

HCC ART GALLERIES

HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Cort Hartle

Interviewee: Eric Ondina

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Cort Hartle (CH):

This is Cort Hartle, I am here with Eric Ondina doing an oral history interview for the HCC Permanent Art Collection. So I just have some questions for you. My first one is what is your story of coming into the world of art?

Eric Ondina (EO):

I've always been the kid in the class that liked to draw. I always found a huge amount of therapeutic relief through drawing and through painting. Ever since I was a kid, I would lock myself in my room and just draw. That was my way of exploring myself and the world around me. As I came into a career, I've always [been reluctant] to do it because I've always been told that it's a very difficult path. I fell into it because I felt that it was the one thing that I was so passionate about and you know, be damned about the struggle, that's what I want to do, I'm very passionate about it. I've tried my hand in a lot of other subjects, but I've always found myself coming back to art as a way of exploring things. Rather than writing a research paper, I try to distill it visually, and that's always been how I really came to understand my subjects. No matter what, it's through art.

CH:

What does your artistic process look like?

EO:

My artistic process usually follows a latency period of gathering a lot of subject matter, whether it be collecting snippets from local news, from instances that I witnessed, anything from a fight I see on the side of the road to what the headline of the New York Times is. I tend to aggregate all of these and then in a period of

furious production I'll collage them together, create aggregates, pastiches, or just quote directly. And then I would create several different sketches digitally. Digital has been a real time saver, so I create colleges through that. And then I paint. I try to paint very directly while tuning out a lot of the technical [considerations] and paint more gestural and I'll leave the refinement until later, but the first initial stages are just very stream of consciousness.

CH:

I know you use egg tempera as your primary medium. Do you want to talk about that? Like why that?

EO:

I created this formula that's unique to my process because prior to that I was always into painting with oils and sometimes acrylics. But with the oils, it became such a trap for me in that I would spend so much time just really celebrating that unctuousness, the ability to blend and render and I would lose so much of the vitality. It was in the latter half of grad school where I was so fed up, I was in a mental block, my paintings sucked and my professors was looking at it and being like, you know, Eric, we really like your drawings more. Why are you a painter? Maybe you can just be a drawer? And well, I've always wanted to be a painter, just because that's how I get so much gratification and drawing always seemed like a step towards the final painting. Sorry to people who work exclusively in drawing, but you know, I've always enjoyed painting. The ability to render with drawing and capture it much more fleeting and free of over burdensome thinking was something that I really enjoyed about drawing.

So I needed a medium that could capture that expression of drawing, but also have the richness of paint. Oils like I said, they just blend for days. But acrylics, you can work it as like an aqueous medium, but they always turn out flat. You know, acrylics will dry on the palette too much. So I developed this medium through different trial and errors, and basically it combines all the advantages of an oil-based paint in that you're able to blend as needed, but once it dries it evaporates, and you are able to paint over it and you're able to re-saturate an area, reblend an area by adding water, or if you let it sit for enough time, it will eventually cure like an oil paint and thus create a solid and permanent surface. So it allowed me to have that gesture of drawing, as well as the ability to render a subject with the richness that you get in oil paint.

CH:

Do you have any specific goals with your art and if so, what are they? And this could be read in a number of ways, this could be career goals, your goals as an artist, or why you paint what you paint, that kind of thing.

EO:

Yeah, I think my most successful work came out of when I really just stopped painting for other people, to impress other people, to what I thought would fit within an art canon, like my grand story of art history. Where would I [be found] in a history book, you know? No, I want to paint what I feel now and that's so much more liberating. And what I feel is as many people who are paying attention, or at least haven't allowed themselves to be so burnt out that they tune out, is that we are in a time of crises, of constant crises, and the noise of that crises is so dehumanizing and depoliticizing and stressful that you tune out through apathy or indulge with whatever indulgences somebody might have. So I try to capture that because I don't want to fall into either of those camps. I don't want to have to decompress through alcoholism or just completely detach and thus be psychically immune to all of the issues that we have. So I think painting is a way of therapy for me to analyze and take in what's happening, but also find a catharsis for it. I think through that I've been able to maybe communicate even better than I had before without trying to reach out specifically to what people want, but actually just make what I make, and I think that really communicates better. So yeah, my goals would be to just take in what I can, express it, if it lands, that's fine. But the most important thing is that I'm able to work through all of the crises of our times and how I deal with that and mostly [that's] what's important to me as an artist.

CH:

Is there a moment that you think marked that shift for you? Like, what was going on when you made that shift into distilling these crises and painting your own feelings rather than what your professors or like, the canon of art history might expect.

EO:

I was spending so much time on oil—it happened in the same shift with the oil painting, especially with oil paint because you can kind of see it within that canon of art history. And like these epic paintings and, you know, just loving that and wanting to speak to that, I felt that I could maybe render grander narratives of our time. And you know, I still talked about topical issues, but I used a lot of techniques like an illustrator [would], which didn't really speak to the heart of and communicate emotionally as much as it did mentally. And I think that's a put-off for people. My paintings became too hard to read, very dense, like you need a map and a key to deconstruct it and I felt that I needed a much closer representation that helped me work faster, more fluid, and more expressively. And you know, it's just a weight off my shoulders to be able to see paintings, as you know, each one is a song in an album and not each painting [is] an entire album with multiple songs. You can keep working and it's OK if one's a bust. Unlike musicians, if you hit the wrong note you just play it over until you get it right but in painting you have these manifestations of

the hours of work that you put into it that now you have to get rid of and that kind of is very hard, it's hard to get over that, it's still hard. Even though I told my students not to worry about that, it's hard for me. So maybe I can take a little bit of my own advice. But yeah, I think the shift in material as well as time we've had such a massive shift of awareness, I think especially post 2016 and then post 2020 with how fragile things are. It's easy to just become disenchanted by what we thought was some sort of monolithic and neoliberal order, and now the cracks are becoming like fissures. And we're going to have a reckoning with that. I think also that political climate that we're in fueled that, as well that need to create much more quickly, freely and expressively.

CH:

How do you identify or interact with the local art scene?

EO:

As much as I can, you know. Be supportive. Be out there. I want to contribute, make connections, host other people's arts, like if we can get in a group show, collaborate. You know the local art scene in Tampa, I've been here for over 10 years now. I just engage with it, you know? If there's no shows, put on your own. If there's a way that I can help out other artists just by buying prints, even if I don't have any money like whatever, put it on a credit card. I really try to help that cause I know that what goes around, comes around. I want to contribute to that community as best I can.

CH:

Do you think that teaching locally has influenced any of that?

EO:

Yeah, it's always great to see students in shows. It's a huge rush for me and a thrill to see students out there making work and the fact that they thank me for that, I'm just so delighted. It means a lot to be able to work with students. Yeah, it means a lot.

CH:

Nice. Was there any specific inspiration for the works that we now have in our collection? We can talk about them individually or together, whatever makes sense for you.

EO:

Yeah. I think both of them are great examples of what I mentioned about these cracks of our systems as well as our sense of escapism through them. Whether it's through just self indulgence or this ignoring of the issues, both of them speak towards that. On the piece *Sink or Swim* you see a typical Florida scene, like a pool

party, spring break, just people out there shaking with white claws and out in the sun enjoying it without paying much heed to a storm that's on the horizon. We in Florida are going to be highly vulnerable to climatic conditions. And without any real will to confront those or surpassing that is just the will to disengage and fulfill yourself through chemical means or, whatever it is, whatever dopamine mining kind of distractions people engage in. And not saying that I'm better than that, I mean, like sometimes you need a break, but it seems like whenever you think of Florida, it's people go to Florida to party, to escape, to have fun. Just driving down any of our club districts and you'll see just a lot of escapism and that's what I wanted to capture in that painting.

The other one *Idle Shrine*, I always loved a good pun, so [in] *Idle Shrine* you have the Shriners marching through what has been your kind of typical American boulevard. You have a giant sky, which I wanted to reference a lot of the early American landscape painters who would paint these epic skies and vast untapped wilderness that extended beyond imagination. It spoke so much to our American sense of boundlessness and freedom and beauty and wonder, kind of this naivety, and now here we are, 200 odd years later. And what do we have? We have a confinement of strip malls, and yet we have such pride, but, you know, without responsibility. And we're seeing this change of conditions now. There's this parade marching through. The Shriners kind of represent to me this pomp and ceremony of the old fashioned, what we would pejoratively call "boomers." They mean well, but also maybe that generation probably needed to do a little better to set up the future generations. And I'm not making a reference to the Shriners as a fraternal organization, I'm sure they do great work, but I think that just as kind of a stand-in for the geriocracy. Behind there [in the painting] they have their little cars and I just like the pomp and ceremony of them. I do like the pageantry of it, so behind them you have some little shriner that fell asleep at the wheel, and is about to plow into the group. You have one coveting an AR15, you have the other ones blowing a whistle and charging forward. So just speaking to the geriocracy behind them is, you know, an old-fashioned country music star coming up behind them would be a drag queen around the corner from an amscot. How tragic is it that instead of boundless fields, we have predatory payday advance stores now. I just wanted to create that landscape in the tradition of the former American landscape painters that saw such beauty and how I wish it could be a little bit better for us.

CH:

Thank you. Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you would like people to know about you or your work?

EO:

I guess just that I've been working here in Ybor City for the past five years at the Ybor Arts Colony, which has been around for 30 years. It was one of the most affordable places, there's been a lot of artists gone through there that have been local luminaries for generations. It has recently been bound to be remodeled and put under a different umbrella. So hopefully some great new generations of artists will come from there, but this is the end of an era and I just want to reference how grateful I am to have been a part of that story.