

Shapes and Drips

Tony Just in conversation with Tenzing Barshee

*On the occasion of his exhibition *Our inchoate love*, Tony Just speaks about his shapes and drips, a project comprised of paintings, murals and works on paper and books.*

Tenzing Barshee: You paint, write and make collages in books. Can you please talk about how that started?

Tony Just: Books have always been essential. The more recent shapes and drips project started seven or eight years ago. I was inspired by Hans Fallada's novel *The Drinker* (1950). I actually poured red wine over the open pages of a blank sketchbook and then painted the kind of negative space that happened between the drips. Later I was approached by Christian Posthofen of Walther König Books to make an edition. For that, I poured black ink over a Gerhard Richter catalog that was published for one of his exhibitions at Marian Goodman Gallery. The pages stuck together and that allowed a shape that was mostly made by chance. I like that I'm able to make things that aren't entirely

controlled by me. In the past, I had to use so much control.

TB: This method became a kind of blueprint for consequent works.

TJ: The drip images didn't become paintings right away. I spent a year just working in the books. I needed some kind of daily practice to keep my hand going and the books became like coloring books. The exercise was really simple: come to the studio, pick a color, pour and paint. That worked.

TB: But then you started to repeat some of the images from the books and enlarge them on canvas. How did that happen?

TJ: I remember some of the thoughts that went into it. To me, the process of pouring ink over a book and the resulting drips alluded to the act of weeping. Through various things that were happening, I realized the in-between shapes needed to be liberated. I really wanted to see the shapes free from the lines that made them. So I painted them.

TB: How do you make the books?

TJ: I set it up on its spine, open it a little bit so the pages are more revealed and then I pour gouache over it. So because the book is upright, the color drips down in different ways. Once it is dry, I'll start painting each page and I'll fill in the spaces.

TB: So although there is a resemblance to Rorschach inkblots, you're not actually pressing the pages?

TJ: Correct. When the color forms a connection between two pages, the drips appear to be mirroring each other. But if you look closely you will see the variations. To some extent, the Rorschach image is an important reference, it has been effectively used by Andy Warhol, Bruce Conner and others. I really appreciate those works. When I set out to work with this image, I asked myself, how can I add to it? For me, it always goes back to my hand and a quality that is individual to me.

TB: Because of your tremor?

TJ: Not just because of the tremor. But because it is my hand and no one else's. It allows me to transmit my own personality.

TB: Do you think of your painting as an extension of your body?

TJ: It is hard to imagine that that's true. But possibly.

TB: There is such an organic process to how your work comes about. It feels natural to relate it to the body—it kind of exudes growth and corporeality.

TJ: It is hard for me to pay attention to my body. It is not something I was taught. To become aware of my body was kind of an abstract concept. I've come to understand that it is also a

place of trauma. Now that I know that, I make attempts to heal it.

TB: You're painting in books, on walls, paper and canvas. The works are all connected: the same motifs echo through them. Do you think of your works in separate categories?

TJ: The books are their own pieces and they are also maps for the paintings. But some of the paintings aren't based on books but on a spontaneous mark. The parameters to make a painting are simple: to have as little thought involved as possible. As soon as I start to wonder what to do with a shape, it is time to stop. It's similar to the initial process of making the books. I pour the ink over a page and from the picture I will make other paintings. In the most literal way, the paintings are the freeing of the shapes and that has always been the underlying thought about it.

TB: Please explain what happens when you try not to think about making a painting while you're doing it.

TJ: It's much more spontaneous and it feels less of a struggle—but it can still be a struggle to be spontaneous.

TB: What type of speed are we talking about?

TJ: I'm working very fast. The color is often the result of a leftover color from another painting. It kind of happens along the lines of the palette paintings that Ann Craven, Josh Smith

and other people did. I like the game of chance and how I can work it into my work.

TB: How else does chance matter?

TJ: My therapist showed me how to use the I Ching. John Cage and a lot of other artists have used the ancient Chinese divination text. It is basically a tool to create chance patterns in order to access different responses to life based on acceptance. It's really the idea to live a peaceful, loving life. When I learned this method, my life was a daily struggle and my ability to respond to people, places and things was limited. This—I want to call it a game—offered new options to respond to life events. I appreciated that and so I used some aspects in my work.

TB: What do you think about the resulting works?

TJ: I remember a friend who came over to the studio and I showed him an abstract painting. I asked him, do you see the three rabbits? He was offended that I would ask that. What's wrong with seeing rabbits? I have a perception that this kind of looking is denigrated in art. Especially in abstract image-making. So I want to go into that a little bit. I like how things dissolve and come into focus and then dissolve again. I'm enjoying being more open to seeing reality in abstraction. In the wall paintings, I have been isolating shapes from the books that allude to figures.

TB: So after recognizing something in one of your abstract shapes, you decide to turn it into a mural. Does the bigger version still resemble the thing you first saw?

TJ: For the most part it can still resemble that shape, sometimes it is even amplified. In 2013, there was an exhibition at the Bode Museum of the alabaster pleurants or weepers from the tomb of John the Fearless in Burgundy. It was really a fantastic exhibition. The mourning figures wore cloaks and most of their faces were covered. I really responded to that. In a couple of my books, the shapes look like mourners, so I decided that I would take one shape and repeat it to kind of heighten the sense that they are figures and also mourners.

TB: I was just about to ask if your work is revealing something.

TJ: The wall paintings, I think, do reveal something. I'm also using the Japanese healing technique reiki to make them. What does it mean to treat something that we normally don't think of as being alive? For me, these things have witnessed life and they have witnessed death. I'm interested in those histories. I have a feeling that that's what I'm going after in the wall paintings. In the end, you know, the revelation is always limited, it remains a personal experience that others might not share. It is my understanding that a Rorschach test isn't so much about what you see, as long as you do see something.



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