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Art in America

Hugo McCloud on Painting with Plastic

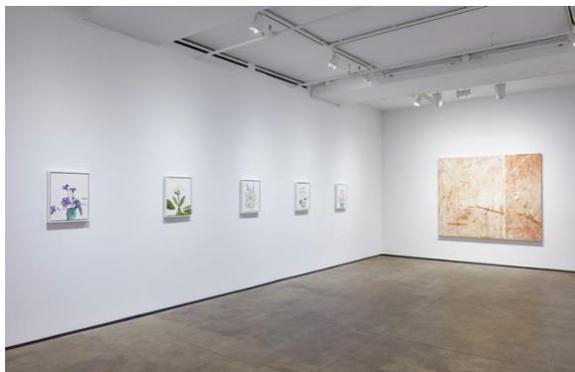


Hugo McCloud: *the day before friday the 12th*, 2020, single use plastic mounted on panel, 55 by 84 inches; at Sean Kelly, New York.

Pushing the bounds of what a material can do is the basis of [Hugo McCloud](#)'s art. He has worked with numerous substances, primarily industrial and discarded, such as tar paper and scrap metal. [Plastic](#)—in the form of single-use plastic bags—is the medium of his latest "paintings," on view in [the solo exhibition "Burdened" at Sean Kelly](#) in New York through February 27. Drawn to the colors and logos printed on plastic bags that he encountered in his travels, McCloud previously fashioned plastic strips into grid patterns. Now, however, the California-born self-taught artist has created figurative compositions using the material to depict refugees, migrants, and laborers. Below, he discusses his ongoing influences alongside new ideas that have emerged from his experience creating images with plastic.

I gave my keys to my landlord in Brooklyn on February 28 of last year. My studio and home in Mexico had just been finished the month prior. It was all part of my plan to establish a new space in New York in September and then live between the United States and Mexico. But I had no idea what the pandemic would become. Traveling back for this show was my first trip anywhere in almost a year. I feel fortunate that I didn't have to deal with the pandemic, the protests, and the politics here, but it's also been weird to have experienced the US crisis only through a screen. If I was still in New York I probably would have made work, but who knows what I would have produced under those circumstances. Talk about unplanned perfect timing. I needed to be in a studio solely by myself. I had to continually dig deep. I found myself watching the news throughout the day and thinking "what's the point?" That's when I started making those little flower paintings that are in the current show, because I could focus on one each day and start fresh the next, instead of trying to work on larger pieces with, say, a two-week commitment.

SEANKELLY



View of Hugo McCloud's exhibition "Burdened," 2020, at Sean Kelly, New York. PHOTO JASON WYCHE.

I've been developing the same themes for years, working with industrial materials to suggest landscapes. But one aspect of my work has clearly changed since the move—my use of color. Living and working in Brooklyn, I would see brick, concrete, garbage trucks, and maybe one small dead tree. But in Mexico, where I live in the jungle a couple miles from the town of Tulum, I'm surrounded by trees and plants. Not to mention that the culture is also vibrant and people aren't afraid to paint their houses with bright pinks and yellows. I create from the visuals around me. Originally, the work at Sean Kelly started with my travel experiences.

I first began thinking about plastic as an art material when I went on a trip with Angel Otero for his show in Mumbai in 2012. There were stacks of hundreds of plastic bags in fluorescent orange, yellow, green, and white. They looked like a mural to me. Before I left, I gathered a bunch of them from a garbage site that sold to recyclers. I kept collecting plastic on all my trips—India, Spain, the Philippines. And, at the time, my home in Brooklyn was constantly littered with grocery bags. From there, I began thinking about the possibilities of the material and how I could manipulate it. I wanted to fuse the bags to one another, and I went through a whole process of figuring out how to do that without adding another material like fabric stitching or glue. I recalled my mom ironing patches on my clothes when I was a kid, and after many tutorials on YouTube, I replicated that process of applying heat through wax paper with an iron.

SEAN KELLY



Hugo McCloud: *come and go*, 2020, single use plastic mounted on panel, 70 by 60 inches; at Sean Kelly, New York.

In the early works, I used to stack the plastic in a grid based on stacks of plastic products that I had seen in factories, but this new body of work focuses more on figures. Even though my work has always referenced labor and landscape, now it's more explicit. Introducing figures into my work pushed my technical skills with the material a lot further. But, thematically, I'm really interested in the willingness of an individual to do something that is inherently uncomfortable. In these paintings, you will see people carrying things on their backs or pushing a bicycle completely overloaded with fruit or garbage. I want to know more about people's stories and experiences. I want to be involved and learn more about migrants and workers—maybe serve on a rescue boat for a couple of weeks. I was able to visit Polpusa's plastic fabrication factory in Mérida to understand the labor process behind how plastic sheets are made. I was drawn to this factory because of the color packaging they produce. If you look at American companies, their colors are the most boring and awful primaries. By contrast, the bags made at this factory are the most beautiful offset colors, like maroon, with different variations of each hue. The company was very skeptical at first, but after their people met and researched me, I was allowed in. They are very self-protective because of recent campaigns against plastic production. It was interesting to hear their viewpoint on consumerism, recycling, and the use of chemicals to make biodegradable plastic bags. I'm very interested in recycling projects like the Dutch Ocean Cleanup and the world's largest beach cleaning headed by environmental activist and lawyer Afroz Shah in Mumbai. I have some ideas, and I look at the material as a tool. But I honestly don't know where it will lead.

—As told to Francesca Aton