

CLEON PETERSON

THE DARK SIDE OF THE REAL

WORDS: sarah jayne fell

From a distance, the paintings of Cleon Peterson depict a hive of human activity, figures interacting in a scene that could be a 'Where's Wally?' illustration. The tableau is drenched in bright, saccharine shades of red or pink broken by dense black and flat white, a jarringly luminescent kaleidoscope of geometric shapes. Zoom out and they could be abstract expressionist creations made with day-glow enamel. Zoom in and discover a scene of sardonic wrath, a disturbing, angst-ridden struggle of bodies and blood; policemen and prisoners, broken bottles and cigarettes, twisted faces and exposed genitals. Wounded, decapitated, disembowelled. Tears, vomit, blood. Fighting, fucking, fleeing. Rape and pillage in its most literal terms.

The works are assaulting on multiple levels, and yet something draws you in, compelling you to scrutinise the savagery that exists within each scene. There's also a marked sense of organised chaos. Something intensely structured that detracts from the horror and makes it all seem strangely okay. I chatted to Cleon, curious about his choice of subject matter; naturally something so confrontational is trying to make a point. He says quite simply, "It's a reflection of the world that we live in." Rather than resorting to symbolism or allusion, he paints things as they are. There's a sense of the smiling façade of society that we see from afar, which up close paints a very different, far more sinister picture. It's an anti-Hollywood portrait of American society that, despite its putrid content, is rather refreshing. "I guess," mulls the artist, "you'd have to ask other people why they're ignoring these subjects."

The story behind this Seattle-born artist and graphic designer helps illuminate his cynical outlook. "Born in '73, I grew up surrounded by artistic people. My parents hated to live within the rules of society and believed that working 'normal jobs' would have made them live inauthentic lives. When I was really young and my family was doing well we had a big



house where filmmakers, dancers, musicians and actors would crash when they came into town. I remember having extravagant parties where people would play piano and drink wine. People like James Belushi and Patrick Swayze stayed at our house. As time went on we lost that house and our lives became much different."

"By the time I left [home] at 17 years old I was a drug addict, my mom was a stripper, my brother was a lost child, and my dad was managing and living in Section 8 housing." More than a decade was lost between dropping out of high school at 15 and returning to college in 2004.





He spent his time oscillating between Seattle, San Diego and New York “before NY got cleaned up, and there were drugs everywhere”; in and out of college, working on and off drawing skateboard graphics, in and out of hospital and rehab, on and off drugs.

Following these misspent years, Cleon cleaned up and completed his studies, graduating and obtaining a Masters in Graphic Design. He’d developed a name as one of the most sought-after illustrators in the skateboard business and went on to design Shepard Fairey’s monograph, *Supply and Demand*. He’s now married, has two kids, and works fulltime as a commercial designer by day at Fairey’s Studio Number One in LA and as a fine artist by night. Despite his existential turnaround, however, Cleon’s work still tells a hardened tale.

“I’d say that everyone sane sees the world through the lens of their past experiences. Living in a desperate world of addiction brings out the worst in you and your peers... I can say that I experienced things that most haven’t in those years and that desperation makes morals and ethics very flexible.”

“Today I experience most of my violence through the media. We are really in a time of violence right now, being at war and taking on the role of policing the world. Every morning the media talks about our side’s death tolls and injuries, and I think this is the worst kind of violence because it is just common and numb.” Beyond his own experience of violence, Cleon clearly also draws on this manner in which the media desensitises people to violence as a central theme in his work.

I ask him about his cultural identity, how it has influenced his work. His answer is pertinent. “Cultural identity isn’t a term I hear that often in the US, but I do think my work is about

just that. I think that instead of it being a nationalistic identity here it’s divided on social and economic lines. There’s also the distinction between living life abiding by the law or breaking the laws. After you’ve been to jails and institutions you then move into the world of sane and insane.” He sees the lack of cultural identity as a flaw in Western societies that leads to disjointedness that destroys cohesion among people. Society becomes organised around binaries that categorise according to moral judgments, creating a system based on difference and hierarchies of authority rather than on unifying factors. These binaries are nonetheless riddled with hypocrisy and corruption, something that Cleon points to in his work. While there is an order of sorts, it is nonetheless a pandemonium, occupying a vast morally grey area. “The grey area between the dualistic nature of authority in our world is where these paintings live,” he explains. Cleon says his work is thus inspired not only by his own story, but also by those of other people. “I feel kinship to people stuck in existential angst and to people that don’t have the answers to everything.”

“I never intentionally set out to create dark or sinister compositions. I often just begin drawing and something like this comes out. I have always had a brutal, sadistic perspective, and for some reason my sense of humour usually ends up taking things to an uncomfortable place. I am always drawn to narratives that evoke a sinister or devious side of culture, the tragic movie where everyone dies or where the hero winds up ordinary. I think there is a truth everyone can relate to in feelings of struggle, desperation, pain, and failure.”

“I’m trying to create this world where everything is about to fall apart at the seams,” Cleon elaborates, “where there’s so much intensity and deviance that there’s no room for anything else in a way; it’s just this image of chaos. This is a world that is pushed to the limits, but at the same time, I feel like I’m painting a reality. You see other painters using symbolism, but I try to stay away from that and paint a reality, but a chaotic, brutal reality.”

The brutal reality he depicts does not sit comfortably with the viewer. It evokes an internal conflict like that brought about by the scene of an accident or a gory horror flick: Should you avoid the scene or can you not bear to tear your eyes away? But really, does it matter? Either way, the reality in front of you remains. “I don’t feel that as an artist, you should be an ambassador for what the world thinks you should say,” defends Cleon. “Or create work that doesn’t push boundaries, or challenge. I like to do stuff that people aren’t necessarily going to like. I’d like to make something that people hate, but have to like at the same time.”

Like it or hate it, Cleon is certainly onto something. Whether he’s designing fulltime for one of the most reputable artists in The States or exhibiting at top international galleries in London, New York, LA, Berlin, Sydney, and (currently) Brussels, just to name a few, the man has irrefutably made his mark. Cleon Peterson is a man with something to say. Whether you choose to hear it, is up to you.

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