Hidden Scars: The Art Of Ptsd

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HIDDEN SCARS: THE ART OF PTSD

by

GABRIEL A. GONZALEZ
B.F.A. University of Central Florida, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the School of Visual Arts and Design in the College of Arts and Humanities at the University of Central Florida Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2013
ABSTRACT

Through the use of mixed media, I explore imagery that reveals the trauma of returning combat veterans, of which I am one, as we try to reintegrate into a society that does not understand the war that still lingers within us. In my work, I depict emotional disturbances that are related to my personal encounters with war.

My working process starts by referencing mainstream media imagery, which I juxtapose against harsh images inspired by veterans’ drug and alcohol use, trauma and death.

My black-and-white pixelated paintings feature the fragmented memories of a hostile combat environment, and although “Out of My Mind” depicts the chaotic emotions associated with PTSD, my whimsical style of illustration suggests a detachment from reality.

Whether we call it shell shock, battle fatigue or PTSD, the war-related disorder is real. I want society to be aware of the hidden scars that our veterans carry with them. I do not anticipate my subject matter changing any time soon.
To all those that did not return from war, those still in the war front, and those who relieve it daily, you are not forgotten.
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INTRODUCTION

Like most children, I was attracted to cartoons. Because I was also obsessed with illustrating and drawing, cartoons gave me a way to express myself creatively at an early age. The animations of Walt Disney, Walter Lance and other animators of an earlier era became sources of inspiration for my drawings and sketches. The fantastical places and characters that I found in animators’ works gave me an escape from reality and took me into an imaginary world.

During the First World War, Walt Disney, one of my inspirations, served as a member of the Red Cross. His first attempt at serving his country was with the US Army, but due to his age at the time, 16, he was rejected from active service. Disney's experience in the Red Cross exposed him to the realities of wartime and its effects on combat soldiers. His artistic contribution to the soldiers and their families came in the form of cartoons in *Stars and Stripes*, a military publication. These illustrations were intended to bring a sense of comfort and understanding in the form of comedic relief. Disney made the realities of combat more accessible and relatable to the public and the combatants.

Walt Disney's contribution during armed conflict was not just limited to his experience in World War I. By the time World War II had begun, Disney found himself as the owner of Walt Disney Studios; a company that was producing animated features for an American audience. “Walt Disney spent the next four years creating and producing training, propaganda and educational films for the Armed Forces” (Maltin, 112). His position allowed him to make another contribution to the country's war efforts. This contribution was manifested in propaganda films. These short animated features would play before movies in the cinema, one of the only entertainment outlets for the American public. In addition to Disney's animations the
theaters would also play News Reels, a means of disseminating news to the general public. In December of 1941, the military took over Disney studios as part of the war effort, making use of the talent that hadn’t been taken by the war. The bulk of the films created by Disney Studios were training films for the military and were never intended to be seen by the general public. This manner of delivering critical information to the troops was softened by the cartoon-like, illustrated style utilized by his artists. To parallel the manner in which troops received information the studio also produced morale-building and informational films for the public. The innocence associated with Disney's characters was emphasized to ensure public acceptance and an affinity for the message being delivered. For example, the Seven Dwarfs were used in a short to sell war bonds, and at the same time Donald Duck urged everyone to pay their government taxes on time. Somewhat more aggressive than live-actions feature films were cartoons directed at fostering an animosity for America's enemies. In many of the short films, negative Japanese and Nazi stereotypes were exaggerated to further a hatred for our enemies and reinforce our country's stance against the Axis of Evil. I feel that the qualities that are reminiscent of childhood in Disney's work provided a refuge for the masses during a very charged conflict for the American people. This refuge in illustration and cartooning has a direct correlation between my internal conflict and my retreat into comic book fantasy to deal with reality.

Cartooning continued to be a safe place for me as a young adult and as a military veteran, but my early freedom to choose an imagined world was replaced by a need for fantasy. The challenge of returning home from war, often associated with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), has created hidden scars for me as it has for many soldiers. I once used cartooning to
escape from the real world, and now I project a pleasant appearance to mask my PTSD. Neither strategy has been very successful.

The security I gained from fantasy was my catalyst for pursuing an undergraduate degree in digital animation, and though animation kept me creatively active, it did not allow me to find a personal voice. What led me to pursue a graduate degree in studio art was a wish to inject conceptualism and personal experience into my characters and digital environments. I found that my decision eventually proved to be wrong because it was too safe. The time I had spent carefully creating characters did not match, or allow me to address, the inner turmoil I faced with PTSD. Characteristics of PTSD include avoidance, detachment and isolation.

Figure 2: *Untitled*. animation still by author, 2010.
In the first year of the graduate program, I created characters and environments that were technically satisfying but lacking in emotional depth. Animating the figures and environments was just as unfulfilling because it did not allow me to express anything chaotic or personal. My motivation at first was not clear to me, but the more I invested in these figures (Figure 2), the less I felt connected to them. Through conversation and critique about that body of work, I realized that I had been trying to confront PTSD in my work. The safety of animation did not address the instability of my emotional state. The disconnect between my animation work and the reception that the work received prompted me to investigate other mediums to give voice to emotions that I could not yet realize visually.

Figure 3: *First Time I Thought I Would Die*. video still by author, 2011.
My artistic exploration into how PTSD has affected my life triggered a video installation called “The first time I thought I would die.” In it I wanted to expand my visual vocabulary and convey the video’s message in a different way. I did not want to hide behind animated characters or digital technology. For my installation I was filmed reading aloud a letter that I had written to myself. The letter was motivated by a therapy session in which my doctor had me write about my remembered experience as I faced death on the battlefield for the first time. Despite the emotional weight and reality of the subject matter discussed, I did not provide the audio in the piece. This way I would be vulnerable about my experiences, but I was simultaneously able to hide in the silence. Figure: 3. In the book, *Art and Fear* by Paul Virilio, author John Armitage speaks of the increasing necessity for sound in contemporary art and of our desire to hear what is not said. “Virilio is forging and transforming our understanding of the ethical dilemmas associated with silence and the subsequent aesthetic of conflicts linked to the sonorization of the audio-visual within the sphere of contemporary art” (Armitage 1)

Although I felt vulnerable when I was being filmed for the video installation, I did not effectively communicate my longing for understanding and acceptance. My digital representation of myself talking about my struggles merely reiterated the emotional distance that I now wanted to overcome. Nevertheless, the experience of making and showing the video confirmed for me that personal experience could be a valid foundation for my work. A subsequent painting series, titled “Black and White,” would soon allow me to combine the vulnerability I felt while filming the video piece with the illustrative nature of my earlier animation work.
BLACK AND WHITE

Figure 4: *The Sacrifice*. Painting by author, 2011
The imaginary nature of my illustrations and the reality of my video installation were pushing me toward a more sustainable and visceral method of working. In this series of paintings I acknowledge similarities to photographs taken on and around the battlefield. Photographers like Matthew Brady and Alexander Gardner created images during the Civil War, many of which were taken after the battles. These photographs were often manipulated by the photographers to create the image they wanted to portray of battle and its impact on people and the landscape. Gardner has been criticized for staging his photographs, *Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter*, Gettysburg, July, 1863, in which the photographer moved a fallen young soldier to create a more dramatic scene. His approach to history does not discount the facts of the war. Instead, Gardner’s photographs allow the events to be seen through his own eyes.” (Heineman, 125) I draw a parallel between this practice and my own appropriation and editing of wartime photographs to give myself a basis on which to structure my paintings. This process mirrors my experience and gaps in memory that I experience years later. More importantly, the imagery in Gardner's photograph and my paintings deals with the aftermath of wartime and battle. The manner in which I assembled the imagery for the “Black and White” series also deals with the battle and its aftermath.

The simultaneity of past and the present is emphasized by the manner in which I juxtapose combat images with non-combat images that I associate with my own war experience. In figure 4, “The Sacrifice,” which is composed of thirty-two one-foot by one-foot squares, I have assembled multiple images about the conflict in Iraq. The segmentation of the image into thirty-two individual squares reflects the manner in which I remember the experience. My memories are segmented and fleeting even though the emotions that the experience caused in me
are not. My intention was to make my imagery more accessible to the viewer but to leave enough psychological room for searching and interpretation. Although the source images that I use are not my own photographs, the manner in which I manipulate and treat the objects is. Appropriation in fine art is not without precedent. Painters such as Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol used appropriated imagery in their work. “No artist, or none that anyone knew of, had ever tried using the process in painting- but this one act reversed the magical appropriation of reality by photography that had plagued painting even since Neicephore Niepce took the first photograph in 1828” (Dalton & Sherman 109).

My process for assembling images was through the digital manipulation of photographs.
This assembling was necessary for me to do because I believe that we in modern society have been desensitized to individual photographs. It is my intent to elevate the power of the images by painting them on panels. The tangibility of painted surfaces reinforces the reality of the subject matter. In this series I was influenced by graphic novelists such as Stan Lee and Frank Miller when I treated photographs of reality like images from illustrated books. Furthermore, Miller’s high contrast black-and-white paint led me to use the same palette. My rationale was to dramatize the differences between the realities of war and the public’s romantic view of wartime photography.

Figure 6: *The Sacrifice*. In situ, painting by author, 2011.
The manner in which I physically presented “The Sacrifice” has an impact on the viewer. In the original presentation of “The Sacrifice” I lined up my 32 panels on the wall at a normal viewing height. The public response to the work was one of reverence, and the piece was received much as if it were a traditional painting in a gallery show. As seen in figure 6, the same work, later on display at the FAVO show, elicited a noticeably different reaction. I arranged the 32 panels on the floor of the exhibition space; the piece came to life, and although the imagery was just as understandable on the floor, the multi-panel piece now had a distinctly different impact. It became a visual reference to a coffin. That morbid reference in conjunction with the subject matter further amplified the notions of conflict and mourning. I found that viewers would walk more slowly and lower their voices as if they were attending a wake. I continued to use this artistic style by varying my approach to color and texture.
Figure 7: *Black and White.* In situ, paintings by author, 2011.
TRANSITION

While working on the “Black and White” series, I was approached to start an apprenticeship with a master tattoo artist, Armadillo Red. I accepted the offer. The new venture influenced the imagery I was attracted to, and it altered the direction of my studio practice.

The history of tattooing has its roots in ancient and modern societies around the globe. In cultures as distant in the past as the Neolithic period, researchers and scientists have found tattoos on the mummified remains of bodies unintentionally preserved by ice. "Ötzi the Iceman, dated c. 3300 BC, bore 57 separate tattoos: a cross on the inside of the left knee, six straight lines 15 centimeters long above the kidneys and numerous small parallel lines along the lumbar, legs and the ankles, exhibiting possible therapeutic tattoos (treatment of arthritis)” (Mifflin 13). The tradition of the tattooed image and its purposes is a varied as the cultures that utilized the practice of skin modification. In China the presence of tattoos on an individual indicated their confinement in prison for various offenses. Tattooing Chinese characters such as "Prisoner" (囚) on convicted criminals' or slaves' faces was practiced until the last dynasty, the Qing Dynasty (1644 to 1912).

The Samoan Islands are credited with giving us the term “tattoo”, which derives from their native term “tatau” (Mifflin 18). The tradition and manner in which the Samoan culture makes tattoos has changed very little in meaning and technical delivery. The skill is often passed from Samoan father to son, and this apprenticeship process can take as long as five years to effectively pass on. The subject matter found in Samoan skin art is strictly based on the family and the elaborate design that is unique to the specific family and is further refined for the individual receiving the tattoo. The use of symbology in the tattooing process is passed through
the generations of skin art and artists. There is a distinction in the significance of subject matter and the quality of delivery to the skin, which illuminates the differences between a tattooist and tattoo artist. In the 1950's in Coney Island it was common to find tattoo parlors, but the selection in what was to be tattooed was limited to the examples on the wall. This limited selection of imagery and the inability of the tattooist to elaborate or to take artistic freedom with subject matter relegated tattooing to the realm of craft and not art. The difference in the concept or idea motivating a client and the execution by a tattoo artist is determined by the freedom the artist allows himself to take with the imagery. The relationship of a client to a commissioned work in the gallery world is not very different. The trust a client places in the artist and the artist's freedom to create are reflected in the artist's stylistic choices, which may increase the distance between craft and art.

There is a negative connotation that I feel is associated with tattooing and its practice in Western society. Admittedly, tattooing and the culture that surrounds it has a checkered past. The societal implications and views associated with skin art are usually connected in the popular imagination with an undesirable subculture and delinquent behavior. The stereotypical tattooed biker club and gang affiliations are some of the negatives associated with tattooing and the artists who apply tattoos. Tattooing's eventual elevation to artistic status seems analogous to photography's migration from a scientific recording medium into a now generally accepted art practice, or 'High Art'. It is also comparable to the transition of Andy Warhol's use of silk-screened, appropriated, consumer advertisements into the movement that became known as Pop Art. “Low art” in many forms has emerged as a critically acclaimed and gallery-accepted form of art. I am convinced that a similar transition is happening to tattooing and the artistic style that
I identify with it, namely Lo-Brid.

“I feel as though the fine art world and tattoos are all one in the same. The only difference is the medium in which it is applied. As with all mediums, each medium has something different to offer and the end result usually reflects those differences” (Smith).

Figure 8: The Golden Acorn. http://www.jesssmithtattoos.com/art/?pid=74, painting by Jesse Smith.
Actual tattoos have made the transition from the tattoo studio to the gallery and museums, notably the Louvre in Paris, in 2006-2008. As reported in *Art News* in December of 2012, an individual named 'Tattoo Tim' had his entire back tattooed by the Belgian artist, Wim Delvoye. This back piece is part of an installation that is shown three times a year. Upon Tattoo Tim’s death his skin is to be removed, framed and delivered to collector Rik Reinking. Reinking is reported to have spent 150,000 euros to acquire the skin art postmortem.
I found myself drawing and illustrating but in a much different and more mature way than before. Inspired by artists such as Jeff Soto (Figures 10 & 11) and Gary Baseman, I found my early love for cartoons and that style of animation manifesting itself in my work as a tattoo artist and in my studio practice. As I progressed in my tattooing apprenticeship, I noticed that the line between what I considered to be high art and tattoo art was blurring. The background in animation that I had rejected earlier in my studio practice was now the bedrock upon which I began to build a new way of working.

Articles in magazines such as *Art News* as far back as the mid 1980's have referred to artists “crossing“ from the canvas to human skin and back again. In the documentary, *Skin*, Director Ryan Hope worked with artists such as Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and Raymond Pettibon to develop the design and display of their artworks on skin. Artists such as Jesse Smith, Will Gonzalez and Jason Stephan, have become exemplars of the new “Lo-Brid” art movement by taking the style to their tattoo studio and the art gallery. This transference of a tattoo style to painting has generated an aesthetic movement characterized by a recognizable style. This
movement utilizes characteristics such as exaggerated forms and anatomical features, a colorful cartoon-like style and traditions, and can draw parallels to “Pop-Surrealism” or “Lowbrow” art.

![Figure 12: Out of My Mind. painting by the author, 2013.](image)

I find that there is an organic transition between my work in the “Black and White” series and a new body of work, “Out of My Mind”. My desire to bridge the gap between my studio practice and the manner in which I tattoo manifested itself in these new paintings. There emerged a congruence with my practice in the “Black and White” series and the way in which I approached painting the “Out of My Mind” images. The difference is that the latter images are illustrative and are accompanied by an expanded color palette. In this new body of work I look inward to create the imagery that triggers the paintings. No longer do I feel the need to appropriate imagery to express my inner struggle. This new found freedom manifested itself in a series full of illustrated characters that gave me comfort and confidence when I was younger and
that were not altered by my experience in military service. The healing that I enjoyed by executing the “Black and White” series was due to my confrontation with the very thing that (I thought) had defined my life after my return home. In doing so I was liberated personally and artistically to revisit my love for illustration and to develop characters who could convey my emotions in an artistic medium.
OUT OF MY MIND

In the work of Walt Disney and Walter Lantz I found that cell animation could again be foundational in my studio practice. Referring back to the inspiration found in Disney's propaganda short films I found the illustrative nature of my new paintings as a response to the animated treatment of Disney's characters. My discovery of artists who had bridged the gap between fine art and tattooing was also a revelation. Jesse Smith and Jason Stephan became my modern day Disney and Lantz. Instead of hiding behind and inside my drawings, I now found the potential for personal expression and a contemporary audience for this way of working.

In my research I found an inspirational parallel to my experience with the Army and my battle with PTSD. Artist Jesse Smith served in the armed forces before completing his BFA, as I had. Glitch Gallery, located in Richmond, Virginia, is a space that only exhibits the work that reflects the Lo-Brid aesthetic, and it represents tattoo artists who made the transition from skin to other, traditional artistic media. Glitch was founded by the artist Jesse Smith in 2011 after he received his BFA in fine art from Virginia Commonwealth University. My new found interest in the market for the Lo-Brid style has given me the confidence to continue the direction in which my practice has evolved.

“When I first started tattooing new school was the genre of tattooing that I looked up and connected with the most. As I matured as an artist I noticed that the artist that were being grouped into that particular genre had surpassed all that that genre had encompassed. I had discussed this thought with other artist and they all seemed to share the same opinion, so I started to brainstorm a bit and came up with the name Lo-Brid. I like how it played off the words, Hybrid and Lowbrow
and seemed to run parallel to their meanings. I personally consider the Lo-Brid style a movement of tattooing that has collected inspiration from graffiti, tattoo, comic book and Lowbrow art” (Smith).

Figure 13: Zombie Owl. tattoo by author, 2013.
As seen in “Out of My Mind #7” (Figure 10), I have treated a panel as a single frame in a much larger narrative. In the tradition of comic book art and the single cell animation, I have chosen to depict a moment from an imagined scene. The scene is one of chaos and a quest for refuge. There is an obvious contrast between the composition on the right side of the panel and the negative space on the left side. On the right of the painting we see many characters in varying situations and expression. The experiences of the characters are an expression of a
personal struggle that I have had to face. The pulling of eyes from their sockets (seen at the center of the image) is an analog to the mental battle that I have confronted during my struggle with PTSD. The small figures represent PTSD itself. They engage with the illustrations directly by maiming, tearing, and eating away at the flesh of the cartoon-like characters. The changes in spatial perspective enacted by me on these characters is characteristic of the Lo-Brid style. My childlike treatment of the characters represents an attempt to elicit compassion from the viewer. My visual invocation of innocence contrasts with the violence that I have inflicted on the characters. The characters are no longer engaged in direct conflict, but neither do they let it define their existence. The expressions on the characters' faces are not of pain and isolation nor are they the result of their afflictions. Instead, the characters are smiling in the face of their afflictions. Their smiles are evidence of genuine hope, which is illustrated by stitches that are barely able to restrain the character's grin. We see that the gaze of the characters is fixed on the freedom and uncertainty that is visible near the left side of the frame.

The calm, empty space on the left is their destination, after they have undergone adversity, and is in direct contrast to the tension generated by the waterfall looming over the figures. This unresolved ending represents my acknowledgment that future struggle is imminent. It is the freedom I find in the process of working on these paintings that gives me the motivation to keep creating. Not only does the subject matter of this new series give me relief; it is a direct response to the tension I felt while working on the “Black and White” series. I painted the images in that series with ridged lines and a very deliberate design. The images were time consuming and required great precision in my line work. This exacting approach caused me anxiety. Nevertheless, creating the “Out of My Mind” series was liberating. I enjoyed the freedom that I
felt after executing line work in an organic way. I am not unduly constrained by the small shapes that compromise the whole, and I can honor the nature of wood grain to fit my newly conceptual, more spontaneous way of working.
CONCLUSION

I started my artistic education in the graduate program by creating three-dimensional animations that proved to be distant and cold, it was not an effective way to conceptualize or express my motivations. The transition from a virtual, imagined world to imagery appropriated from actual conflict gave permanence and tangibility to my life experiences. The permanence of paint on panel provided a vehicle for interpreting my memories and experiences. Due to the laborious nature of painting, the amount of time I invested in artwork gave me the opportunity to give voice to my inner struggles. As a result of my tattooing and my organic rediscovery of illustration, I found a new hope in executing, “Out of My Mind”. Although the cartoons and graphic novels of my youth became a place of refuge from my struggles with PTSD, I found it necessary to abandon the comfort of that place to paint the “Black and White” series. Now that I was personally ready to confront my post-Iraq War struggles in an artistically mature and direct way, I subsequently took comfort in the Lo-Brid style. The influences of illustration and single cell animation on me were the catalyst for “Out of My Mind”, but I have found that the freedom and expression that I discovered while working in this way has helped me to also develop personally.

I am still haunted by PTSD. However, I no longer let that define my journey in life. I am attempting to loosen the grip of PTSD on my existence and on my perception of my current circumstances. Figuratively speaking, I am no longer the owl isolated in a dream. I see my journey reflected in the faces I have created in “Out of My Mind: Untitled #7”. I am still affected by the past, but I am looking forward to the calm that often comes after the struggle.
REFERENCES


Smith, Jesse. E-mail Interview, 6 Mar 2013.

--- On Wed, 3/6/13, gabe gonz <gabe21g@yahoo.com> wrote:

From: gabe gonz <gabe21g@yahoo.com>
Subject: Re: Artworks
To: "Jeff Soto" <jeff@jeffsoto.com>
Date: Wednesday, March 6, 2013, 2:05 PM

Thank you so much Jeff! Greatly appreciate it!

— On Wed, 3/6/13, Jeff Soto <jeff@jeffsoto.com> wrote:

From: Jeff Soto <jeff@jeffsoto.com>
Subject: Re: Artworks
To: "gabe gonz" <gabe21g@yahoo.com>
Date: Wednesday, March 6, 2013, 12:49 PM

Hi Gabe,

Yes feel free to use my info and work. Glad I made an impact! My schedule is a mess, I'm real busy at the moment, so I can't answer your questions.. however, there's a ton of interviews online and I know people have asked me to talk about style/advice/etc., so all you gotta do is search!

Thanks
Jeff

On Mar 5, 2013, at Mar 5, 2013-8:39 AM, gabe gonz wrote:

Hey Jeff, my name is Gabe Gonzalez. I'm a Graduate student at UCF and am writing my thesis defense. Your work has influence me a lot and am wondering if its OK for me to use you and your work as comparisons in my thesis dissertation/paper. Anything you could say about your style/movement/works/advise would be great help. Thank you for taking the time to read this.
--- On Mon, 4/1/13, gabe gonz <gabe21g@yahoo.com> wrote:

From: gabe gonz <gabe21g@yahoo.com>
Subject: Re: Fwd: Gabe's Questions
To: "Jesse Smith" <jessesmithart@gmail.com>
Date: Monday, April 1, 2013, 6:22 PM

Jesse,

Thank You so much! This was more helpful than you can imagine. I greatly appreciate you taking the time to respond.

Gabe

--- On Mon, 4/1/13, Jesse Smith <jessesmithart@gmail.com> wrote:

From: Jesse Smith <jessesmithart@gmail.com>
Subject: Fwd: Gabe's Questions
To: gabe21g@yahoo.com
Date: Monday, April 1, 2013, 3:58 PM

----- Forwarded message ------
From: Jesse Smith <jessesmithcreates@gmail.com>
Date: Mon, Apr 1, 2013 at 1:06 PM
Subject: Re: Gabe's Questions
To: Jesse Smith <jessesmithart@gmail.com>

How does Jesse feel about Tattoos and the Fine art world, does he see a difference?

I feel as though the Fine art world and Tattoos are all one in the same. The only difference is the medium in which it is applied. As with all mediums, each medium has something different to offer and the end result usually reflects those differences.

Does his experience in the military have an impact on his art?

Being a Military Brat, my family and I were forced to move every couple of years. Constantly relocating allowed for me to experience a lot of different environments/people. These experiences have definitely played a major roll in the art that I create today.
Who are his influences?

Just like everyone else, I have tons of influences, but the people who I feel have helped mold my art into what it is today are:

1) Greg “Croala” Simkins: Not only for paving the way for us character driven artists, but for also being such a great guy. Greg has opened my mind up a bit more and allowed me to feel confident in decisions I make in my art.

2) Gunnar: The way he captivates a, not so cute, situation in a cute way.

3) Tim Biedron: His bent perspectives on his characters as well as his original color combinations have really made me feel comfortable with the fact that I like to place eyes in places where they don’t belong.

4) Joe Sorren: There are no boundaries with Joe. If he feels like stretching one arm out longer then the other or squishing a face in the middle of a big head, he’ll do it. All while capturing a rather innocent feel. All his creatures/characters seemed deformed, but they carry themselves with confidence as if they aren’t concerned about how people view them.

5) Jason Stephan: Aside from being one of my best friends, Jason’s attention to detail and overall precision are unmatched. Not only is he an inspirational artist, but he’s also one of the realest people I know. Whenever I have questioned myself as an artist/tattoo artist Jason has been there to encourage me and keep my head straight. All of his goofy characters reflect his personality and he is one of the most solid artists that I know.

6) Jime Litwalk: Ultra clean artist with an uber cute style. I’ve always been sucker for simplicity.

7) Tony Ciavarro: Tony inspires me on many levels. Of course his art is precise and super clean, but his work ethic and business sense is impeccable. And to top it all off he is probably one of the most humble artists I know.

8) Michael Hussar: A super talented individual who captures the true essence of evil in all of his paintings. His stylized realism is something that I aspire to add to my art.

9) Scribe: Scribe creates these imaginary worlds/scenarios that at first glance seem to be kinda meaningless to the viewer, but as you look deeper, you see that the characters are extremely consumed by their situation. It’s kind of like a simple version of your everyday battles. His simplistic style, along with his ambitious ideas, have inspired the direction in which I have gone with my art.

10) Toast: Ever since I first started following his work, back in ’95, this guys kept me in awe. Everything he does is just mind blowing. His attention to light source and his ability to tweak just about anything, have truly laid a foundation in my mind on how to create an innovative character.

What art styles have influenced him the most?

The art styles that I am most influenced by are probably:
Tattoo Art in General: Being a tattoo artist and studying tattoo art as a whole has taught me a lot about creating fluid compositions on the body and making a design that is legible via showing dynamic contrast and light.

Graffiti Art: Graffiti is where I first learned how to create tweaked out characters with crazy/poppy palettes. I owe a lot of who I am today to graffiti art.

Lowbrow Art: The lowbrow art movement is something that I feel has stemmed from two major genre's, comic book art/graffiti art. As mentioned above, graffiti art played a major role in my development as an artist, however I honestly was never really into comic books. I always enjoyed looking at the art, but the whole super hero thing was never that interesting to me. That aside, the art I feel I can most relate to these days comes from the Lowbrow art movement.

Concept art: I think that concept artists are some of the most talented artists out there. I spend a lot of time studying concept art.

Illustration Art: The art school that I went to focused a lot of energy on Editorial Illustration and because of that it has become a part of who I am as an artist.

Can he elaborate on Lo-brid art?

When I first started tattooing, "New School" was the genre of tattooing that I looked up to and connected with the most. As I matured as an artist I noticed that the artists who were being grouped into that particular genre had surpassed what all that genre encompassed. I had discussed this thought with other artists and they all seemed to share the same opinion. So I started to brainstorm a bit and came up with the name "Lo-Brid". I liked how it played off of the words "Hybrid" and "Low Brow" and seemed to run parallel to their meanings. I, personally, consider the "Lo-brid" style a movement of tattooing that has collected inspiration from graffiti, tattoo, comic book and low brow art.

Lastly (trying to keep it short because I know you are both extremely busy) What words of advice does he have for an artist who has only been tattooing for a year and is starting out in the fine art world?

Study and create as much art as you can. The more you study and create the better you will be:

I really appreciate your interest in my work and hope that the answers above suffice. Good luck buddy,

Jesse

On Mon, Apr 1, 2013 at 9:28 AM, Jesse Smith <jesssmithart@gmail.com> wrote:

-------- Forwarded message --------
From: gabe gonz <gabe21g@yahoo.com>
Date: Sat, Mar 30, 2013 at 5:53 PM
Subject: Gabe's Questions
To: jesssmithart@gmail.com

Hey Philippa,
Want to say Thank You again! Your help is greatly appreciated. I was doing my research for this MFA paper and thought it was interesting that the one artist/tattoo artist (Jesse) that I find to parallel to artistically and we both had a similar start to tattooing. I was also in Germany in the Army and learned to tattoo from a military friend I met there, then got my BFA. Just interesting fun facts. I don’t know if I told you, my paper deals with PTSD and the trauma of soldiers returning from war and how that is represented in my art.

How does Jesse feel about Tattoos and the Fine art world, does he see a difference?

Does his experience in the military have an impact on his art?

Who are his influences?

What art styles have influenced him the most?

Can he elaborate on Lo-brid art?

Lastly (trying to keep it short because I know you are both extremely busy) What words of advice does he have for an artist who has only been tattooing for a year and is starting out in the fine art world?

Philippa, again, greatly appreciate you guys helping me out! Gabe.

Hopefully be able to go up there someday and meet you guys in person.