

Joe Madeira's Rainbow Paintings are Razor-Sharp Critiques of Modern Anxiety

by Louise Benson - Elephant

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Our latest artist-in-residence used to work in advertising. Spot satirical Nike swooshes amidst flailing arms and legs in his spray painted compositions. Welcome to Joe Madeira's absurdist world. Words and artist photo by Louise Benson

Joe Madeira has been spray painting. Translucent plastic sheets are laden with the powdery remnants in acid-bright hues, not to mention the zig-zag patterns left behind on the floor. "Come in," he exclaims, shyly, spray can in one hand, Diet Coke in the other. Madeira is the latest artist-in-residence at the Elephant Labs, an open-ended opportunity to experiment freely with new materials and techniques. Creativity in the Labs evolves naturally, with studios located adjacent to the Innovation & Development laboratory of Winsor & Newton, Liquitex and Conté à Paris, while all the materials that an artist could ever dream of are provided. This is a programme that is one-of-a-kind.

Layers of previous artists' work are visible throughout the studio: rainbow traces of paintings and sculptures come-and-gone. Madeira is busy making his mark. Small wooden boards, approximately the size of iPads, line the walls. Until recently, the artist primarily worked with digital tools to create wild, colourful compositions on his own real-life iPad. It is a natural transition to the sleek gradients of spray paint, and one that pays close attention to Madeira's digital roots—as well as his previous work in the world of advertising. Well-known logos are humorously deployed amidst surreal allusions to the body, from a bright pink tongue covered in yellow spots (imagine Mr Blobby put through the mincer) to whirling arms and legs. The results are absurd, anxiety-inducing and just a bit terrifying—as seductive as they are scary.

How did you first start out as an artist?

I originally did my MA at Saint Martin's, and then I went to the Royal College to do an MPhil in Postmodernism and Identity, focussing on performance and photography. I was twenty-six when I finished at the Royal College and I didn't immediately continue with an artistic career. I freelanced in branding for quite some time, which I think you can see the influence of in my work, for instance with the use of the Nike swoosh. Then I opened a gallery and did that for some time, but running that space made me feel that I wanted to get back to my own work.

So it really all started three years ago, when I started making art with my iPad. The iPad for me was amazing, because it gave me so much freedom. It made so much sense to the way we live now: it's digital but it still felt like creating something real, like a drawing or a painting. So I quite liked that because it made me think, "What is real and what is not?" I enjoyed the possibility of make-believe and of illusion; the illusion of space on the board.

What's your process as you have moved from creating pieces on the iPad to creating physical works?

The residency with Elephant was perfect for me because it was the first time I had the opportunity of such freedom to use different materials. So that freedom of going from the digital to the real was really amazing. While I've been here, I've made a conscious decision not to use the iPad, however, a lot of the process in creating my pieces came from what I've unconsciously learned by using it. I told myself to just use my brain, and I feel that my physical works are very similar to what I was doing digitally, creating the same kinds of spaces.

I think having started digitally, I was a bit worried about going back to producing stuff physically because the iPad makes everything look perfect. It doesn't allow for accidents and you can always undo mistakes. So I was worried about that, but actually, the "mistakes" that I made in the physical works have led me to new places that I wouldn't have gone if I'd have made them digitally. So there are certain things that are not perfect which on the iPad I would have made perfect, but actually I feel that the imperfection achieves something new and real.

Apart from the effect that digital creation on the iPad has had on you, what are your influences?

I have two main influences. One is architecture; I'm very influenced by the space of architecture and how the body exists in that space, particularly a consideration of the modern context of human isolation. In terms of the colours, I'm very interested in sports, and the colours and textures that see in trainers and other sports gear. Wearing sports clothing feels like a way of announcing the body and the things we can do with it, and expressing the belief that through the possession of these objects, we can become better and achieve something. To a certain extent, it's also about the eroticism involved with sports gear; these days, people even wear sports clothes when they're not doing any sports, simply because it eroticizes the body in a sort of active self-announcement.

Sometimes portrayals of the body can focus on it as an almost grotesque object to emphasise the reality of its functions. Do you have an interest in this kind of "bodily" idea of body?

Apart from using it as an exploration of space and shape, one of the things that I'm very much interested in with the body is injecting a sense of humour. The grotesque portrayal of the body is part of the fun. The pieces that work better for me are the ones where I look at them and they make me laugh, or create some other kind of reaction.

What have you learned while on the residency at Elephant Lab?

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I think the residency has been fantastic, because I've had the opportunity to focus in a space and have all these materials. While on the residency, we've been using it as a kind of lab, and using it as an opportunity to experiment, so most of the things I've made I see as starting points rather than finished pieces. I've just been experimenting and playing with the materials and seeing where that takes me. I've had the opportunity to try out some new materials, the spray paint; the liquitex, and an oil stick which I've loved using. They feel right for me because I can use them more for drawing rather than painting. My core approach is always drawing rather than painting because I prefer thinking about the shapes rather than filling them in. This is why the spray paint works so well for me, because it's about filling in rather than making the gesture of a brush stroke. Whenever I use a brush it takes me in a direction I don't really want to go.

How have you found the experience of using physical objects rather than the iPad?

While on the residency, I've been using the sketchbook, which has been a really great way to test colours and ideas and shapes. And it's given me the opportunity to explore collage. I find using canvas difficult because it's bouncy but using paper for collage was something that came naturally, and gave me things to explore. I might use photography in collage in the future because again, it feels like a way to explore the illusion of space. But board for me is the best medium.

What kind of things will you be working on after you've finished the residency?

I'm interested in doing some casting. I did a course recently on bas relief in clay and I'd like to do some more of that. I'll still be using the iPad as a starting point, and have the same type of composition, but just go a bit more towards sculpture. But I'm also interested in making the things I've made here into a bigger series. These pieces are reminiscent of the iPad, the same dimensions and proportions but, once they're physicalized, they become completely different. I'd like to make a series until I've exhausted the idea.

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