

L Magazine

February 16, 2011

Inside the Artist's Studio: Angel Otero in Ridgewood

Benjamin Sutton

How do you begin a painting?

The work starts from a very personal point. I'm using oil paint but in reverse, so I paint on glass, and I paint in a very traditional way with oil paint and brushes. After I'm done with the imagery or text we cover that with a whole layer of oil paint. And from there it goes to dry for a while and after a month or a few weeks we scrape it very slowly and it comes out with a really interesting texture. It's kind of like a transfer, because I also have to be thinking in reverse. In a traditional painting you paint a background, you paint a chair and you paint the model in the chair, and here I've got to paint the model, the chair and then cover that with the background. It's very challenging, which makes it really beautiful. And oil has such a heavy history behind it, and a lot of things are very difficult to control in the process. It sometimes gets very very messed up in a good way. It kind of distorts the very personal part of it.

Would you say your work is autobiographic?

It starts from a very personal place, but the pieces are not done in a way to try to construct a narrative. I'm not trying to tell stories about my family or personal point of view, I just use it like a tool. It's kind of like confronting memories, but without wanting to scream it out. I'm very shy and very timid, and I like the process because it breaks the obviousness of what's behind it.

It plays a lot with the history of painting, and since I was young I've been in love with painters and painting in general. Painting is a medium that goes through a lot of challenges in art history with people saying it's dead or people not doing anything new with it, so I always have wanted to use very traditional materials in a different way. I'm excited about the work, because I'm not sure how things are gonna come out. So I paint it, I cover it, and then later when we scrape it out sometimes I really don't like it. Or, like this piece was originally this crazy plant with all these shoes hanging from it, and it just totally got lost. But it's beautiful, it shows this overlaying of processes.

It's almost like sculpture, really.

It's very sculptural, it has a very sculptural approach. And even converting the oil painting into something else but still being what it is, makes it this object that you kind of treat in a sculptural way. When we are creating this it pretty much looks like we're wrapping something. It's an extremely delicate material after we scrape it because it's kind of half wet and half dry, and we just let it slide slowly onto the canvas until it sticks to the layer of resin.

Do you interfere in the way the scraped paint sticks to the canvas at all?

No. I mean, I do mess around with it a little bit. I don't try to do specific patterns, but for example if there's an area where I think some kind of wrinkling would produce a really interesting illusion effect, I will try to make it. But pretty much we just let it fall and it just falls slowly and fast, and generally makes the wrinkle itself. I like it because I'm letting it be whatever it wants to be, you know, and I think that's very beautiful.

You mentioned trying to create illusions; are you trying to play with viewers' perceptions by using paint in a way that's not like painting at all?

People sometimes think it's fabric. In fact, the first paintings I did with this kind of technique, they were about this big (*makes shape of a small canvas*) and people thought it was just wet cloth and they were like, "Meh, whatever," and it made me feel horrible because I felt like I had something very interesting going on. My work a year ago was very figurative, it still was dealing with ways of using oil paint like a kind of object, but I thought this other thing was cooler. And for me in the studio it was very fun because I wasn't sure what was gonna come out.

Like this piece is a whole text that says: "He prefers himself to everyone else because everyone else abandons him." It's a text by Sartre, talking about Baudelaire. He wrote beautifully about him and his attitude towards art. And it deals a lot with loneliness and people not understanding you and the things you're doing. I thought it was very beautiful, and it touched me in many ways, and I decided to make it into one of the text pieces. But when I'm painting it I cover it with some abstract expressionistic marks, and then we cover it with yellow and scrape it out, and the text is still there. It makes for interesting textures because of the drying time. We use a stencil font, not for any specific reason, just because it's easier, or maybe I don't like my writing.

Do you like leaving the final part of the work a little up to chance after such a specific and careful process?

It's funny because a lot of the time me and mostly these dudes (*nods towards his assistants*) mess it up, not on purpose but by accident of course, but really the most beautiful things in some paintings have happened because they did some accident. And I get mad, and then I look and it's actually great. It's about this in-between or these kind of unexpected happenings, and they are evident in the work and I think that's gorgeous. It shows a lot of accidents, which is a very human element, and that's very, very important.

It's been interesting the past few months here, we've thrown out a lot of paintings. Sometimes we scrape out the paint, if I really don't like a painting, and then we use those scraps for other paintings. I don't like literally

throwing away stuff, so I just put it away and hopefully find a spot for it.

When you're painting do you think about what it's going to look like scraped and re-applied, or do you try not to?

I wanna say fifty-fifty. Sometimes I really try not to think because that makes it more interesting, but sometimes I know that if I want something to show after we scrape it I have to do certain tricks when I paint it. But I prefer not to, and to just paint what I feel like painting, and then take it to this other level. It's difficult because I love painting, but sometimes painting is so challenging because what else can you do that's new besides painting something that's your own subject matter?

How did you first start doing this process?

It started pretty much from me scraping oil paintings at school (*the School of the Art Institute of Chicago*) that I didn't like. You know oil paint is extremely expensive so I didn't have money to be throwing paint out like it's nothing. So, I would just keep this mountain, which every painter does. They keep this mountain-like stack of oil paint somewhere in their studio. And then randomly one night I just grabbed part of it and put it on wet paint and thought it looked cool. Then later I did this little extra part to it: I used aluminum spray paint and when it went through that it totally looked like tin foil. And I thought that was gorgeous, because it was oil paint that looked like tin foil, which is an incredible illusion effect. And tin foil is a very cheap material, the oil is a very prestigious medium, so I thought that played perfectly. And from there I started making these pieces—instead of the abstract or figurative very expressionistic paintings that I was known for in school—with very collaged dry aluminum color and I was doing flowers, actually, it was very simple. And people thought it was me collaging tin foil, and when they knew it was oil paint the effect was very strong and beautiful.

From there things grew, and it went from me taking those pieces of oil paint to pieces of glass and scraping paint off small pieces of glass from Ikea, until I developed a way to take paint off huge pieces of glass. I'm very ambitious, I'm a workaholic. I'm here every day until late. And this is clean right now but usually I have a lot of stuff going on because some things are just thrown away or end up in some other place. And I'm just working and working, and ideas come and I just do it. I write, I draw sometimes. I write a lot actually, a lot of ideas, but the best parts happen in a very intuitive way.

Would you say you're more interested in painting or sculpture right now?

Sometimes a sculpture calls and I really wanna do it, but honestly most of my attention goes to the two-dimensional work. I just love painting. Most of the time here is put into the paintings. Sculpture is still difficult for me, to be honest, but I like challenges. I like to see where that ignorance towards something can take me. So I mess around with sculpture a lot.

It's almost a superfluous distinction since paints are your raw materials, even for your sculptures.

Yeah, the material creates so many venues for you to do stuff, it can be sculptures or paintings, but it's interesting how much you can get out of it, almost like a fabric, you can put it anywhere you want.

Do you have any interest in costume design?

I've thought of doing dresses, but then I thought it would be too obvious because it looks like fabric. I want it to be something unexpected, you know? I love fashion, I'd love to try something like that.

How much does your home, Puerto Rico, factor into your work?

I have a boat like this one (*points to a large painting of a boat*) that I use every time I go there to go fishing for a little while. And I love the ocean, I love surfing. A lot of the work, most of it is very, very personal, a lot of references to home. It's weird for me doing stuff that is so personal, I don't know how I feel about it, so the process kind of breaks that a little bit. But even this piece with the chandelier that says "fake gold." The whole fake gold thing runs in my family, which is a lower-middle class family, using a lot of fake gold around the house that makes them feel really prestigious. They don't have a granite-top counter, they just got a piece of wood and contact paper with a marble print, and it looked gorgeous. And I think that's beautiful. It shows a lot of pride and interesting creativity, and this idea of the middle class, like it's the middle but they're happy with it: fake flowers, fake contact paper, fake gold, fake jewelry, and it's still gorgeous. So I play a lot with that sort of subject matter.

Is there anything that attracts you to chandeliers specifically, I'm noticing at least a couple here.

I like them and people use them a lot in art history, making sculptures out of them. I just think it's such a gorgeous thing, but to be honest it's mostly because of the chandelier at home. A lot of elements are just elements that are back at home. I had always thought that I didn't grow up with art because my family never encouraged me, there were no art books or anything. But at school I started thinking, "what can I consider art around me, now that I really know?" And it went from me making drawings of the pattern of the fence outside, which was abstract; the chandelier was kind of baroque, or fake baroque; the bed, this is my grandmother's bed actually, and it has all these plants on it. This is from a memory of me as a kid. The people who lived upstairs apparently left the water running in their shower, so I was sleeping when I started seeing all these drops falling from the ceiling and I thought it was gorgeous because I wasn't sure what was happening, like it was pretty much raining. And then my grandmother flipped out and started putting all the plants on top of the bed so she could clean, and so it's pretty much about that. A lot of the figurative elements like that

come from my memories of home.

I put a lot of hidden details into the paintings, and if people perceive some kind of narrative that's good, but the honest part is that I'm not really trying to tell stories at all. I know there are things that can cause you to read something in a specific way, but I'm really not trying to do that. That's more for me. I like people to see the process and the imagery, and if they perceive some sort of things it's beautiful.

That makes me think of Louise Bourgeois, whose art was so much about her personal life, but then people look at her work and see themselves in it.

Yeah, that's funny, I just saw this interview with... I forgot his name, but he's asking her, "So the spider has to do with this," and he's using all these huge words and she's like: "It's really just about my mother." And he's like, "No, but I can see that you..." "No, it's just about my mother." He kept going and then at the end she's like: "Okay, so it's about all that, fine." It's true, that happens a lot. Some people find this amazing, very ambitious and heavy meaning, and sometimes it starts from the most minimal thing. That happens to me a lot, and it just becomes this crazy stuff that people read in many, many ways, but really it's just about my grandma's plants and her cuckoo-ness.

How do you decide if a painting is terrible or great? What makes you decide to scrap a piece? Is it something intensely personal?

I don't know, I guess so. Sometimes, obviously, you see a lot in the composition and color relationships, the traditional ways of seeing parts of the painting. But the big part of it is you just don't feel it, like "this is bullshit." That doesn't mean that it's bad, I just don't feel that it should be there, so it goes to a sculpture, or sometimes I put it in other paintings so we cut it. We always still use it. Most of the time they come out cool. As soon as we're halfway through I'm like, "Wow, this is gonna be killer."

How long does a painting take, from the moment you start painting on glass to the moment it's stuck on the linen?

I'll stay painting on it for at least a week, maybe more. And then it takes several weeks to dry a little bit. Obviously colors are different pigments, and different pigments dry differently. Reds are kind of difficult, that's why you don't see too many reds. The whole thing takes about a month, a little less than that.

Do you just keep painting on the same layers of glass?

Yeah, and it's cool because some residues stay and transfer to the next layers, so sometimes you'll see a face out of nowhere or something.

We have a lot of materials. All the money I make I just put back into the

studio. I try to save a little bit, but I'm like a material freak, I just go to the store and buy the whole thing. I know everyone at Blick. Sometimes I kinda flirt with them a little to try to get a discount like: "Come on, I'm spending two thousand dollars here." In fact I've stopped going because it's a little disrespectful me buying a lot of stuff and then nothing being left for students.

Do you usually work on one painting at a time or do you have several going at once?

Several. I paint here, I paint there, I like having a conversation between the work. I tell [my assistant] Miguel to help out with something, I work on a sculpture. But I don't paint in front of anybody. I stay here at night and I paint, because it's very personal, I feel kind of stupid sometimes because I'm so zoned out that I'm not sure how I look, or if people are staring at me. So when they [my assistants] are here we're usually scraping the materials, but the actual painting of it is just me at night by myself.

The gallery [Lehmann Maupin] is so respectful and they're super-helpful, but they met me doing a specific kind of work, not extremely far from this but a huge step. And they love the work that I was doing a year and a half ago, and then eventually this kind of work pulled me so hard. I spoke with them, and showed them how I was feeling about this kind of work, and they were scared, but honestly they backed me up hugely. At the end they came for a visit and they were blown away by the work and they've been extremely supportive with everything, which is very important. For me it's important that the gallery feels good about what I'm doing. Also I'm young, I can't say: "I'm Angel Otero, I do whatever I want." I really like working with them, they're super-professional. I know it's something different out there, very challenging. It deals with many, many things at the same time, and at the same time it's very honest, which is the best part.

Have you been stressed out working on the pieces for this exhibition?

Um, I'm nervous. I have a very good friend who's also an artist, so sometimes I ask him to come look at the work and talk about it. Yeah, I'm a bit nervous, it's a big deal for me. I come from a totally different background. My mum still doesn't know exactly what I do, or that I really make money. Sometimes she calls the gallery or asks people if it's true what my paintings cost because she thinks I might be dealing drugs or something. Because they don't believe the amounts of money that people pay for art. So it's interesting; they're coming for the show, it'll be an interesting night. I'm very nervous and very happy at the same time. They came here just once before; they didn't even take one picture of the paintings, they just took a picture of the skyline from the window. I thought that was funny though because the work is kind of about them being like that. I'm excited that they're coming.

A lot of people are putting a lot of thought into process these days, especially for painting. It's so intense right now because everybody's, well not everybody, but I see the art world looking for something new in painting, and you want to be part of it. I don't like the attitude of "just let me paint what I feel" and not caring what people will say. That's not me. I like trying to change things or challenge things. Trying to make history.

Are there any artists who've had a really strong influence on you?

I love painters, I'm always checking on painters. Lately I've been checking a lot of Bonnard paintings.

Have you seen any shows recently that have really marked you?

I saw that Rauschenberg show at Gagosian, I thought that was gorgeous, I really like Rauschenberg a lot. The MoMA abstraction show was good; I mean obviously it's paintings that I've seen all over in books, but I loved it. Abstraction was really what hooked me up. For me painting was like painting a landscape, a mountain, a tree, or a portrait of people or food. And then this dude showed me these paintings and said: "You know this is the most famous artist in the world?" And it's this dude just throwing paint at the canvas. I was in shock, but at the same time it felt so good to know that people considered that art because it looked so liberating. Abstraction was the main thing in art that grabbed me.

I went to Chicago [for school] totally ignorant of contemporary art. It was so embarrassing because I didn't know who Jeff Koons was, or Damien Hirst. And I remember people talking about them and being like, "Murakami, who the hell?" Contemporary art for me was Basquiat and Jackson Pollock, and that was it. The professor said, "Everybody stand up, say your name, where you're from and your favorite contemporary artist," and I was the only stupid ass who said Jackson Pollock and everybody started bursting with laughter and the professor said: "How does it feel to live in the 50s, Angel?" And I didn't even get the joke, I was like, "I love the 50s." But it put me on track to be really honest. Those moments, those kind of embarrassing, whipping moments they put me on track. Now I'm like a super-freak of knowing who's out there and reading about them.

I like this painting [*Couch Habits*] a lot because it looks like some painter's couch full of paint. It reminds me of Lucian Freud a lot. I like it because Philip Guston has a couch, Freud has a couch, almost every figurative painter does a couch; this is my couch. Everything was yellow originally, and it didn't come through. I painted everything yellow and then we covered it with brown. I wish I could keep this one, but I don't have the guts yet.

Do you have any of your own work at home?

I have a few pieces, but not a lot. I get bored sometimes. Honestly right now I'm dying for them to take this shit, because I've been looking at it for so

long. This is the oldest piece here, I finished it before Miami, but all of it was done in the period of two months, maybe a little less. It's been fast.

Did you show a lot of work at Art Basel Miami?

Yeah they showed around six pieces, there was a big presentation. And I really wanted to do it because it was Miami, and at the same time it was a promotion for this show. That was the first time that I was showing this process, or at least at this scale, and I was really wondering how people would react to it and it was really positive. People that I knew whose eye I trust were really happy with it. They were shocked, which is good. I was worried that the gallery was going to be like, "No Angel, the work we like is what you were doing before." But the truth is that I never expanded that work that much, this was more interesting. I couldn't say no.

Do you know any of the other artists in this building?

I know everyone because I'm one of the first ones plus I'm the only one that speaks Spanish and the person that fixes stuff doesn't speak English, so I'm like the translator for this building. But there's several good artists in the building. I remember during Bushwick Open Studios, I didn't know what it was and I walked around and there was some really cool stuff. But yeah, I know everybody here, everybody's super-cool. They come in, sometimes they knock, which I don't mind, but sometimes it's a little difficult because I'm in the middle of something and I like giving attention to people. There's always something new in here. There are so many artists always moving here.