

Johnny Otto
Manifesto 2019

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 wandered 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 spirit 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 by 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.