





Jake Walker

INTERVIEW

Naima Morelli



I came to know about Jake Walker's work indirectly. I first contacted him because of his blog "Studio Visit", where he portrays artists working in their studios, and interviews them about their artistic process. But Jake, as I soon found out, is also an artist himself, represented by Utopian Slumps in Melbourne and Gallery 9 in Sydney. His paintings are primarily focused around landscape and tend toward abstraction. His process, as he explained it to me, is often to begin painting on a board that has previously been used for a palette, to mix colours.

"My approach is just to start without an idea, put some paint down and see what the paint tells me to do next. I try to play around with it until something works out," he says.

< *Assemblage* 2014, acrylic, oil, wood, paint, jute, brush glazed stoneware frame.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Jake Walker in the Athfield tower, Wellington, NZ.

NEXT SPREAD: *Black Painting 1* 2012-13, oil on board.

Jake moved to Australia from Wellington in early 2000. Back then there were very few artist run initiatives in New Zealand, and a gap had opened between ending art school and finding a commercial space. Despite the overall excellent quality of the art, asserted Jake, it was nearly impossible to be discovered, or even to have a show that wasn't completely self-funded and held in a makeshift venue. In Australia he was surprised to find people being exhibited while they were still in art school, or soon after.

"Things have changed now in New Zealand, largely thanks to the internet and increasing connections with the rest of the world," he explained. "In Wellington recently heaps of artist run initiatives have started up and been very successful alongside the more established art spaces. It has been happening a lot!"

But while the increasing speed and ease of global connection bears plentiful fruit for artists in New Zealand and Australia, it is not without its drawbacks according to Jake.

"I'm a huge fan of New Zealand and Australian art from the fifties, sixties and seventies," he said. "It felt very odd and unique and slightly wrong: just the right amount of wrong. I think that has to do with the fact that we are a long ride away from the rest of world, and back then we didn't have the opportunity to look at what was made overseas on a regular basis. We were outsiders. That's not the case today, because you can see virtually everything that is happening in the world on an hourly basis if you want to. What that means in terms of art, I think, is at the moment it is becoming more homogenised. There is an International art look going on now, which is not necessarily as interesting as the outsider thing."

Do you think that Australian and New Zealand artists are becoming more conformist? Are they just reproducing a Berlin or London style?

J.W. It's not about copying. I think Australia and New Zealand are part of the international dialogue now in a way we've never been before. There is still a hint of originality in Australia and New Zealand, but it use to be far stronger. There was this particular sort of look. Painters were coping things from low res photographs. There was a lot of flat art being made, and people used to say that was because they couldn't tell the paint thickness in photographs. There were also particular sounds, musically, that used to come out of Australia and New Zealand, and now music has become more commodified as well, with an International sound.





In your own paintings though you seem not to be interested in flatness ...

J.W. Yes, my painting is getting incrementally thicker over the last five years, I build it up in stages as a way of creating something that is irreproducible. There are so many imitators and if you make painting that is flat it looks too much like them. That's why I became more interested in thicker surfaces, I guess ... the same reason why sculpture has experienced a huge resurgence worldwide.

I particularly like your paintings on laptops. Do you consider them more as paintings, sculptures or video-installations?

J.W. (laughs) I guess I can feel it has been a piece of video art, and a sculpture, and a painting of it. I made a few of those and I'm still working with that idea. Initially I made one of those because I visited a friend's studio, and I saw that he was sourcing images from an office laptop for his paintings. The laptop was completely dirty with paint and finger marks. I liked the slightly abusive and disrespectful relationship that he had with technology. People think technology is so important, they don't break it or scratch it. At the same time technology becomes obsolete so fast that even half-decent machines can be turned to junk. For my painting on laptops people said: 'oh that's a sort of commentary on people looking at art on the internet'. I hadn't actually considered that, so I guess it was a reading. What I had considered was that I thought it was a good trick to make people look at a painting for longer than one second. Nowadays people seem to look at paintings very quickly. That's because they are used to looking at photographic images online and in magazines, where they can flick through them fast. But people look at video art for longer because they expect some sort of narrative, or they know they have to engage with it for a while to see what's happening. So I was playing some video on top of my laptop-paintings in order to kind of 'force' people to look at some paint for a little longer than a few seconds.

I agree that people tend only to glance at artworks now, especially during openings. For the artist it can be excruciating, because you spend a long time on a work and there are people at the opening lying around on your paintings ...

J.W. Exactly! Or even: 'Let's make some deco for this party! Put some decorations out for this party', but you know, if it reaches a few people during the show, they will come back to look at it harder. I myself prefer to look at the work when there is nobody else around. Good art is often pretty quiet and sometimes it's very hard to notice what it is trying to say when there is a room full of nicely dressed, beautiful people to look at and listen to. At openings it's fairly evident that people are more interesting than art ultimately. That is a nice kind of thing that has been going on for thousands of years and I love it. People are always more interesting than the art, no matter how good the art is. (laughs)

In Melbourne in particular everyone is trying very hard with their outfits!

J.W. For sure! But I have noticed something; if I go to openings of mid-career artists where the demographic is older - baby boomers generation - they tend to look at the art a little bit harder than GenY does. That's probably due to how they were taught to look at art. I think that we are so saturated by images now that it's almost impossible to look at anything for long enough. We look at things quickly and our minds are made up. Sometimes I think I'm part of that problem, and whenever I put something on the internet it feels like, yes, I've added one more image to an already overwhelmed world; but what are you going to do? If you can't fight them join them!

In your early paintings did you follow the same mental process and approach you are using now?

J.W. My very early paintings were similar to the ones I'm doing now, but a lot of stuff has happened in between. That happens because as you are learning you notice other artists that you like, and they influence you. These days the abstract paintings that I'm making are very similar to the abstract paintings that I was making when I was eighteen, nineteen years old. It has turned a full circle. Though they are taking a long time to finish these days. The paintings at my last solo show I've been working on for a couple of years. Not continuously, but I work them up to a point, then let them dry and work on something else, and then return to working on them twelve months later. There is a lot of history in the surface of the work. That's what I want.

How do you decide when a painting is finished? Is it something you just feel?

J.W. I just have to be in a good mood, I think. A painting looks finished to me sometimes because I might have been in a positive mood that day. But when I'm coming to the studio in a more critical mood, I may decide I have to do more on them. It's pretty tricky. It's a cliché, but the hardest thing is to know when to stop. At an artist studio show a couple of years ago in Gertrude Street I showed quite a few paintings. One of them struck me as unfinished halfway through the exhibition, and I started painting it again as soon as it came down. So some paintings will never be finished. But that's okay. When someone owns it I can't paint on them anymore anyway. Most of my paintings are in collections now so I don't have the chance to keep on painting them ...

Unless you sneak into the collection ...

J.W. ... and steal them back! There was one painting I sold on the last day of my show that I thought I was going to get back, and I really wanted to have it back just because it was a good painting. It still looks like a very good painting to me, and I can't work out how I made it. I tried to make something like it for



Brick Floors 2014, acrylic on jute, glazed stoneware frame, 38 x 34cm.

six months following, and I haven't made anything that is quite like it yet. But then all I think is that the universe doesn't want to let me make me the same painting twice. I think it's punishing me for trying to do the same work.

You are working with ceramics as well, yes?

J.W. Yes, I'm interested in the relationship between ceramic frames and the painted surface. Ceramic frames activate the painted surface in a particular way ... in a slightly creepy way, I think. I took a ceramic course with my girlfriend three or four years ago. It is a more logical learning process with ceramics, because you have mandatory passages. You go in a straight direction compared to painting, which can be frustrating because I don't know exactly what I'm after. So then painting and ceramics just ended coming together, I guess because they were both hanging around in my studio at the same time. It is logical that they might end up as closer allies.

So now that the whole world is closer to the whole world than ever before, and everything's moving so fast that a painting can be sold before it is even finished, and no one's got the time to stop and just look at things for a while, what can art do to help?

J.W. There are a lot of people out there that have no engagement with art whatsoever. I think there is still a degree of scepticism about it as a lifestyle choice, practice or profession, and I'd be nice if there were more paths to getting new people to pay attention to art. There are some people who take groups around to commercial spaces on tours and show them work. It takes people a while to look at artwork before they feel comfortable to go into a commercial space. I mean, there are just the most unfriendly shops in the world, basically. For starters, galleries tend to hide their own existence with very subtle signage, and sometimes nothing at all! And they tend to be tucked away in laneways or places that are not immediately obvious to the general public. I think there is a lot of people out there who enjoy art, and who would probably enjoy art collecting if they tried it. There is a lot of money kicking around Australia and the pool of people that are engaging with art and collecting art is still incredibly small. Art is just another thing to be interested in, like football, or food, or anything; it's not a rarefied area that only the privileged few will ever understand. I do think that art needs to broaden its reach, that's important.

Jake Walker is represented by Utopian Slumps, Melbourne - utopianslumps.com - and Gallery 9, Sydney - gallery9.com.au Artist site - jake--walker.blogspot.com.au Studio Visit - artstudiovisit.blogspot.com.au



Naima Morelli is a freelance arts writer and journalist with a particular interest in contemporary art from Italy, the Asia Pacific region and art in a global context. She is also an independent curator focusing on Italian, Indonesian and Australian emerging artists. At the moment she is working on a book about contemporary art in Indonesia.