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Biswas, Allie. "Hugo McCloud: 'I Respect the Beauty in the Things That Are Overlooked'," *Studio International*, January 2, 2016.

studio international

Hugo McCloud: 'I respect the beauty in the things that are overlooked'



The emerging artist Hugo McCloud, whose layered abstract paintings concentrate on process and material, talks about his second solo show in New York

Hugo McCloud (b1980, Palo Alto, California) is known for his large-scale abstract paintings that use materials such as tar paper and metal, and engage with traditional woodblock printing techniques. In his second exhibition at Sean Kelly, New York, the artist presents more than 20 new works that portray diverse colour palettes and experimentation with surface pattern. The exhibition follows his recent residency at Bellas Artes Projects in the Philippines, where he further developed his printing techniques. McCloud lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Allie Biswas: What were your first experiences of making art?

Hugo McCloud: I grew up in a pretty creative family – my mother did landscape design and my father was a sculptor. All my father's family are artists, whether architects or painters. I grew up in that world. And then I played sports at school and went in my own direction. When I went to college, I decided to study business. I came home one summer and, at that time, my mother had a design store, selling water features, such as wall fountains. I decided that I would figure out how to make them. I felt really inspired by those things for some reason. So, that summer, I tried to weld, and use materials such as copper. I fell in love with it. After that, I went back to school and lasted about two months. I dropped out, went back home and started pursuing fountain design full time.

AB: What was it about fountains as an object that interested you?

HMC: I think the functionality was what interested to me. I liked that they had a function, as well as movement. I liked the idea of the water running over a surface. I started designing full-time, and I began to be asked to

design other things, such as pieces of furniture and interior spaces. Within a 12-year span, it went from very small wall fountains to designing the interiors for commercial spaces.

AB: During this time, were you building up your knowledge of design history? Did you admire certain designers whom you held up as models, for instance?

HMC: Well, I didn't have any historical knowledge about designers. That wasn't my background. I was working based on my intuition. My design education was basically spending time in bookstores looking at design magazines or books. It was very much on-the-job learning, which obviously comes with a lot of bumps in the road.

AB: When did you turn to painting, and what encouraged that change in direction?

HMC: In 2003, I travelled to South Africa with some friends who were architects. They were doing a project in Soweto. I piggybacked on their trip. After seeing a lot of the townships, I was really inspired by the kinds of materials they were using to build their houses. Obviously, these people are just using whatever they can to build walls, and so on. But the rustic colours of the materials that I saw really drew me in. I took these images, and added them to my knowledge of using scrap pieces of metal during my design work. I then used metal to create a canvas. That became my first series of paintings – the patina paintings. After that trip, I moved to Johannesburg in the same year and got a studio. I stayed there for a year.

AB: How did your overall experience of living in Johannesburg impact on the paintings you were making at that time?

HMC: My original contacts there were very much tied in with the Mandelas, so I was able to be a part of that world. But many of my other friends were Nigerian, which is another world in South Africa, and I also had friends in the townships in Soweto. So I was able to see a lot of perspectives. That ties in with this current exhibition, where you have the "dirty" works alongside the works made out of gold. There is this broad spectrum.

AB: Was this period in Johannesburg a transition from working on interior design projects to concentrating on painting?

HMC: Yes, that period was the start of my work in fine art, and I didn't make any furniture during that time. That was when I decided that I wanted to go into the fine art realm. But then I returned to the US and was working both on my paintings and design projects. It was a little later on, in 2008, when I told myself that I really wanted to focus on art. Compared to design, art gives you freedom. You can change anything at any given time. Once a client says, I want you to make this piece of furniture, that's it. You're making something to spec. Even if it's a one-of-a-kind work, it has a very systematic order of how it's created. So my interest in art was really about having this kind of freedom. I wanted to get out of those year-and-a-half-long projects for a hotel, you know. I didn't want to manage employees any more, or take on projects that I didn't really want to do, just because I had overheads.

AB: Did this decision propel your move from California to New York?

HMC: In 2009, I moved to New York to pursue my art. When I moved here, I got a studio that I lived and worked in. For the next four or five years, I was just figuring it out. I never wanted to approach the art world until I knew I had something. I knew I had the ability to make work, but I didn't have the tangible product to show them. I knew that if I showed the right people, it was going to put me on to something. After showing at the Luce Gallery in Torino, Italy, early in 2014, I was doing a lot of studio visits with big galleries. Everyone was curious and interested, but there wasn't any real context behind my work or who I was, so it was a hard sell. Then Sean Kelly Gallery did a studio visit and liked my work. I was then included in its summer group show, where I showed five large pieces, which did well.

AB: The surface of your canvases – through texture and pattern – is key to your work. How did you begin to explore such ideas?

HMC: In 2003, when I was working on my metal paintings, I remember I was cleaning the roof of my apartment building, which had just been redone by the landlord. There was a roll of tar paper and a bucket of silver paint. I

was looking at the roof, and then I noticed the tar paper, and I started putting these ideas together. I started to see the impressions that were in the tar paper, in the roof, which I thought were pretty cool. So I took the tar paper and the silver paint, and started playing with them and painting. I started hammering the metal to create different textures, and that is what led me to the block-printing. I started doing research on YouTube to learn more about block printing, which is such an important part of my paintings right now.

AB: Had you come across block printing before, in any other context?

HMC: I don't remember, to be honest, but I had seen such processes during my design work. At that particular time, having had this experience on my roof, and become interested in block printing, I ended up going to India. My friend Angel Otero got a show in Mumbai, in 2012, and I basically told him I was going to go with him. I had always been drawn to India – the food, the culture. When I met his gallery there, I told them what I was doing, and they put me in touch with some people who worked on woodblock printing. I really wanted to meet people who were making woodblocks, to see how it was done. With my knowledge and ability, I could just have watched YouTube videos to work out how to make blocks and carve patterns, but I've always found it important to know about the history and tradition of something, so that you can say: "Well, this comes from this." Instead of just taking ideas, you are putting yourself in an environment. I wanted to be in India, and see it firsthand, rather than just going on the internet.

AB: What did you learn about block printing from this trip? How did this experience help to develop your own practice?

HMC: They do block printing in so many places, but the Indian block-printing technique was something I was drawn to. If you've ever watched the Indian textile printing technique, they are not using rulers, or making sure that everything is perfect. It is a very controlled moment, but the reality is that it's not perfect. Each print is a little bit different. Nothing is perfect; there is always something that's a little off. And I really like that. I think what the individual accepts as perfect is perfect. I brought back some woodblocks from India, and tried it myself back home at my studio. I was doing something precious, that had the potential to be beautiful, but I was also using a material – tar paper – that is rugged and based on construction. It was this combination of things that I found interesting. For the past two years, I have been using one-block repetition throughout the painting. For this new body of work on show now, I created a full image with the blocks, so the blocks tiled together created the image. I use each block one time per painting. It's like a puzzle.

AB: And these blocks are a result of your recent residency in the Philippines. Can you tell me about your time there?

HMC: I don't think that you can find that kind of craftsmanship here in the US. Now, it is just about making a machine do it for you. I have my own personal irritation with the art world – it's almost acceptable to not do any work at all as an artist, and you get praised for it. So it wasn't necessarily about me saying, "Hey, I did this", but it was about staying true to my background. There is something about being somewhere that is out of your comfort zone, and doing the same thing for 65 days, the same thing over and over and over again, which is what happened during my residency. I'm not Buddhist or anything like that, but there is something very meditative about that process, and it forces you to deal with self. When you know that two weeks from now you will be doing exactly the same thing, that takes processing in your head. It's not the physical making; it's the mental process.

AB: I understand that you began sourcing patterns from discarded furniture you saw in your neighbourhood?

HMC: When I first came back from India, I tried the blocks that I'd brought back with me. Then I realised that I needed to make my own blocks. I bought these books on ornamentation from the Strand bookstore. Every pattern from every region was in it, and I was super-inspired. But I realised I couldn't use any of those patterns from that book, because what do I know about Arabic design or Japanese textiles? Nothing. It's not part of my actual life. I wanted something that was from around me, so that I could talk about it. I had been in these industrial neighbourhoods for 15 or 16 years, and you always see discarded furniture on the sides of the road. So when I went running in these areas, and because I had planted [the idea] in my head that I needed to find sources for my patterns, I started to look at the textile designs on the furniture's fabric. I started to document these patterns, taking pictures on my phone: there were mattresses, couches, chairs. Floral patterns came up a

lot of the time. Those things became the source for my patterns for the first blocks I made. Taking something that someone has thrown away, I was finding something interesting in it, something that they had disregarded. I was taking something attractive or interesting from it, which people then desired through my painting. That was the story that I was playing with in my head. I'm interested in this furniture that no one decides to pick up for months on end. I respect the beauty in the things that are overlooked. That was the conversation I was having. So that's how I found the patterns for my blocks. But I still travel a lot, and I will take things from what I see. For example, when I was in Mexico, I was looking at the traditional dresses worn by women there, so I documented a bunch of patterns from those dresses and I used some of those for a couple of blocks. Because I have used patterns taken from my own sources for the past two years, now I don't mind using other things that I see on my travels, if it's part of my experience. I realised recently that people don't necessarily care about the source – they just like the painting because it's shiny, for instance. But they will care at some point, and if I don't have that conversation with the source material, that is what they will push against me. That is what they will use to knock me down.

AB: So would you say that you are conscious about how your work might be perceived by critics, given your origins as a designer?

HMC: Within the design world, you're not critiqued on the conversation around the work. You're just critiqued on the visuality or functionality. The art world is different: "What are you trying to say within your work?", or "Why did you use this?" With no formal training and coming from a design background, I didn't want to get put in that place where people thought: "Oh, he's just a designer, he is designing art work." For the past six or seven years, I have been trying to control that conversation. I don't want to be placed in that context.

AB: The process for making your paintings is based on a very historic technique, which is then combined with this contemporary method of sourcing patterns. How conscious are you of making these practical techniques direct the aesthetic and ambience of the work?

HMC: There is always the conversation that the paintings are too ornamental or decorative. That doesn't even matter, because, to me, it's more about the process. It is about the layering of materials to create the canvas, then the painting process. A lot of paintings will start with some kind of image that I've grabbed – from Instagram, from a magazine, or a reference from another painter. I'll have a picture that I've put into Photoshop and rearranged or distorted. The colour is mostly what I'm drawn to, or the lines of the picture. That rearrangement of the image is how the painting is directed. It becomes the foundation. So I'm not going into it blind. I'm also working on all 20 works at the same time. Everything is on the floor. For my shows, I always think about the architecture of the gallery: what feeling I want to create, what experience I want the viewer to have in the space. I will curate the show in my head first. The white paintings in this exhibition came about as I wanted to create this line of lightness in the gallery. That's why all the paintings are the same size in this show – you can look at the whole room at once, which gives the exact feeling that I want. I can see a straight line. The eye sees from beginning to end without any stops.