

Shay KUN

Painter Shay Kun might lavish attention on the shape and colour of a single leaf in one of his luminous landscapes, but it's nothing so base as the majesty of nature that he's out to capture. After all, artists have been giving us grand vistas and gorgeous flora since time immemorial—and it's that collective memory of landscapes past that Mr. Kun really wants to paint. The valley electric.

by Ryan Max



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tanding in his Chelsea studio and discussing the paintings in various stages of completion scattered on the floor and walls, I learn something about Shay Kun: he likes the word 'bastard' a lot. Which makes perfect sense for someone whose work is defined by the incompatibility of his creative influences. First and foremost, his actual mother and father: both survivors of the Holocaust who went on to become landscape painters in Israel—his mother's cheery commercial landscapes contrasting his father's darker themes of death and decay.

Then, his parent's adopted country, stuck between a relentless obsession with forging something new and distinctly 'Israeli' while still seeking the international esteem of Western European and American traditions; the pull of his postmodern peers at London's Goldsmiths contending with his attraction to 18th century landscape painters and the Hudson River school; a digital remove from nature and an organic touch to the digital. It's doubtful that any of these warring themes would have a chance of coexisting without Mr. Kun's meticulous touch.

Your parents were both artists, and you have been selling work since you were 16. When did you start painting? I started painting at a very early age, 3-4 years old. I remember sitting down in my mom's studio—a commercial landscape artist—asking myself if these 'greeting card' paintings are in my genes. In retrospect I know that both of my parents' work shaped my style. My exploration is not a tongue in cheek one liner of an Israeli artist flipping the European-American sublime, but an emotional exploration of the point of departure between my mom's celebratory landscape and my Dad's decaying and deteriorating ones, and how I can add to that my own small voice.

Beyond your self-training, you studied fine art both in Israel and at Goldsmiths in London. How did your education influence your work? I learned valuable things from my BFA, but I didn't find a product to apply them to. So I learned a lot about how to look at art, and the questions you should ask yourself when you're making

something, and the questions you should ask other people when you're looking at something. I had a fantastic education, but the end products that people were making when I was there didn't really interest me. There were lots of students who made works about the process of work. The intellectual atmosphere was very theoretical, but in a way that seemed dated to me.

Most of the ideas I explored back then came from the interaction between the virtual and the real, and the artificial and the natural. It was the late 90s and everything cyberspace was mysterious and intriguing. I used to deal with death as a virtual experience in mixed media installation and videos, paintings that had more 'graphic' quality to them and held a story like a Fischli and Weiss sculpture. It did not work that well. I was at Goldsmith's 'post-Freeze' where for a long time most art was very hands-off. If you used your hands you were considered stupid. If you faxed something to a factory and had it made, that was fine. I didn't have any connection with that.

You look for subjects that allow some distance from the source. You paint wolves based on toys, soldiers based on video games, and landscapes based on works of art. Why is this the material that interests you?

I am a very emotional person, one of those who cares about everything and takes it to heart, attaching myself to subjects even without knowing them. So for me this kind of lifeless detachment enables me the sense of clarity in my personal investigation. I will probably contradict myself so bear with me.

Your parents are both Holocaust survivors, and the hot air balloon motif you often work with is based on a toy your father carried through Auschwitz. What attracts you to this item as a subject? How do you think this back story impacts a viewer's experience of your work?

I have always been consumed with the notion of escape and escapism and those items were so loaded for me that I could not have asked for a better vehicle to explore my notions in depth. My practice is very accessible, however I am not intending to feed the viewer with a spoon, so it's a given that some scripts will be lost to the viewer—nevertheless, they are left with enough

meat to chew on. There's incredible creative energy in looking at what you were given as you grew up, and then making a version of it later on.

I think my work does not look sophisticated in the way that the previous generation's did, because the previous generation in Israel

borrowed a very high-art, international look: they borrowed Conceptualism and Minimalism, and added their own pop, their own cultural content to it. Choosing Minimalism and Conceptualism guaranteed international credibility. I did not feel the need to do that. I was lucky enough to attract an international art audience that is relaxed enough to know that you can make very sophisticated products from odds and ends, and not make it seem regional. It's very international but it doesn't need to prove it.





You say that your concerns are much more aesthetic than political. Why do you select images of children picking through trash piles and soldiers moving through landscapes if it is not the subject matter that really interests you?

My works are very much inherited and routed in two separate lines: my fascination with soldiers and army life through my own experiences in Israel serving in the army, and the perception and alternations of that in computer games, simulation and other disaster spectacles. I try to infuse my serene scenarios which combine American-Israeli landscapes with the simulated touch and synthetic feel of art, being transformed through technological means and being repainted. Into that I try to inject my personal stories and visions. I do find the more violent and extreme myths a flavourful subject. I am not trying to overplay them, just inject a dramatic quality to the painted arena. The suburban really interests me, and the domestic—lots of European artwork is domestic, you can't get away from it. It's a complete continental fascination.

How long does it take you to finish a piece? How long do you work on a typical day?

Much less than you would imagine. My process of working is usually one of elimination; I have quite a low attention span and high curiosity rate, hence I have to be overwhelmed by a piercing image in order to explore and dissect it further. That is why I am mostly interested in the mechanism of perception than the actual subtext. I am one of those hard-core believers that practice

makes perfect. I love to play with highs and lows in terms of the art materials—in some works I also use sandstone paint, which is used for pottery and leisure time activities, as well as airbrush paint that possesses fluorescent qualities. 10am is for sure studio time until about 7pm; then I marinate, clean and think about the day.

You work with galleries all over the world; what were some of your recent shows, and what do you have coming up?

I have been exhibiting extensively on the international circuit in recent years, including participation in most of the leading contemporary art fairs around the world and solo shows in NYC, London, Boston, Tel Aviv and Miami. My upcoming shows in 2012 are: New Orleans at Martine Chaisson gallery in February, NYC at Benrimon Contemporary in May, L.A. at Rivera & Rivera gallery in September, and Chicago at Linda Warren gallery next December.





