

AUSTIN LEE

SOUL TECHNOLOGY

INTERVIEW AND PORTRAIT BY AUSTIN McMANUS



SEVERAL YEARS AGO, WHILE WITNESSING A 3D PRINTER

sluggishly constructing a miniature skull for the first time, I imagined various ways that artists could experiment and manipulate the new tool to their advantage. True, many artists have already employed 3D printing as an artistic medium. But, for me, nobody has utilized this new technology within their process better than Austin Lee. I believe this largely because his final product does not allude to, or resemble, anything fabricated from plastic. Most people's first impression is that they are probably built from clay, and upon further scrutiny, they appear highly texturized, clumpy like clay, occasionally blurry, limited in rendering, hypnotizing in their presence. The busts of both his mother and father were the most recent subjects of this medium to make a gallery appearance, in an exhibition titled *Nothing Personal*.

Incorporating new technology into his art is one of the many defining qualities of Lee's practice. Using an iPad for his initial sketches or "digital doodles," Lee swiftly draws, erases, redraws, deletes, and, eventually saves. These sketches serve as blueprints for later paintings, and sometimes the actual painting is photographed and put

back into Photoshop for alterations and ideas. Using another new technological tool, Lee created a series of watercolor paintings using a robot that mirrors digital artwork with a paintbrush. When asked about applying new technologies to his practice, Lee advised, "New technology is an opportunity to explore. It's important for artists to experiment and find new ways to use tools and to question them." Recently releasing the first publication of his work, Lee continues exploring the world of augmented reality, inviting viewers to download an application to enhance the viewing experience as Lee's drawing visually come to life. It's brilliant and capable of entertaining all ages with intensely colored, childlike drawings.

Lee had his first solo exhibition in New York last year, so, in many ways, he's the new kid on the block who's already established. He has, in a significantly short time span, attracted the attention of gallerists and collectors alike, establishing a feeling that he's been here the whole time—which he has. Lee got an MFA from Yale and has been working on his art for over a decade, but moving to New York seems to have been his big break. Visiting and chatting with him, I started to understand why so many people have been quick to applaud his work. He's fully committed and borderline obsessive, continuously questioning the ideas and processes of his art. Energetic and inquisitive, his appetite for creativity and production is headed down the fast lane.



right
Installation view
of *Nothing Personal*
Postmasters Gallery, NYC
2015

opposite
BITE
Acrylic on Canvas
14" x 11"
2014





above
Me and My Dad
Acrylic on canvas
92" x 72"
2015

right
On the Way
Acrylic on wood
48" x 48"
2012

opposite (from top)
Mom
3D printed ABS plastic,
plaster and acrylic
10" x 10" x 9"
2015

Raw
Acrylic on Canvas
52" x 52"
2014



Austin McManus: A good friend recently told me he was moving to Vegas and I replied, “Why?” I guess I don’t have a very good impression of the place. What was growing up there like?

Austin Lee: I left Las Vegas when I was three, so all I remember was that it was hot. I’ve been back to Vegas twice since then. It’s a weird place, a sad Disneyland for adults.

Where did you spend your youth, and were you creatively inclined growing up?

I was born in Nevada but grew up in Pennsylvania. I was always making drawings when I was a kid. The first one I remember making was of a horse. It stood out to me because some other kids were really into it. It was the first time I remember doing something that people cared about. I also remember experimenting with computers early on. My dad had a great nerdy friend who talked him into buying a computer. He showed me the basics and then I would experiment on my own. I learned early on how to make websites, and I started doing weird drawings and Photoshop collages when I was pretty young.

Can you recall the first and last time you saw a piece of artwork that left an impression or moved you?

The first time was a painting by Leonardo called *Ginevra de’Benci*. I saw it at the National Gallery in Washington DC and was blown away. I think about it all the time. It has a weird uncanny space in it that I always try to emulate in my own way. The last thing I saw that moved me was a sculpture by John Ahearn in the MoMA PS1 *Greater New York* show. It is a woman leaning over to hug and kiss another woman. A beautiful moment frozen in time.

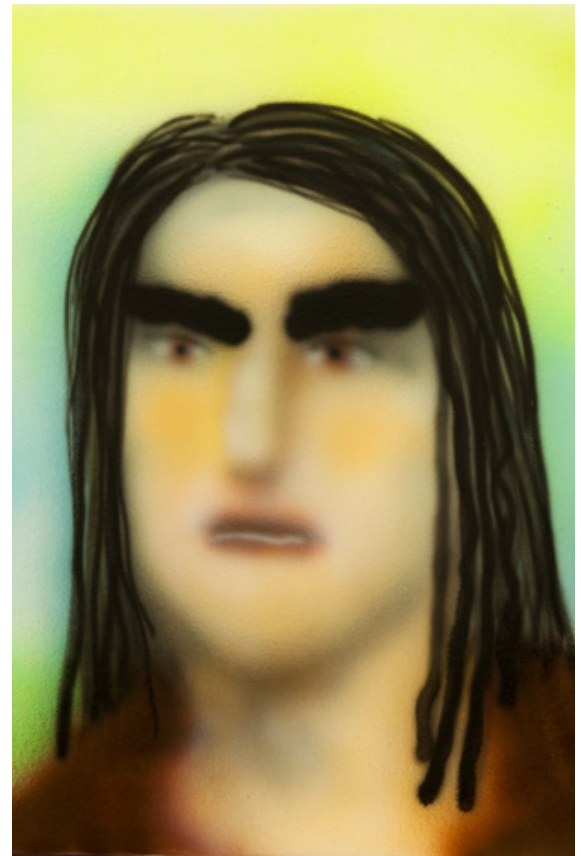
You’ve garnered a great deal of attention in a relatively short period of time. 2012 was your first time showing painting in New York, and in 2014, you had your first solo exhibition. This year, you have had three solo exhibitions in three different countries. Were you surprised at how fast the attention came your way?

The first show was at Family Business gallery. It was curated by Marilyn Minter. I think maybe that particular show was the reason I received attention quickly. It was a really great introduction to New York and had a surprising DIY vibe that I wasn’t expecting to find here.

I am fascinated by the “augmented reality” application you created in collaboration with Phillippe Karrer. The merging of new technology and publishing for an alternative viewing experience is exciting. How did the inspiration for these ideas develop, and have you considered applying it in other aspects of viewing your work, such as an exhibition?

One of Phillippe’s friends is a programmer and they figured out a way to show 3D objects in the round digitally. We tried that out and it was great, and then I came up with the idea of animating the drawings. We tried to keep the functionality really simple and straightforward. I don’t love the idea of someone looking at a painting through an iPhone, so I’ve been reluctant to use it for anything else. Most people spend only a few moments in a gallery looking at a painting. I’d rather them actually look at the painting





than look at a phone. A printed book is different because it's a reproducible object. If you own the book, you can experience it multiple times at your own pace. It's important to do something because it's useful or interesting, not just because you can. The app portion of the book becomes a way to have an additional experience. It doesn't get in the way, and hopefully it just adds something.

That's a very valid point about the very minimal time someone looks at a painting. Have you seen any children's responses to viewing the book through the app?

Yes, children usually respond the same as adults. Confused, excited and curious.

I've noticed there have been a handful of artists experimenting with virtual reality art experiences. Do you have any thoughts on using this technology as a medium for viewing art, and is it something you have considered exploring yourself?

I've read a few books by Jaron Lanier, a pioneer of virtual reality. I think the way he discusses VR is especially interesting. He talks about it as a potentially transformative mental experience. It reminds me of a dreamlike state where things and ideas can shift and change and have different meanings, some kind of post-symbolic communication. I haven't messed with it much myself but definitely would, given the right circumstances.

The other day, we were having a conversation about being the last generation before the total immersion of technology, and how the current generation will have no context for what that was like before. I feel fortunate to have been able to watch that evolution. What are your thoughts on growing up and experiencing part of history?

I think every generation has different issues to deal with. The rapid growth of technology is especially relevant today. I imagine that major shifts in how humans interacted and communicated used to happen more gradually over the course of a generation, but now these developments might happen several times in a person's lifetime. For example, body language plays a huge role in how we communicate. We lose that with texting, but we still try to adapt and find new ways to fill in the gaps with emoticons, for example. Things get difficult when new mediums appear and are quickly replaced before we can work out the bugs, or right when we are starting to. I feel like video chatting is close to good but it doesn't work because the cameras are in the wrong spot so there is no eye contact. It's a small thing, but it really ruins the whole experience. Probably by the time phone developers figure out to put the camera in the center of the screen, we will be using video holograms poorly.



opposite (from left)

Art

Acrylic on wood

48" x 48"

2012

Leesa

Acrylic on Canvas

14" x 11"

2012

left

Untitled

Digital Drawing



We were trying to predict what would replace Instagram, because eventually something will, or our attention span will drift and we'll desire something else. What are some of the impacts of social media, and more specifically Instagram, on our culture and how we view ourselves?

It's interesting how a medium changes the way we perceive images. On paper, Instagram and Flickr are similar, but they're used way differently. There is an assumption on Instagram that you are getting an inside look into someone else's life. Flickr doesn't function in the same way. A poorly composed photo might seem like a candid look into a friend's life on Instagram, while on Flickr, it's just a poorly composed photo. I think it's interesting how subtle design decisions can drastically change the way people interact with each other, for better or worse.

Writers have referred to your work as post-internet art, but not as net.art. From my understanding, net.art refers to the first generation of artists that came along with the Internet in the mid-'90s, and the current generation of artists using the tools of the Internet have been labeled post-internet art, correct? You made a good point in a previous discussion about the parallels to graffiti and net.art.

Net.art refers to artists who use the Internet as a medium. I wouldn't group myself with them, but I grew up looking at that work and was influenced by it. When I didn't have any place for people to see my paintings, I would make work online. I didn't necessarily think it was art at the time. I was just having fun making stuff. That's what I was saying I like about the connection between net.art and graffiti culture, just putting something out in the world and not asking for permission. Wanting to be heard.

I really like the work you made with the WaterColorBot which, for those not familiar, is a device that uses a brush and watercolor paints to recreate digital artwork onto paper. A 12-year-old girl created it. You expressed your enjoyment in making work with these kinds of easily accessible technological tools. Are there any other new technologies that could possibly be applied to your practice?

New technology is an opportunity to explore. It's important for artists to experiment and find new ways to use tools and to question them. I've been trying to learn 2D modeling since 2006, but only recently figured out how to integrate it into my paintings. Pretty excited to see where that goes next.

When you are physically making a piece after creating your digital draft, do you take into consideration what your work may eventually look like when it returns back to a virtual platform?

I prioritize the physical form and presence. I think the documentation can only give a sense of the thing or experience.





Personally, I find your work to be much more active and potent in the flesh versus online.

Yeah, for me, that is the point. Digital images lack touch but have other strengths. Ideally, I can find a bridge between them.

I know you like finding ways to improve both your virtual and anatomical practice. Is it important to find a balance between the two?

Yes, the balance is what I care about. I don't think in absolutes. Taking an extreme stance seems backwards to me. Computers aren't going away anytime soon, so we might as well try to figure out the best ways to use them instead of just accepting them as is or becoming luddites.

You have learned to embrace mistakes and failures within your work, and I was wondering if you could explain how they inform your practice?

Failure and mistakes are inevitable, so I've learned to go with the flow. Most mistakes are disappointments, but some lead to breakthroughs. The more, the better.

Your most recent exhibition, *Nothing Personal*, at Postmasters Gallery included only two of your 3D printed head sculptures on a table at the entrance, and they are of your mother and father. Why did you choose them as subjects, and I'm curious what they thought about being decapitated? I also noticed they were not for sale.

I am always looking for heads to scan and my parents let me scan theirs. I actually decided to include the busts in the show last minute. Seemed like a nice contrast to the title of the show. I sent photos of the heads to them and they didn't say too much, but I think they liked them.

People tend to romanticize the idea of the artist toiling in a studio, but the truth is the majority of the artists I know completely overwork themselves, clocking well over the average 40-hour work week. Do you fall into that category as well, or do you keep regular hours?

Yeah, I'm definitely in that category. It doesn't feel like work to me, though. It's fun. I have my computer there too. I'm not always painting, sometimes just writing emails or working out ideas. Just being in there leads to things. Most of my successes come from large amounts of effort. I keep trying till something works.

You have admitted to getting very anxious when you spend too much time away from your studio.

It's actually more that I am always anxious, and painting is a method that I have found to become calm. Painting is one of the only moments where I feel like my mind is totally clear and everything makes sense.

Unless you're eating a donut! We both have a vice for donuts. Can you remember the best donut you have ever eaten and from where?

Yes, I love donuts. I have to explore more NYC donut places because my favorite is still YUM YUM just outside Philadelphia. My favorite is a white cream-filled donut with chocolate icing and sprinkles on top. Peter Pan in Greenpoint is a close second overall.

JUX

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opposite (from top)
Eye 2 Eye
Acrylic on canvas
80" x 96"
2015

Steamy
Acrylic on canvas
32" x 36"
2015

above
Horse Fantasy
(portion of Diptych)
Acrylic on canvas
60" x 36"
2015