

## **F News Magazine**

### **April 2, 2012**

#### **F Profile: Angel Otero**

By Kris Lenz

The history of painting is over 4,000 years old. In that time, historians can point to only a handful of moments when an artist creates a new process for creating visual art with pigment. Angel Otero, SAIC alum (BA, MFA) may have pushed his way into that historical discussion with a method that pushes the limits of painting. He first creates an image on a pane of glass with thick coats of oil paint; when the work is nearly dry he scrapes the work off the glass creating "oil skins" he then affixes to a canvas. The result is visually complex, unerringly beautiful distortions of the original image.

Otero was born and raised in Puerto Rico before moving to Chicago to pursue art. He had a nontraditional education in art history and quickly realized he needed to catch up with his peers if he was going to create work relevant to the contemporary scene. Thus he was "born again as a die-hard art history fanatic who continues to find new life in his art historical forebears.

Recently Otero returned to campus for a packed house lecture for the Sophomore Seminar. FNewsmagazine met with the artist at the Art Institute of Chicago where we strolled through the museum, looking at some of the paintings that inspired him while discussing the role of art history in his work.

[At the Café Moderne]

Angel Otero: I do follow a lot of art history but my approach is different than when I was a teenager or in my early twenties. I used to go to museums to see a particular artist. I'd stand in front of their work and view it materialistically. I wasn't really into knowing the story behind the painting or the struggle that went into it. I looked at the painting for material and process. I would ask myself how was this made? How did they create this effect? The use of materials is what interests me; how those materials created effects that move people.

Kris Lenz: But that's not how you view paintings in a museum now?

AO: No, I see that idea was wrong. I got to a level of maturity where I now understand it is important to know the backgrounds and stories behind certain paintings.

KL: You've spoken before about how on one of your first days at art school your professor asked who your favorite contemporary artists were...

AO: (laughs) Yeah, and I said Pollock and de Kooning and the dude just smashed me in front of everyone.

KL: Was this a "show up naked in school" moment you still have nightmares about?

AO: It was kind of that, but it was also something that needed to happen in order for me to understand where I was standing. I had very little knowledge of contemporary art. Then all of a sudden I'm in Chicago at one of the best art schools in the country and they're telling me there's a broader contemporary art world. That just embarrassed me and put me on track. I started reading reviews, getting the magazines and all that. I started following the line of contemporary art and then I'd go back to my studio and could see where I was standing and where I was going.

KL: Do you think that your lack of a traditional background could be seen as an advantage in a sense?

AO: Now I think I see it as an advantage. There was knowledge of the sort of old-school style of painting that definitely influenced my work. I simply added contemporary knowledge to that. But back then it was embarrassing.

KL: Most contemporary artists don't seem comfortable discussing influence and art history but you seem forthcoming in your discussion of influence, why is that?

AO: I think that's because I am almost directly influenced by some artists. I'm not afraid to mention artists I used to imitate in order to understand what they were trying to do. That background is important because my work deals with bringing up questions about the history of painting. I'm balancing the conventional and the unconventional. I still use brushes and oils like they did, I just use them in a different way.

[In front of Jackson Pollock's "Greyed Rainbow"]

KL: You are particularly connected to the history of oil painting, what is about oil that is so compelling?

AO: The history is so abundant. There are many existing ideas about the possibilities and impossibilities of oil painting: what it can do, what it cannot do, what it's meant to be and what it's not meant to be. There's a constant conversation about those possibilities when you work with oil.

KL: How do you react to people who say oil painting is dead? Is there a conscious effort on your part to prove that it is not?

AO: It's a statement that's become very popular in art history. It's not literally dead, painting never dies. It always comes back. In history there were certain moments when painting seemed washed out. Like with the Minimalists, the art world wanted something quiet, serious and formal. Then boom, painting comes back huge with people like Julian Schnabel, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Sandro Chia and the late Andy Warhol paintings. They continued the conversation within the material, imagery, paints, sizes and so on. There's always a push and pull between the past and what artists think is the present.

KL: Does Pollock's work and experimentation with process directly influence you?

AO: When I came up with my process is I wasn't thinking about strategy, it came out

of pure impulse. I was reworking and reworking until boom, I got something. I reflect a lot on how people perceived Pollock's work when it first happened: everyone was in shock. I don't see that mine has gotten that huge reaction. But it's the same kind of idea that we are showing the world what we think painting should be now. But even in his work he's not completely rejecting the traditional modes of painting when it comes to color, shapes and paint.

KL: When you see painting that is difficult or challenging, is that a motivation that causes you to look more deeply at it?

AO: Not necessarily. What draws me is the aesthetics, the beauty. If I see something beautiful I am drawn in because I want to see how the artist created that feeling, that effect.

[At Van Gogh's "The Poet's Garden"]

AO: You see, this is one I always used to study.

KL: What is it about this painting that is so interesting?

AO: Van Gogh was obsessed with painting. He wasn't a guy trying to say "this is my bed, this is my chair." The imagery he chose was his excuse to start painting. He was so obsessed with the material that he went over and over and over it again. He scraped a few times but really preferred to go over the paint. He kept asking his brother for more paint, that kind of obsession with the material interests me.

KL: When you look for color combinations where do you start?

AO: Different ways. What predicts my next painting is my previous painting. All of a sudden I like how that sky turned out, so my next painting starts by picking up an idea from the previous painting.

[At El Greco's "The Assumption of the Virgin"]

KL: Did you used to come (to the museum) for inspiration when you were back in school?

AO: I came for the same reasons people go to a church, to feel something or look for something unknown.

KL: The Old Masters play a major role in inspiring your work; have you always felt drawn to them?

AO: It was tricky because I thought you needed to know the background like "this bird represents these people and flew over the Virgin Mary." But in terms of the object itself, the material, the colors and the composition of the figures in the painting were interesting. I always asked why this guy did it like this, this one like that. This guy is brushy and this guy is so clean. For example, El Greco is muddy as hell but he's expressionistic in some kind of way.

[At Poussin's "Landscape with St. John on Patmos"]

AO: I chose Poussin for my new show in Istanbul because I've been reading about his obsession with mythology. You see Cy Twombly was obsessed with the way Poussin wanted to convey certain feelings by using posture in a certain way. Poussin was a guy constantly debating about what painting was supposed to be. It was a constant tension between the world and how we represent the world. And I liked that so I used his work as a big reference.

KL: Several of your new paintings are inspired by Poussin's work. Which painting did you start with and how did you use it?

AO: The images I start with can be figurative, abstract or gestural. With the Poussin paintings I start by selecting an image I want to visit with my process, the first was "Rape of the Sabine Women." I do my painting on the glass as close as possible to the original. I have a friend who is a master at figurative painting and he helps me do it faster, close to a perfect painting. Then I layer on the colors, let it dry and then scrape.

I know that the image is going to be changed into something else. With my process it's fifty percent control and fifty percent I don't know how they are going to look. So every day the crew and I are going to scrape a painting I wake up excited becomes I'm going to see some new shit.

[In front of Edgar Degas' "The Star"]

KL: Do you feel close to the Impressionists? They were making political and social statements, but you're not interested in that at all right?

AO: Yeah, I'm aware of that but I don't think I have same purpose.

KL: Your early work seemed so explicitly personal, involving memories of Puerto Rico and your grandmother's house. But you're saying that even then you weren't interested in narrative?

AO: Those were excuses. I admit that now because I am very confident in my work. My background obligated me to speak romantically about my work: "I need to have a muse; I need to paint at night; this one is about when my girlfriend broke up with me." So even leaving grad school I was scared of being rejected. I did use references to these things but I made up the stories. I didn't want to talk to the world about my grandmother. They were my excuses because they were the closest things I had to start any painting. At that point I couldn't trust abstraction yet, because abstraction is difficult.

I was just doing what I love, and that's paint. Period. So when they came for interviews and asked about my grandmother, I was like what the hell? I don't want to speak about this shit. But my work is always about the way it is painted: my obsession with paint and constructive painting. My work is a dialogue between what painting can do and what it cannot do. Just leaving questions, there are no answers.

KL: Then why choose these personal subjects to start with?

AO: I do sometimes use the personal as a starting point. Sometimes I start with a picture of someone in my family, but not with the purpose of telling a story about my life. It's the same way I grab a big brush or a small brush, it's a tool for me to construct a painting. That's one of the cool things about the process, I can pretty much use any subject or imagery to make a painting because it's going to come out so distorted in the process.

I want people attracted to that dialogue rather than trying to find some story. My work isn't about Puerto Rico or that I'm Latino, I'm all those. But I wasn't feeling comfortable with the fact that people thought I was telling stories about my poor grandmother. I thought I needed to speak in that romantic way. Sentimentality is a crazy sort of double-edge sword in the art world.

KL: Are you conscious of your place in that ongoing dialogue of Art History?

AO: I don't know how to answer that. I do know my place in history with regard to what I should be fighting for. I'm not sure where I'm standing in terms of the effect my work can or could do. I read biographies for these same reasons. I'm curious how other painters live. Do they live the same lives, are they always in the studio, are they questioning themselves on what they do, are they challenging themselves? I question all that stuff in order to see myself where I'm standing. But the only real answer is that we are all different.