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Fenstermaker Will. "Global Systems of Labor: Hugo McCloud Interviewed by Will Fenstermaker." *Bomb Magazine*, December 1, 2021.

# BOMB



*Hugo McCloud, pass the salt, 2020. Searcy Family Collection, Dallas, TX. Courtesy Pettit Art Partners. © Hugo McCloud.*

Hugo McCloud's survey at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Connecticut reveals an artist who, even early in his career, can be best understood through his novel approach to materials. If you've only seen his art online, you'd be forgiven for thinking his images of workers are made with translucent watercolor or glossy acrylic. In fact, they're meticulously rendered with single-use, semitransparent plastic bags, cut and layered over a white surface. Informed by an earlier career in industrial design, McCloud's "paintings" in plastic—as well as his large-scale abstractions made with metal, tar, and other industrial materials—speak to a global system of labor, the everyday pursuit of beauty, and the resiliency of the human spirit.

—Will Fenstermaker

## Will Fenstermaker

Your four major exhibitions all occurred during the pandemic: a show earlier this year at Sean Kelly, your current survey at the Aldrich, your show at Vielmetter in Los Angeles, and a recent commission at Art Basel Unlimited. You also made your move to Tulum official earlier this year. Can you give me a sense of how your work has evolved, especially over the last year?

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## Hugo McCloud

I base a lot of my work on the idea that every moment has the ability to be beautiful in the right context. My very first paintings on metal came right after I went to South Africa and saw shanty houses built with a collage material. I thought if I could just cut out this wall and put it in a clean environment, those overlooked textures would become more pronounced and meaningful.

I started my plastic series doing abstraction, but I wasn't able to get the narrative out so I moved on to figuration. I went with very direct imagery. I use plastic as a tool to connect things that people deal with around the world. I also use it as a traveling tool, because it's something I can collect from different environments. My first works were based on photos that I shot here in Mexico and a bunch of images I took of men in India pushing carts.

Before the pandemic, I was going to do the Art Basel Unlimited piece on the migrant situation. I was trying to get to a port in Malta where a lot of migrants from Africa land in order to get a firsthand understanding of their situation. Then COVID hit. All my shows were postponed. When Basel finally announced that it was going to return, I submitted a different topic because of my inability to travel.

The piece is titled *The Burden of Man: waiting to breathe* (2021). One of the things about COVID that really struck me was all of these different countries with long lines of people waiting to get their oxygen tanks refilled and all of these black-market oxygen providers or different types of corruption.

## WF

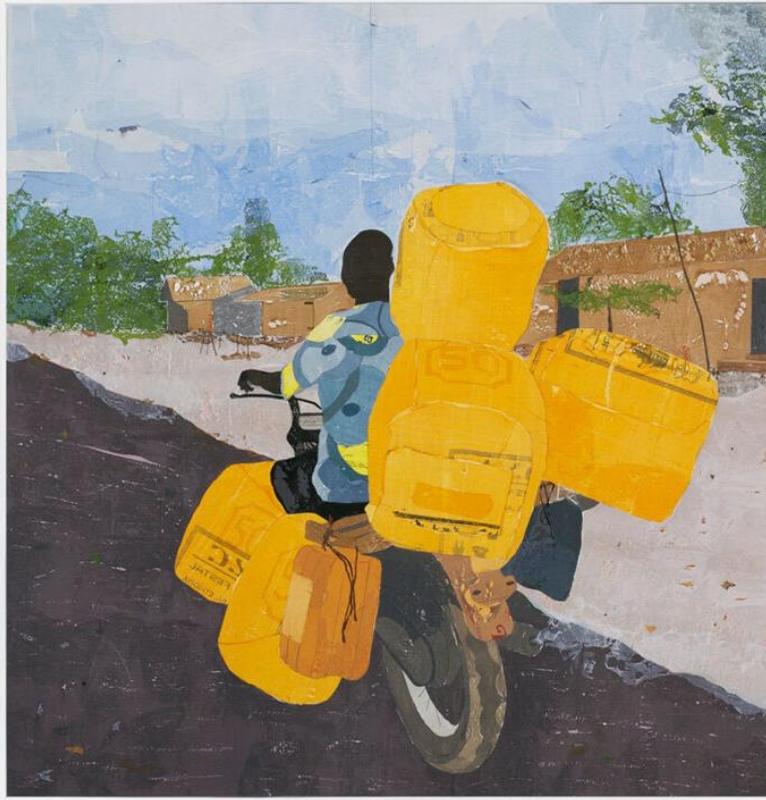
What does the work depict?

## HM

The piece has images of a wall of oxygen tanks—I moved to Mexico during the Trump era—and the trees in the background represent the idea that oxygen is free. There are lines spaced exactly six feet apart. Despite COVID, migration is still going on; people are still making these journeys. So I overlaid the work with this semiabstract, filleted map of the Middle East and Africa depicting the migration routes that people follow into Europe. It gives it a sense that despite the global pandemic these issues continue.

Working with direct imagery has given me the opportunity to really understand the nature of the material—how something that's not liquid can convey figures or shadows. I've been looking at artists like Hurvin Anderson and Peter Doig for how they capture fluidity. Unlike my metal works, which are very action oriented, when I make these works I'm standing still. My brain is moving faster than my body. If I'm not thinking about it properly, then an hour making one banana after another can seem like forever. But if I'm also remembering an experience, it gives me so much more energy to push forward.

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*Hugo McCloud, 5 on #7, 2019. Collection of Beth Rudin DeWoody. © Hugo McCloud.*

**WF**

Does this idea of beauty in context also inform the images of potted plants and flowers that you've been making recently? Many of the flowers are drooping and decaying.

**HM**

Yeah. The current show at Vielmetter has a small series of those and a couple larger works. That imagery has always been a part of my life. My mother's side of the family is from Vienna. My grandfather was in a holding camp. My great aunt was married to the Italian painter Michele Cascella, and my mother is a landscape designer and also had a store with a florist. Their house in Menlo Park is filled with Impressionist works of flowers and the piazzas in Vienna. My flower works started as something I could focus on for three or four hours, a way to shed light on something beautiful every day during the pandemic. They became little daily journals.

**WF**

It's interesting you mention these moments of beauty after the war, because I was thinking about your work in relation to Alberto Burri and Arte Povera. Burri also made abstractions out of industrial materials widely available in postwar Italy, such as the burlap sacks used to distribute food aid. He worked on a national level, creating an aesthetics of austerity that represented a specific

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period of trauma, whereas you work on a more global scale. Are you drawn to materials because they express something poetic about our age?

**HM**

When I began working with plastic, I was interested in the limitations of the material. What are its possibilities and capabilities? And then it became something else. A plastic bag with branding from a store in New York City could jump by plane to China where somebody else picks it up, and it takes on a new meaning. I made a work depicting migrant boats using plastic bags that had Arabic on them. There's something interesting about that transfer of material. It's about connecting people. There's something personal about it, and, on the other hand, it's just a simple idea that something so light and meaningless can last forever.

I try to use materials that are like that. A lot of the copper in my first paintings came from leftover scraps from my design projects. Also the tar paper came from roofs in New York City. These materials are part of everybody's day-to-day life, but no one looks at them as artistic material. At the same time, when somebody from New York sees one of those tar-paper paintings, they might remember being at a barbecue on a rooftop or something like that.



*Hugo McCloud, immaterial sections, 2018. Private Collection. © Hugo McCloud.*

**WF**

In a video accompanying your exhibition at Sean Kelly, you said, "I'm creating portraiture, but I'm also creating a subject that doesn't have time to stand still." I thought that was interesting because of the aristocratic lineage of many portraiture traditions: the first people to have their portraits made had all the time

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in the world to stand still. Of course you're not the first artist to challenge that, but I think the way you inflect it with material exploration is uniquely interesting. How does your understanding of your materials influence the way you approach human subjects?

**HM**

Well, the reason I said that is because I'm not so much interested in the actual person. I'm interested in the person's action and their willingness to push. The idea of making somebody who's doing uncomfortable, labor-intensive work pose for my documentation is weird to me.

**WF**

So it's more about labor than laborers. How about for you? How labor intensive is it to make these plastic works?

**HM**

Before I started doing these larger and more intricate plastic pieces, I thought it was going to be a much more relaxed and less physical practice than my metal paintings. But let me tell you, to be bent over that long is very taxing on your body. You can't raise the table, and you can't put the painting vertical; it has to be low enough that you can get in the middle of it. It requires an extreme amount of concentration to trace the images onto the panels and construct it piece by piece. The plastic has to fit exactly on the line that you draw, so you have to cut each piece with a razor. And when you apply heat, the plastic starts to shrink. It's like running a welding line all the way down a piece of metal. If you try to go straight down the line, your metal is going to move.

I came into the art world from a very untraditional background. Since I didn't go to school and all those things, I started with the materials that I understood from my career as a wood and metal fabricator. I found a way to use these materials, but I'm still struggling and striving to get better and better, to refine my technique.

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*Installation view of Hugo McCloud: from where i stand, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, June 7, 2021–January 2, 2022. Photo by Jason Mandella. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York.*

## **WF**

Where do you feel you are in terms of working with plastic? Do you see more potential? Are you thinking of working in any other materials?

## **HM**

When I first started off, I was very quick to move from material to material. I don't think that's a negative thing, but now I have a clearer understanding of my boundaries. If I can't create what's in my head, then I haven't reached it. I haven't tapped fully into abstraction either because I haven't fully figured out how to make this solid material move like a liquid. I'm still trying to figure out how to create a brushstroke, in a sense, with metal.

I haven't exhibited these works yet, but I've started putting plastic on black backgrounds instead of white. I'm also in the stages of designing another studio here with a foundry to do bronze casting. For me, it's a matter of having options to be able to explore different ideas while also knowing I can't switch into a completely new thing every year. It's not the wisest thing for me. I'm thinking more strategically and have a bit more maturity and understanding of the world.

*Hugo McCloud: from where i stand is on view at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Connecticut, until January 2; Hugo McCloud: translated memories is on view at Vielmetter in Los Angeles until January 8.*