

# SEANKELLY

Schneider, Julie Smith. "Art in Focus: For Artist Hugo McCloud, There's Beauty in Struggle." *The Center Magazine*, April 5, 2022.



On a Friday afternoon in mid-March, Hugo McCloud, a 42-year-old, self-taught artist takes a break from his creative labors. Dressed in a dark gray t-shirt, McCloud wanders through his sunny 2,000-square-foot studio in Tulum, Mexico, gesturing toward works-in-progress and dozens of brightly-colored, custom-made rolls of plastics. From the outside, the studio building looks like a hulking cement-gray box, a sleek Brutalist fortress, emerging from a lush-green tangle of palm trees and jungle vegetation.

Inside, an airy heap of colorful pieces of plastic forms a cloud at the foot of a gallery-white wall hung with two panels, each paned with swathes of warm gray, buttery yellow, sky blue. One depicts a man riding a bicycle with tremendous clusters of green bananas balanced on either side of the back wheel. On the other, flat blocks of color are starting to cohere into what looks like a bike frame. At a glance, one might assume the panels are paintings on canvas. Closer inspection reveals not the work of brushstrokes, but sharp blades and hot irons. With immaculate care, McCloud slices each shape, shadow, and patch of color from plastic before heating and melting the forms together, creating a painterly surface — a wholly unforgiving process. Once the plastic fuses into place, it can't be undone.

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These two pieces are part of an April exhibition at Rockefeller Center, the latest installment of the 2022 [Art in Focus](#) series, produced in partnership with Art Production Fund. Displayed in vitrines, lightboxes, and murals throughout the campus, the installation features both original works created for the exhibition and plastic works from McCloud's "Burdened Man" series, illustrating people and laborers laden with piles of products, including chairs and pineapples and stuffed-full sacks, balanced on carts and bicycles. The imagery, based partly on photographs McCloud captured while traveling the globe — including formative travels in India and South Africa — explores themes of humanity and survival, labor and class, environmental concerns, and the beauty of often overlooked everyday experiences and materials. McCloud says he sees plastic as the perfect medium, a universal material, to connect his thoughts on these layered subjects.

"I'm not really looking at the word 'burden' as a negative," McCloud says. "It's more about the strength of humans, despite the circumstances, getting by in whatever way is needed to survive, and still having strength to move forward. To me, that strength of mankind is beautiful."

Bringing his work to the well-trafficked marbled halls of Rockefeller Center, McCloud says, offers a chance for New Yorkers to more easily access and experience his art, beyond museum walls. Viewers may notice the connection between the alluring, color-filled figures in his artwork and the citizens on the sidewalks of New York City collecting cans and pushing carts mounded with bags — a link, the artist hopes, may inspire different ways of thinking and noticing.

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Born in 1980 in Palo Alto, California, McCloud grew up in a creative family. His mother worked as a landscape designer and owned a design shop, and his father, a sculptor. “My mom didn’t believe in having a TV,” McCloud says, so, as a kid, he spent hours building projects in the garage and playing “all the sports,” including football. After a stint studying business marketing, McCloud left college at Tuskegee University, knowing he didn’t want to work for a corporation, driven by an entrepreneurial energy. He taught himself how to weld and started fabricating wall-mounted fountains that he sold through his mother’s shop, as well as spots in San Francisco and Los Angeles, under the name McCloud Design. The business expanded to include furniture and architectural elements for private homes and hotels.

Using metal shavings and scraps from his fabrication work, McCloud started making visual art: wall pieces and “metal paintings” with rich layers of patina. In 2008, he moved to New York City to pursue a fine art career. For the next decade, from a series of studios in Bushwick, he honed his voice as an artist and developed a distinctive approach to artmaking, rooted in labor-intensive processes and unconventional art materials, including tar, aluminum sheeting, and woodblock printing techniques, which he used in a series of “stamp paintings.” To continue expanding his material explorations, McCloud is building additional studios on his land in Tulum — a metal foundry, woodshop, and ceramic studio — which will eventually be part of an artist residency program he’s masterminding.

McCloud’s current plastic-based works in the “Burdened Man” series move away from abstraction for the first time and include human figures as a way to make the themes and narratives in his work more apparent, he says. But his future work will likely continue to shapeshift. “When you look at all of these things in 10 or 20 years from now, you’ll see the connective tissue of how the plastic ties into

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the stamp paintings, the metal, the ceramics,” he says. “You’ll see how everything has a cohesive thought process to it.”

Designer and musician Netic Rebel, McCloud’s close friend of 15 years or so, has witnessed the artist’s career unfold. From helping hang McCloud’s first solo show in New York City to designing a house (one Rebel describes as “Dune-esque in the jungle”) on neighboring land in Tulum, Rebel is intimately familiar with his friend’s approach to life and work. “Hugo doesn’t make dainty art,” he says. “There’s a degree of intensity to the process. And I think that’s just how Hugo is. He’s a very focused, driven, willful, purposeful, persistent person.”

In addition to his marathon artmaking processes, McCloud has begun training and competing in triathlons. The training, like his art practice, requires repetition and stamina and creative muscle. “Doing endurance sports is, for me, almost like a meditation,” McCloud says. “You can go into a space of deep thought. When I’m swimming, I can actually think about my work. I can think about if what I’m doing makes sense. It gives me this break from being in front of the work, in an isolated situation where I only have my mind.”



The Rockefeller Center exhibition doubles as a sort of homecoming to New York City for McCloud. Though he hadn’t intended to make Mexico his full-time home base, that’s what happened. In early 2020, after wrapping up a project in his Tulum studio, the artist had intended to return to New York City, where he had been splitting his time. But, given the state of the world, he reconsidered and stayed in place, making new work and trying to ride out the pandemic among the palm trees.

“[Given the last two years], the idea of the ‘burdened man,’ and the stress of life is very relatable to everybody... it’s mentally been heavy,” McCloud says.

“Struggling doesn’t have to necessarily mean you’re struggling just to put rice on the plate. It can be struggling to pursue a dream or an idea or anything that’s hard for you to accomplish.” And, from this human endeavoring might grow the green sprouts of life persisting.

*Hugo McCloud’s artwork will be on view around the Rockefeller Center campus from April 11 through June 12, 2022. This installation is part of [Art in Focus](#), a series of art exhibitions produced in partnership with Art Production Fund.*