

LOST IN THOUGHT | JOSH JUETT

It's easy to get lost here. In fact, I recommend it. Take your time and savour this. Josh Juett's exhibitions are complex, densely allusive thickets of symbols and coded meanings; they invite you to ruminate. Turning his work over in your mind and teasing out its interwoven threads is one of the principal pleasures of the experience Juett offers.

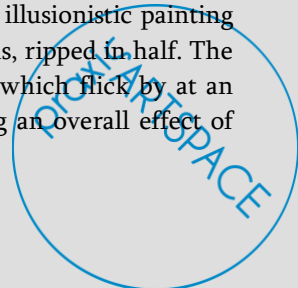
Lost in Thought is more than a collection of meticulous, intriguing paintings. The show appears to have been installed in an odd private museum; the strange dioramas, anachronistic frames and out of focus projections transport us to a space indifferently maintained by its idiosyncratic curator. The artist even taught himself wheel-throwing to create the ceramic vessels for this elaborate *mise-en-scène*.

Juett describes this approach to exhibition design as a deliberate counterpoint to the Instagram experience of visual art; a way of making the physical encounter distinct from a scroll of digital images. For his first solo exhibition, *You Look Great* (2021), Floating Goose Studios was transformed into a decrepit squat, complete with peeling wallpaper and a mattress on the floor. And earlier this year, for *Self Raising Flower* with Billy Oakley, the artists carpeted the Collective Haunt gallery and furnished the space with floral armchairs and dainty china. Perhaps this strategy suggests a kind of self-deprecating, ironic distance, implying the existence of a collector whose taste in home decor reveals a fundamental deficiency in aesthetic judgement. But there is an intelligent layering of meaning here too, a sense of character creation, which embeds Juett's paintings within a meta-narrative that complicates our understanding of them.

The works themselves are entrancingly surreal compositions, which juxtapose pop-culture iconography with techniques borrowed from the Golden Age of Dutch still life painting. Gaudy, primary-coloured plastic toys are lit with preposterously Baroque drama and placed within bucolic surrounds. Juett acknowledges the influence of Otto Marseus van Schrieck, whose *sottobosco* paintings rejected the decadent profusion of luxuries typical of seventeenth century Dutch still life compositions, preferring instead the natural abundance of the forest floor: snakes, snails, toads and mushrooms. Emboldened by scientific advances, van Schrieck challenged popular assumptions about what subjects were worthy of artistic contemplation. In an age when the Aristotelian concept of the Great Chain of Being still held powerful sway, van Schrieck's fascination with the lower orders of life was seen by some as perverse, but he found enormous popularity among seventeenth century collectors who were equally curious about the natural world. From van Schrieck, Juett has borrowed a distinctive point of view, close to the ground, and some of the grottos are familiar, but more intriguingly there seems to be an equivalency between van Schrieck's disdained organisms and the cartoon characters and disposable pop-culture artefacts that populate Juett's paintings.

Art works that take pop-culture properties as their subject matter run the risk of being reflexively dismissed as 'fan art'. This term, used pejoratively, assumes that works of this type are conceptually vacant, regardless of how technically adept they might be. While this may be a valid critique of the innumerable tributes that proliferate on internet message boards and Instagram stories, it cannot be said of Juett's paintings. He employs cartoon characters and toys for their symbolic value, co-opting them into a complex constellation of idiosyncratic meaning and deploying them to create allegorical compositions that are often deeply personal. For an audience who, like me, is not intimately familiar with the cartoons *AAAHH!!! Real Monsters*, *Adventure Time*, *Regular Show*, and *Tuca & Bertie*, the characters in Juett's paintings take on a quality akin to religious iconography (which I confess to finding similarly oblique). The specific significance might be reserved for the *cognoscenti*, but an evident undercurrent of meaning invites the mind to follow its flow. The mouldering apples and misshapen lemons in Juett's works draw me back to the *vanitas* paintings of the Dutch Golden Age; their juxtaposition of earthly splendours with intimations of ephemerality and decay were frequently interpreted as *memento mori*. For Juett, impending mortality is replaced by a more twenty-first century concern: the anxious intersection of adult responsibilities and the pleasures of a prolonged adolescence.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Juett performs a clever feat of *tromp l'œil*, taking a repeated motif from his paintings - a crumpled piece of paper taped to a wall - and manifesting it on a grand scale. Realised through illusionistic painting on thin sheets of bent metal, these works appear to be 'in-between' frames from familiar cartoons, ripped in half. The technique of 'in-betweening' refers to single cells of animation, inserted between keyframes, which flick by at an almost imperceptible speed, registering in the viewers' minds only subliminally, but conjuring an overall effect of



fluidity. They are typically used to convey character movement, as in Juett's examples, where the swiftly turning heads of Ren, SpongeBob and Homer Simpson are implied by a comet's tail of trailing eyeballs. Frozen and robbed of their essential fleeting effect, these images now suggest a meaning opposite to their original intention: instead of a quick double-take, the characters appear stuck in a perpetual crisis of indecision, literally torn between competing priorities.

To be lost in thought can be pleasurable, but it can also be paralysing too. For Juett, many of the works in this exhibition stem from an uncomfortable awareness of his own thought processes; the endless recursive loop of self-reflection. Many of these finely wrought, vividly realised paintings are illustrative of an internal monologue, with beloved cartoon characters and prized objects from the artist's own collection serving as avatars. Much like the *wunderkammers* of seventeenth century Dutch collectors, Juett's pictorial accumulation of objects and characters becomes a means of self-expression; a way of understanding the world and describing one's own identity through gathering and display. *Lost in Thought* is a self-portrait of a fascinatingly complex and inventive mind.

THIS ESSAY ACCOMPANIES THE EXHIBITION, 'LOST IN THOUGHT' BY JOSH JUETT, AUTHORED BY ANDREW PURVIS



IMAGES: (clockwise from top left). Courtesy the artist.

- *Every car that I've owned has been a piece of shit*, oil on wood panel, 60 x 90cm.
- *Father of the year, and other missed opportunities*, oil on wood panel, 60 x 90cm.
- *Flashback*, oil on wood panel, 40 x 50 cm
- [Untitled at time of printing], diptych, oil on aluminium sheets, dimensions variable.

