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Of Societal Crucifixion And Other Preoccupations

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Artist Winston Torr at work! Photo: Naizoo

He's certainly one of the first you'll notice upon walking into a packed room or overflowing gallery – artist Winston Torr's jagged, jet-black mohawk shooting out above the crowd. Likewise, his artwork with its dark tones, sharp lines and aesthetic brilliance are also quite the eye-catcher, keeping gallery-goers entranced. Canadian-born, raised in a Chinese-American household and now making his way in Berlin, Winston's upbringing and global experiences are manifested in his artwork through his fixation with issues of culture and diversity; the human figure and the bounds of society. His artwork uses newspapers as a base to hold charcoal-like figures that are intended to mislead the eye upon first glance. a.muse interviewed Winston ahead of his solo show in Berlin to learn more about his technique and artistic impulses.

a.muse: Your use of newspapers as a base and medium for your work is quite extensive, when did you start working more closely with newspapers and how did the idea come to you?

Winston Torr: I have been fond of the texture and the print of newspapers ever since I was a child, as they vary between various countries. My professors would always fuss about not using newspapers in art, mainly because of the acidity levels. I strongly pointed out that it is my art and it is what I want to do with it that counts. Later I discovered the technique of preserving the social contents of newspapers by transferring their inks onto canvas using acrylic polymer and resin treatments. The idea of rearranging the actual social environment by layering newspaper inks on top of each other, held together as a time capsule prison, mirrored how I want to see the world – without the societal environment forced upon me.

For most of my life, I have been told by my surroundings (social upbringing) what I should and should not do in life to be happy and accepted. These rules simply did not make sense to me. Later in life I realized there are other ways to live and be happy. Dealing with this constant brainwash scenario, I use this transfer technique of rubbing the fibers away off of one side of the newspaper to reveal the inks from the other side; a compulsive meditation addiction to omit social barriers.

a.m: In a way, newspapers are a "social surface" for you and your works – what sources do you find yourself coming to again and again to find texts and in which languages? What significance does this have for you?

WT: Newspapers to me represent what the society wants the public to read, see and believe. I somehow want to make a point by saying, "don't always believe what you read."

The types of newspapers that I tend to use are a mixture of my background, the places in which I have traveled to and the environment I live in. I use Chinese newspapers frequently to remind me of my heritage. Living in such a mixed society I may quickly forget.

a.m: The humans and figures that take over your works have a remarkable sense of precision and proportion. Do you use specific models or are these figures simply created by you?

WT: The figures represent exactly what the general society believes to be perfection because this is what they have brought up to idealize. From a distance, the figures do look precise, yet when the viewer examines closer, the brush strokes of the bodies are merely an outlined structure that is rougher compared with the face. This observation questions their thoughts and mindset. Are they really happy? Or are they depressed? Or are they just machines that do and look like what the society wants them to and in return their souls leak out through their eyes?

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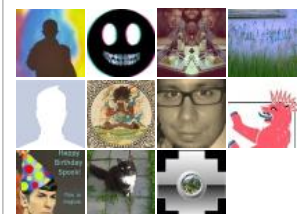
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a.m: That's very fitting for the title of your exhibition "Social Crucifixion"! How did you come up with the name of your exhibition? (It's interesting to note that "fiction" is also part of the word)

WT: The general society lives in a world of mixed perception. The topic of what pure reality means is a challenging question people face with each day. Society is bound with the fixation upon societal beliefs. Who really has the right to judge, deny, or doubt another's reality, without double-checking their own crucified issues?

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SPADED. Oil and Newspaper on Canvas. Artwork by Winston Torr

a.m: Your use of dark colors and disintegrating or decomposing texts with slashes and cut marks add a haunting element to your work. Is this something that you aim for? Is the process of achieving these effects cathartic for you?

WT: The slashes and cut marks along the figures play a role in psychological issues. The figures simplify into society standard, stripped from all external barriers. The slashes and cuts brand them in a means of purification away from social upbringing and beliefs that may distort one's mentality of their own intuition of life.

a.m: Going off of your artistic preoccupation with society and external standards, would you say that your public artistic identity measures up to your more private identity and life experiences?

WT: There is much still to gain and learn in life that I take every opportunity to experience. Each identity is a different platform for finding one's self in ways that differ from the another. Both compliment each other greatly.

a.m: How does Berlin foster your creativity? What locations around the city do you find particularly inspiring?

WT: Berlin is a place where all kinds of biographies mix and mingle. Time to lay low and creative without distraction, and at the same time enjoy the energy! I find the Berlin parks to be especially inspiring because of the numerous hidden sections – such as a scenic pond surrounded by nature – to read, spend time alone, and think about new ventures.

a.m: Can you share one of your essential DIY art & craft tip with the readers of a.muse?

WT: Absolutely. In my free time I enjoy soap making, mainly because I like using pure ingredients that I can find in any local store, rather than chemicals hidden in commercial products. All natural and customized to one's taste is what I would recommend. [Editor's note: For some in-depth [tips on soapmaking at home](#), [check out this link](#).]

Thanks for the interview, Winston! Be sure to check out [Winston Torr's artwork here](#) and catch him at the opening of his solo exhibition "Societal Crucifixion" at Trace Contemporary on May 23rd 2013.

Interview/Article by Julie Anne Miranda-Brobeck



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