

Prismatic Waves: A conversation with Alex Fischer

Interview by Noel Rodo-Vankeulen



Noel Rodo-Vankeulen: I think we should begin with your working method, specifically how you approach creating a work. I mean, whenever I look at one of your digital pieces it seems like the process is masked behind this visually full image, but at the same time it's also very much laid out for the viewer.

Alex Fischer: I like to be aware of my influences and even reference them directly, but you're right, those influences are often hidden through my process. I visit a lot of blogs, artist's websites and galleries in order to have a broad image library to work from. I don't often go looking for specific

images or symbols once I've started a piece, instead I work from what I have. My method is very 'abstract-expressionist.' I have vague ideas of what I would like to include in a piece, but I really let the aesthetic develop on its own. I can't think in terms of traditional collage where one image is laid on top of another, but instead have to look at how Photoshop and other software can let me layer images in entirely new ways. Because it's nearly impossible to conceive of what fifty images will look like layered on each other, the compositions can reveal themselves very slowly.

NRV: It's almost as if you work backwards. Painters usually start out with a blank surface and eventually build up an image. You're almost working like a photographer where you chip away at existing images to solve what you're making. How did you become interested in appropriation as a working method?

AF: Exactly, I don't feel as if I'm ever starting from scratch. Even with painting and sculpture, I always like to start from a pre-existing structure or image. For the sculptures in *Smarter Today*



(Layering Process) Three Fates, 2010



I started with two old office chairs and built my forms on top of them. Appropriation for me is a way of looking at the context of production, something I would rather address than ignore. People are inevitably influenced by the world around them, so by referencing the context of my production, I feel like I can better engage the dialogue of where contemporary art is and what it should be doing. The reason I don't just photograph other people's work is that I think there's something that can come out of assembling a variety of sources – previously hidden patterns and trends that can reveal themselves.

NRV: So you're using the Internet as a sort of sketchpad?

AF: I do gather images from the Internet, but as important as the Internet is for broadening horizons, it's essential to know the actual work and know where an artist is coming from. An image-based experience cannot simply do much artwork justice.

The Internet's strength however is to act as documentation, and having intervals of collecting provides a record of what was promoted and available at the time. The images I do save are also not limited to a two-dimensional practice. I like to include reference to sculpture, installation and architecture in my image based work, and vice-versa. My work is a reflection of the conditions in which they are created. So rather than separating that media the pieces end up sharing in the characteristics of different media.

NRV: That's an interesting point. There is a form of representation in both your image-based work and sculptures, but it's not totally pointing at a situation or event similar to how, for example, something traditionalist like genre painting functions. As I said before, you sort of lay the process out for the viewer and use your work in the service of conveying what you're doing as artist.

AF: I try to depict events, situations and other identifying features as vague in order to keep them open to interpretation.

NRV: That ambiguity is really present in your titles as well. Many of them reference what you've specifically used within the pieces themselves (Sarfaty's Walk, 2009) while others seem to address the

'world' of the work (The Invisible Man Returns, 2010). You even have a few titles that read as deeply coded or personal (Polyester Boat, 2009).

AF: I like for the titles to act as cues that can suggest people, places or a context, but also for their ambiguity to parallel the ambiguous nature of my work. I can



Sarfaty's Walk, 2009

never accurately predict that a title or the piece itself will make someone think a particular thing, so I'd rather just have them open up environments of thought. The ambiguity also serves as a subtle defense from making a work implicitly personal. *Polyester Boat* is actually one of the more personal pieces that also ended up being one of the most abstract in terms of its visual reference and title. *Sarfati's Walk* on the other hand is much easier to recognize as a figure from a Lise Sarfati photograph walking through an environment that has been overcome with a kind of metaphysical or technological chaos.

NRV: I can't help but also see those environments looking somewhat Canadian. Not Canadian in the sense of that northern cliché, but more of a true Canada where these in-between environments exist. It's almost a landscape where bush parties take place, like the random clearings in suburban woodlots. I also see landscapes that look like inner-city parks and some that mimic rural tree lines. You've kind of moved away from this in your more recent work but I wonder if, or perhaps how, that landscape influences this world?

AF: The natural features in my work do suggest



Jeff Wall dug me a Mountain, 2008



(Detail) Our Ground, 2009



(Detail) Bring home the Bacon, 2010

North American or Northern European landscapes, one reason being that it's the landscape that dominates art history, but these features are also influenced by the fact that I grew up in rural Ontario. My experience of the landscape has very much been of fields and forests that upon first glance seem natural but are in fact heavily landscaped. I think 'in-between environments' is the right idea. My projection is based on the level of impact that I think humanity has had on the landscape, not only in the sense that we've scattered our plastics and transformed ecology, but even that we've left our mark on the very geology of the earth. The work has changed from a more current depiction of these landscapes to one



(Detail) Santiago Sara Brown, 2009

more 'futurist' in an attempt to subdue my own ideologies and assumptions, and to give a more rounded sociological viewpoint.

NRV: Almost like an entropic landscape?

AF: There will always be a limit to what we can know or predict, but there is some certainty that we have and will continue to affect the landscapes we occupy.

NRV: What about the figures that occupy your work, are they projecting their own psychological space or is it something connected to our own contemporary space? I say this because they often appear to be trapped, interwoven, or even growing within the landscape. Others are regularly set gazing out onto this very epic and 'remixed' environment. Your sculptures have this quality as well.

AF: I think the figures represent reality in that they are a mixture of both. Intensely networked and intermingled concepts seem to only emphasize the difference between diverse concepts. People assimilate their environments, but the outcome isn't a homogeneous society where everyone looks and thinks the same. The figures in my work have accessorized their identities with the multitude of symbols that

have been provided for them throughout history. Humanity has a greater infrastructure and understanding of the world than ever before. Even being as fallible as we are, as a whole we've become really privileged. This is sort of the same way that contemporary art expands and divides; it's where the title of my exhibition Smarter Today comes from. The characters represent a broad range of people who cannot escape their ideologies, nor want to.

NRV: What about their gender? They all seem fairly sexually undifferentiated.

AF: It's one of the more debatable aspects of what I see as a sociological trend. Precisely it is what might be considered progress with respect to mixing heterogeneity and homogeneity over a very long period of time. It's also what suggests that these worlds I depict are very far away. Despite some arguments to contrary the trend of humanity is to utilize empathy and expertise to achieve harmony. At the forefront we all get to vote, we all get an education, etc... But getting back to gender, we're moving into a stage of human development where for the first time we will be able to sway evolution.



(Detail) Cooks Cape, 2010



Think of it as 'the best of both worlds' or a normalization of disruption surrounding how we classify gender and identity. The uncertainty of the outcome is likely something that would traumatize humankind. I'm also admittedly a very 'liberal' thinker, but I always like to subject myself to ideas that leave me to second guess my own position.

NRV: In your sculptures the figures you create become quite monstrous and creature-like. I'm never sure if this has to do with adding physicality to the idea your 'characters' from your image-based work, or if, as you've said, any vision of our future selves is inescapable of being disturbing on some level.

AF: I think both the materiality and the actual scale of the sculptures causes people to interpret them more as disturbing creatures. The assemblage and layering is much easier to identify and, adding that all of the sculptures have facial features, they end up having an animated presence. The assemblage in both my digital and sculptural work is an important aspect of my practice, it calls attention to the fact that none of my work could have been made without some form of context. The work would be invariably different without my precursors. The work in *Smarter Today* is a look at the future from the confines of the present; humankind circa 2010 in all of its poise and fallibility.



