

JOHNNY OTTO



“Grand. Vibrant. Aggressive. Powerful.” - Art Reveal Magazine

Johnny Otto

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BRIEF BIO

Johnny Otto is a self-taught Contemporary Artist and Magazine Publisher based in Los Angeles. He was born in Bay Village, Ohio in 1966, the grandson of Czech and German immigrants. Often compared to Basquiat, Haring and Picasso, Otto's work is actually influenced by a trip to the Detroit Institute of Arts, which he visited as a child and where he was exposed to their vast collection of African Art. Otto's work spans more than 35 years and includes shows with David Hockney (Divine Design Fundraiser Auction), 01 Gallery, Headquarters, Jeff Hamilton's Street Art Fair, Radiant Space, Ministry Gallery, Art Squat, Project Angel Food Auction, Novian/Miller Space and others. He has been featured in numerous publications including Art Reveal Magazine, Artillery, LAWeekly, VoyageLA, and Left Bank Magazine.

A Brief History of Exhibitions and Publications

2021 ART SQUAT MAGAZINE / Publisher & Editor-in-Chief of new magazine - Los Angeles, CA

2018-2021 BOOKS PUBLISHED: Art of the Streets, Man or Monster (with the poetry of Orlando Kennedy), Art is Unnecessary.

2020 PROJECT ANGEL FOOD AUCTION / Fundraiser/Donation - Los Angeles, CA

2019 RADIANT SPACE / Group Show / It Was All A Dream with Sammy Baptista, Chad Muska, Oscar Meza, Kris Markovich, Thatcher, and Blikeme - Los Angeles, CA

2018 RADIANT SPACE / Solo Exhibit / Water & Spirit Fundraiser for Drop in the Bucket - Los Angeles, CA

2018 SPECIAL GUEST ON DEBORAH KOBYLT LIVE - PODCAST / Los Angeles, CA

2016-2020 MAGAZINE INTERVIEWS / Art Reveal Magazine, LAWEEKLY, VoyageLA, Splash, Shout Out LA, Left Bank Magazine, Artillery, Arts & Culture, Fine Art America.

2017 MURAL PAINTING / Video Shoot - L Los Angeles, CA

2017 BURGERS & BUDZ / Live Painting at JEFF HAMILTON'S TUDIO - Los Angeles, CA

2017 STREET ART FAIR, JEFF HAMILTON'S STUDIO - GroupShow - 40 of the top Street Artists - Los Angeles, CA

2017-2021 #FINDART / Hidden pieces throughout the Hollywood area - Los Angeles, CA

2014 THE ASHLEY PAIGE GALLERY / Group Show - FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS - Los Angeles, CA

2009 MOVIE MAKER MAGAZINE FEATURE - New York

2005 HEADQUARTERS / Solo Exhibit - SKETCHES AND PAINTINGS - Los Angeles, CA

1999 01 GALLERY / Group Auction - ABSTRACT AND FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS - Los Angeles, CA

1996 MINISTRY GALLERY / Solo Show - ABSTRACT AND FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS - Los Angeles, CA

1994 ART IN THE ALLEY / Solo Show - EXPERIMENTAL DRIVE. THRU ART EXHIBIT - FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS - Los Angeles, CA

1992-1994 ART SQUAT COLLECTIVE / Group Show -CONCEPTUAL PIECES - Los Angeles, CA

1993 PROJECT ANGEL FOOD ART / AIDS fundraiser Auction at Pacific Design Center with David Hockney - Los Angeles, CA

1990-1991 NOVIAN-MILLER SPACE / "MEGABOYS" - FEATURING 20 EMERGING ARTISTS - Los Angeles, CA

1989 RIVERFRONT GALLERY / Solo Show - FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS AND SKETCHES - WINDSOR - Ontario, Canada

1986 SUBWAY EXHIBITIONS / Group Show - ABSTRACT PAINTINGS - UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR - Ontario, Canada

Johnny Otto Manifesto

I am not an Artist, I'm a human being

An Artist needs to be a lion. Wild and free. When I paint, I don't worry about what people might think of my work or how they might categorize it or try to compare it to other artists that have come before me. I just paint for the love of painting. Madly and unimpeded. I am not part of a 'movement', when I create. I am not a 'Neo-Expressionist'. I'm not one of the 'wild ones' or one of the 'New Fauves'. I am not Basquiat or Haring. They had their moments of inspiration and tergiversation. I have mine. With brush in hand and a blank canvas in front of me, blinding my eyes with it's white glare, I strive to redefine it with my spirit and all the decades of creatures and myths that have stained my journey with their blood.

Every generation has to fight to be free from those who came before them, while at the same time recognizing their genius. I do too. I have to be free from the other great artists but also pay tribute to them. I can not ignore Picasso, or Matisse, or Dali or Van Gogh. I can borrow and steal and absorb them into my being and regurgitate their values and influences as I see fit. My hands move differently than theirs, though. My eyes scan the canvas, see the textures, absorb the colors in a manner that is all mine. I've made it mine, at least as much as one can. Water is affected by the sun but is not the sun. It is an element unto itself. That is all I wish to be. While I speak of influences, I can not discard my greatest influence, my Father who introduced me to art. The basement of our house in Canada had a fireplace, red shag carpeting, wood panels, my Father's books and a TV set that also had a record player in it. First I'd make the journey to the record store to buy the latest 'Hendrix' album or "Led Zeppelin, then I'd play them endlessly while poring over my Father's books. Not just books about the masters, but he also had encyclopedias about WWI and WWII. Gruesome images of the Holocaust and all the suffering.

My Father was a Doctor so he also had medical text books and books about science. Not much fiction. Actually, I don't recall any at all. Sitting in his sanctuary and making it mine, was one of my favorite experiences as a child. I couldn't wait to go to the Museum to see the great masters in person. The museum for us was across the border in Detroit. The Detroit Institute of Arts. As I approached it for the first time I was in utter awe as one of Rodin's 'The Thinker' sculptures greeted me, a sign of things to come that would be both magical and life changing. Once inside, one of the first murals I ever encountered: Diego Rivera's 'Detroit Industry Murals', which filled two massive walls. Outside was the thinking man and inside was the man of industry. Which did I want to become? The town I grew up in, if I had stayed, the jobs were mostly working for Ford or Chrysler or in some supporting fashion. I didn't know of any Artists who came from my hometown. As I explored Rivera's work and saw the men in the factories making machines, I knew that I didn't want to be one of them. I didn't want to be in a hot factory all day long building cars. I wanted to be the guy outside the museum. The thinker.

Once inside the heart of this great museum, I began to see some of the paintings that I had seen in my Father's books. A Van Gogh, right in front of my eyes!? I got to see the brush strokes that the photos did not capture. The detail. The vibrant use of the colors. Each room had its own surprises. Massive paintings my European Artists, American Western Art, rooms filled with Mummies, all of it so overwhelmingly magical for me as a child. My Father's books, as wonderful as they were, didn't do them justice at all. As I wondered around the museum I left the Old Masters behind and discovered a room, which haunts me to this day: A room filled with objects that I hadn't seen in any of my Father's books. What strange and wonderful things had I found? Faces of the dead staring at me. Spiritual, alien beings that were carved out of wood and sheltered behind glass. I felt a disturbing presence in that room. There was a spirit that had been trapped in the wooden masks and the statues. The sprit of the dead ancestors, perhaps? I remember these pieces of African Art yearning to be free from their enclosures, just as I was. Whomever carved these had felt some sort of discourse with their Earthly vessel and sought to escape it. As I stared deep into their eyes, I felt them trapped inside. These were much more than wooden carvings, these were a way for them to preserve their souls once their bodies had passed. These were immortality devices of a sort. Just as I felt the sunshine hitting Van Gogh's face as he sat in a field painting, I felt the knife digging into the tree trunk and forming the shape that would one day be a mask to hide inside. Now, as I paint, I strive to recreate what I felt back when I was a child.

Sometimes I succeed and I feel it right away. I feel the eyes peering back at me as if they are haunted, as well. If the eyes follow me as I move across the room, then I know a piece is finished. I know I've captured something. A soul. A spirit. Maybe mine. Maybe an ancestor. Maybe the spirit of everything and everyone who has influenced me. Maybe I've captured the mortal coil. What does haunt us, haunts us for life, but one cannot haunt others if they themselves have not been haunted by something larger than themselves. Even as I strive for absolute freedom, I am bound my all that prevents it, and that is everyone and everything. For being human is to be caged in a form that has limits but is graced with a mind that is without them. The struggle is to find a balance. To be a spirit in a material world. So, as much as I am an artist, I am not an artist, I am a human being, and subject to this frame of flesh and bone. The best I can hope to do is to create something that transcends the flesh in some way, and gives hope to the spirit that it will soar as wildly as its deepest desires.



Johnny Otto in his studio, Los Angeles, 2021

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www.ottophobia.com