

Mr. Turps Banana: Marcus Harvey on Painting, Sculpture, Publishing, Teaching

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by Erick Miller

“Young British Artist” and impresario Marcus Harvey showed new work at Philadelphia’s Locks Gallery this Fall. In a wide-reaching interview that touches on his work as co-founder of Turps Banana (2007), the magazine and latterly gallery and art school, along with his own studio practice and his latest body of paintings and sculptures, Harvey talked with Philadelphia-based artist ERICK MILLER

What is Turps Banana? How do the pieces fit together: the school, the journal, the gallery?

The magazine came to be not by design but organically ten to twelve years ago. I suggested to a friend, the painter Peter Ashton Jones, that a magazine would encapsulate his interests because he had published poetry before and we had been interested in talking about painting, specifically. I didn’t have many painter friends who could talk in depth about the medium. They usually wanted to talk about other things; money, or bullshit having to do with the mechanics of the market. But he and I really clicked on talking about painting and I thought there was a need for a structured organ that could house that. A no-bullshit version of some of the art journals out there. We talked about it for a few years and it became sort of a joke really, that’s why we ended up with this ridiculous name that I kind of regret.



Installation Shot of *Setting Sons*, Locks Gallery, 2015

How did you name it?

Well, we had all sorts of ideas and our friends said, “what are you going to call it? Smock? The Beret? The Palette?” So we started referencing the yellow journal, which was a famous late 19th-century literary and artistic publication associated with Oscar Wilde’s circle, so banana came into it and Turps came into it and we started to use it just as a name to wrap around the project.

And it stuck?

Yeah it stuck. When we got the first edition together we still didn’t have a name so we used Turps Banana and it stuck. We knew that we would shorten it to turps and just use the symbol because the symbol is used as a symbol out front of academies and kunsthallen in Europe.

The title also reflects our interest in modern-and-tradition as a kind of way to not being about fashion or the new but what a painter finds interesting about painting. So then we decided that the only people who should be writing in it would be painters, not exclusively because we have technicians in it, like paint manufacturers

or the odd gallerist, but we try not to let critics anywhere near it.

So we kicked it out to anyone we knew who had some interest in painting that was good or unfashionable or overlooked because that was always something that was important for us to probe. It comes out twice a year and has become indivisible from our lives as artists.

A lot of the painters this put us in contact with are teachers. And the message we got from them is that art education is in terminal decline. Without question they said it was an appalling environment.



Ship, 2013. Oil on inkjet mounted on plywood

What's the problem?

The problem is that its run as a business by institutions that have lost sight of what art education ever was for. They're bureaucratically top heavy so it squeezes out all of the fun and experimentation and excitement from the operation. It squeezes out the space, because space is at a premium especially at London colleges. So if they can figure out a way to make you think that you can use a computer or be site specific in terms of preparing your work, that's a good way of filling studios with more people.

I rather enjoyed teaching, and my own education was good because I was taught by artists who were continually showing, and there didn't seem to be any division really, between students and the teachers.

You went to Goldsmiths College.

Yeah, it was good. There was plenty of room. It was serious. We talked about replicating the idea of an art school but without the bureaucracy and bullshit, sort of like the magazine, keep it lean, mean, and cheap, then perhaps we could do it. After about three years of talking about it we put the art school together which is essentially studios with a mentoring structure.

And the correspondence program?

Well, I was reading a thing in the Observer about online education and thinking, "what a horrible thing." Distance learning is encroaching on real learning. It was just another profit tool for institutions while at the same time doing less. And then I thought, all our material comes to us online, we edit it online, the magazine can exist online, why can't we have an educational project online and I re-evaluated my position.

It works like this: the participants upload work on a specialized art viewing app five times over a year and receive a response from their mentor in the form of an essay about the work and issues around it. The idea is that your work then assimilates the feedback so there is some development next time you come to upload and so on.



That has proven to be a very effective tool because it throws a kind of structure on someone who could be anywhere around the world who is interested in painting and looking for a way to be re-energized and focused but maybe has kids or a job and a limited amount of time to do it and just needs that little bit of help. What they get is a really great mind, someone who is participating in the swim of it in London or New York. The participants on the correspondence course immediately start doing stuff together, you get emails “oh we’re all meeting up,” to have chats and shows and that was an unforeseen bonus.

A load of them all trooped off to Norway one year to do some painting and this was independent of Turps but was brought about by their participating in the online course.

And it’s painting specific?

Absolutely, yeah.

Why?

That’s my medium. That doesn’t exclude the use of photography or film but there is no kick there. There are no technical advisers with that kind of expertise, but painting is obviously a broad church. Its not just brown and oil but you create an enormous amount of traction being so specific. You attract people who know what they want to do.

Painting is not well served in art schools. It’s very present in the market. So if I say that painting is marginalized they go “what are you talking about? It’s everywhere.” That’s just because it’s easy to sell. It’s the most prominent thing in the market, but it’s marginalized in schools because people don’t know how to teach it. Its not vocationally targeted, so you can’t major in it as an outcome.



Isle, 2014. Oil on inkjet mounted on plywood

Is it critically out of fashion in certain circles?

Absolutely, yeah. So with us it’s a celebration as well as an education. There’s not a huge amount to say about painting which is why it is critically not in fashion. What critically is in fashion are things that people can be critical about because it pays their mortgage. Whereas if it was something you couldn’t talk about, how many hundreds of people would be out of work who feel they have a right be be at the table?

And we have a gallery now, which is again, painting only.

Is it a not for profit? Or would there be a relationship with the market?

Obviously, yeah, there would be. We pay the market rent for the space that we’ve got. It can’t come out of the [school] fees. Although, I don’t believe there will ever be any profit in this. If there is I’ll just pay people more.



So let's talk about your painting. I was doing some research and I was struck when I saw the show, it seems like there has been this gradual transition from overtly political, culturally specific work with an element of caricature to this current work which seems almost archetypal. Can you talk about that change?

My work has taken some stylistic shifts, which are almost never dealer friendly. So once I was aware of that I was able to exploit it, almost. I didn't have to maintain a style. Although there are some serious stylistic urges in there. Obviously, the materiality of the paint is one. An acknowledgment of the importance of photography as our primary visual agent in visual culture is another. The frustrations around and the truth of it have been a sort of driving force in what I do, to somehow re-viscerate the photograph.



Maggie Island, 2015, cast jesmonite

All my work is in the past. It is all culturally specific and about a kind of British history. It is much narrower than it appears actually, in terms of its interests.

The only specifically British thing I recognize is Margaret Thatcher's head. The sculptures feel Greek in origin and the treatment of landscape in the paintings could be very American, or Germanic.

But they are quite specific and quite political.

How so?

I showed *Ablus*, 2009 at White Cube that year and people couldn't look at it. Jay Jopling referred to it as "the painting." They're all over the place with the PC bullshit in England. It looked like a painting of an English defense structure, which is what it is. Anything that underlines an island geographically without trumpeting multiculturalism is seen as reactionary. It was seen as right leaning and that is the way it was digested.

There is no room to explore anything in a piece of work in the present climate. People are literalists. Soon they'll be looking at paintings of the crucifixion and saying, "the painter hated Christ".

So to have an island in the sea, I couldn't have it be anymore specific than that. I took out as much as I could, to get this sort of frank basic truth. It becomes a sort of caricature. I kind of feel the work becomes a sculptural, physical, political cartoon. Things are stripped down to their formal essence to tell a story. I also think there are underrated graphic qualities in cartoons, the formal tension is also what drives the meaning. So if they are activated with an element of materiality, that's almost enough for me. You can then put your hand back into abstraction and pull some of the force of Serra and Hofmann and Rothko back into a contempo-

rary statement without having to push it too far into something specific to lose its power.

So they are quite specific depending on where you are and I was quite shocked at the way people reacted to them.

I detect throughout your work a kind continuous sense of gravitas, even at the level of palette. The choice of black and white feels very heavy.

I tend to look backwards really. There are people who look forwards, visionaries and people who feel very positive. I tend by looking forward to look back. The black and white obviously gives historical gravitas. That palette is history, isn't it? I would like to get away from it actually but it is very useful. A few years ago I would have thought that it wasn't noble to use inkjet prints with painting but I decided that making paint look photographic was somehow unethical, so I started to use them.

Unethical? How so?

I found that using paint to imitate photography lost credibility because it doesn't liberate paint to do what it needs to do. And using a two speed effect where you use painted photographic effects to play against painterly effects seemed unethical as well. It seemed over rehearsed. But I couldn't move away from the idea of how important photography is visually so to deny it also would be naive.

It seems to me that for people who are dealing with the visual history of a specific thing, in your case a nation, the most visual evidence of the past is the photograph.

Yeah. It's the truth. It has a truth to it. So incorporating that and working against it with the paint seems to be the best tension. The photography allows the paint to be its most animal expression of itself, while being contextualized in a photographic panorama. They're both vital mediums for me. To bring them together in the painting while developing the extreme sculptural qualities of the paint feels like a way forward. Obviously tons of artists have done it before me.



Man Exiting, 2015, oil on inkjet mounted on plywood

I saw in an interview that you said sculpture begins for you in two and a half dimensions.

That's the destination for me, really. My sculptures are fully in the round but they're supposed to be viewed from the front. It's exciting to go around and see what's on the back but I think of them in a 180-degree view really. Otherwise you get into the realm of pure sculpture but my work is situated in the theatre of the flat. So they tend to be painterly, theatrical, and frontal.



How does the work with the Turps Projects filter back into your studio? Or do you see them as discrete?

It is nourishing and it is inspiring. There's a certain feeling of responsibility, really. Having set up this thing, I need to be evidence of what it claims. They blend in nicely to one another. The only thing sometimes is the time constraint but you learn how to delegate to your team.

You work alone in your studio?

Yeah. I've done that for years. There aren't many jobs where you don't interact with anyone all day long, and I've been doing it for decades. So the idea of working with people on a positive project, managing, trouble shooting on a modest scale, is rewarding as well.

As a counterpoint to the studio practice?



Dad, 2015, oil on inkjet mounted on plywood

As a complementary thing. My experience in the studio motivates that side of the Turps project. It is harmonious.

I see painters going where they need to go to and I get to participate in that process. I think artists and painters who like what they're doing really like to teach. Like scientists and writers, they really like sharing the medium, making it a celebration.

Marcus Harvey: Setting Sons at Locks Gallery, Philadelphia, September 11 to October 24, 2015