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Robin Eley- Digital Witness

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Australian painter turned LA resident Robin Eley has received international acclaim for his hyper-realistic meditations on modern communication. But for his latest solo show, "Prism," (now on-view at the 101 Exhibit) he sought to delve deeper into his themes than ever before. And that meant exploring an all-new discipline.

Eley's inspiration was to craft clear, polygonal sculptures of heads, their transparency an expression of our investment in online identities. Under the tutelage of former WETA employee, he became versed in the special effects program Maya as a means construct low-poly representations of his subjects. These digital models were then divided into segments and sculpted individually via a high-end 3D printer. After glueing and rubberbanding the parts together the sculptures were then finalized through long, laborious hours of sanding and finishing. Taking anywhere from eight or nine days to as long as a month for one head, it was a methodical process that put the "pain" in "painstaking."

"I would be sanding and spraying them and this white residue sort of gathers," says Eley. "Every now and then, as I would move through the process, I noticed that the white residue started to turn orange and I said, 'What is that?' I look at my fingers and they're just red raw and bleeding."

Given the show's focus on the digital self, it's ironic that the work should be paid in blood. In the following interview, Eley discusses putting his work on a global stage, capturing the performances of his models, and how he chooses to present himself online.

**What inspired the move to America?**

I guess opportunity. And the challenge and the life experience of it. I thought I was ready to move my work into a bigger market and sort of hold my work up to a higher form of scrutiny. I wanted to move to a city with a really thriving arts culture, which I think LA does, it really does. It was either my wife and I stay in Australia or we roll the dice and go overseas, and when the opportunity presented itself with [the 101 Exhibit] we just thought, "Let's go for it." It's proven to be a great move. We're here for three years, at least, we've got a three-year visa. We can choose to renew after that, but we're here for the foreseeable future. It's crazy, because I didn't know that much about the Los Angeles art scene coming here, but having been here for a little while now there's such a great sense of excitement around people here. It's a city with a lot of room to move creatively, and to be a part of that is very exciting.



I'm sure Australia has a thriving art scene all its own, but I'm curious how that climate feels different to you in LA. What kind of reputation does the city have globally?

I did an extensive amount of research before I moved to LA. I wasn't just going to fly over to a random city. But, I didn't realize until I started talking to people that LA is THE emerging art place in the US. In Australia the arts community is very strong. I'd say the main focus in Australia other than LA would obviously be New York, because that city has the most history and everyone knows about it. The initial idea was to come to New York, but this was years ago. We visited here last year and we spoke with the gallery and we got such a great vibe being here. Getting on-not really the ground floor of something, but being a part of something that is growing and developing outside of what I do in my studio is an exciting thing to be a part of. I think in New York it would have been tough. Plus, the weather. Coming from Australia- I mean, we had pretty good weather, too. I have to consider my wife.

I imagine Australia isn't that big of an arts scene because the country is pretty much just three major cities and then a lot of small rural towns.

You know, it's disproportionately big to the size of the place. It's a strange, we have far and away the most art prizes, per capita, of anywhere in the world. There's an incredible amount of art prizes, and some which cut all the way through to popular culture and are known throughout all levels of society, not just the art communities. So there is that. It's a very proud culture, but at the same time, I wanted to put my work on more of a world stage. I definitely see a continuing presence in and relationship with the Australian art community if they'll have me, but I've gotta continue to reach out to it. I can't just expect it to come because I'm making work in Los Angeles.



So all of these models are people that you knew in your home country?

All but one. These subjects, there are stories behind all of them. Apart from one, they're all from my hometown. One of them is from Los Angeles. I knew that I had one spot to fill for one painting, and because of the conceptual approach to the painting, how we do a lot of things through social media, how we configure the digital representations of ourselves, I decided that I wanted to find my last subject through social media. I wanted to find that person through their digital representation. So I did an open call for anyone living in Los Angeles area who would like to participate. I basically just listed all of the things that I would require of them as a model, and I got a whole stack of responses and ended up choosing Lorraine, who is in Pasadena. I met her and she was wonderful. So that was the finished painting, and her sculpture is right there, as well. But the rest of them are all Australian.



I always get such different answers from artists about their process for selecting models, how they direct them, how they get a performance out of them. Some are very collaborative with their subjects while others just kind of treat them like props. What is your method like?

It's very important for me that I get to know them as much as I possibly can before we do anything. And so there's an initial point of contact whether through introductions from a friend, or one of the girls that I've painted in this exhibition worked at the coffee shop that I would go to all of the time. So I would see her all of the time and she was really nice. So there was a conversation there. There are always at least two get-togethers just to present my idea to them, see if they're interested so that they have a full understanding of it. I let them go away and think about it and then see if they want to get in touch again, which they all have so far. Then we'll meet up again and I'll talk about what I've envisioned doing with them, individually. And we also just talk about stuff, you know? So that I can feel comfortable with them and hopefully they can feel comfortable with me.

I'm really conscious of picking people who've never been in front of a camera before, in that sense, so I like to find it. I don't like to direct them or feel like they need to be directed. Basically, I just put them in front of the camera and I feel like I've given them enough information before they're there. When they get in front of the camera I take my time and I let them kind of feel really awkward for awhile. There's always this sort of magical moment that happens. For some, it's fifteen minutes in. For some, it's an hour in. Suddenly they forget about what they're doing. They've solved the problem and they're just there in that moment. That's kind of how all of these shoots sort of work, because I do work from photos, obviously. From a practical point of view I was trying to select people- a lot of these sculptures are based on facial structure, and so I was trying to choose people with different facial structures Narrower faces, wider faces. Things like that. And also just ones that I found interesting. All of these people have become friends since then.



You've dealt with themes relating to the cultivation of digital selves before. How did you want to expand on that for "Prism"?

I guess the approach that I took was that after my last exhibition I wanted to take everything that I had been trying to say in my work and encapsulate it in a single sculptural form, which is where I sort of developed the idea as transparent, low-poly heads. And then I wanted to take that form and fold that back into a new way of painting. And that's how I came up with these paintings. So basically, I don't know if you've picked it up, but the wireframe constructed within a 3D program is then used as the abstracting element for the portraits. None of the shapes or lines are random at all. They're all exactly taken from the models that I've made, and so the idea is to capture the digital self in the sculpture. They're digitally-made. They are simplified and they have no real life to them, they cast no shadow, light passes through them. And I use that to represent the digital self.

I ask the question with the paintings: "How does our investment and creation of this digital self effect us as real people?" And so I use that as an abstracting element of what is essentially a very realistic painting. The color variations- obviously, the show is called "Prism," so, you know, when light hits the prism it fractures off into the color spectrum, and so the paintings cover the entire color spectrum, plus black and white. There's a chromatic progression. It's an expansion of the themes that have interested me for a long time. I think I'm asking much more direct questions now than before. I felt, in a sense, that I was observing from the outside looking in. I think that now I fully acknowledge that I'm in it, as well. So I'm trying to paint from the perspective of someone who is experiencing the things that I'm painting about rather than just casually observing.

**Are you very active online?**

I am in a sense. I definitely watch what I say and do, which I think in a way- again, is admitting that I'm being affected by it, as well. It's not just what you choose to do, it's what you choose not to do online. But I am active on Instagram and Facebook. Number one, it's a great way of sharing images professionally, but as far as personal info goes I hold back a lot. I constantly question, "Why would I post that, why would I comment on that?" A lot of times I can't justify it. The amount of times that I've written something and then deleted it before I've even posted it- because as soon as I read it I wonder, "Why am I doing that?" And often the motivations are not how I want people to think of me. Which is interesting, because that, in a sense, is editing the self, you know? It's not just about what you post. It's about what you don't post. Once you're in that world you become hyper-conscious of how you represent yourself. Either that, or you're not conscious of it at all. I think that both have an effect on you.

Certainly, and I think- not enough artists are aware of this- but being very active online is almost a necessity in today's climate, I think especially when it comes to Instagram.

I think it's because it's so digestible for people. I think our attention spans can be measured in seconds these days. Instagram just caters to that perfectly. It's a photo and no one has to know that you looked at it. You can just look at it and scroll on. With a lot of people that's what images have been reduced to, so in one way social media has been great about making people aware of my work, but also it's quite revealing of how people now interact with images. They're much more willing to view an exhibition online than come to see it in person.

I think images, in a lot of aspects, have been reduced to almost a disposable folly. It's just entertainment, you know? And you can just swipe your finger and it's gone and the next one's there. In one sense you clamor for that attention online, but does feeding that beast ultimately damage the greater perception of images, in general? Because I would say that most gallery owners would agree that attendance is down, because most people can look at things online. Most people would acknowledge that seeing something online isn't as good as seeing it in person. But it's good enough.



I know a lot of artists who now have to navigate marketing not just their artwork but themselves as personalities, posting selfies or information about their life. They're not just selling the work but the history and lifestyle behind it. Some artists I know are icons as people, as well as successful craftsmen. Some are really savvy about that aspect and some don't have any interest in playing that game. I have never consciously played that game. I totally get it. It's interesting that the most shared and commented on and liked photos that I've ever posted are not selfies but ones of me actually present with the art, basically pretending to work. The secret that no artist will tell you is that if they have photos of themselves working on art they're not really working on it. They're just posing and pretending. So photos of me pretending to work on my paintings are the ones that people share the most, because it shows a connection with the art. I don't think I've ever stepped into the realm of taking an image that separates me as an identity separate from my artwork. Without my artwork what is there of interest, you know? It's so much of who I am. It's just not a game I want to play, really.

I just think it's interesting that it wasn't a consideration a few years ago and now it's something to say "yes" or "no" to.

Yeah, and I question how that affects the work you make. I don't know. I guess it's the cult of celebrity or desire, or ability, to be something that we didn't have a few years ago.



Well, there was Andy Warhol, who was very smart about self-promotion, himself. He was a “celebrity artist.”
Exactly. Well, can you imagine what he would be doing today?

He would be huge. He would have millions of followers. He would be like Beyoncé.

Absolutely, and I think that proves there’s nothing wrong with it. But I guess for him that presence in social media would have ran directly parallel with the work that he was making, because that’s what his work was about, in a sense, and probably what it would be about today. But for me I have to be careful. I’m painting almost cautionary tales of over-involvement in the digital world. I need to be careful about how involved I am, because otherwise the work is disingenuous, I think.



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