

Interview with Jimmy Baker

By Alex Couri

The weekend before coming to install his Rapture exhibition at Roberts & Tilton in Los Angeles, ArtSlant's Alex Couri had the opportunity to converse with Jimmy about his newest work.

AC: Many of your ideas about the future of our technologically-based society are presented in the medium of painting. Can you explain the relationship within an art historical context of your use of such a traditional form of artistic expression?

JB: First, I think it's important to acknowledge that the paintings are only one facet of the project. They are really the only pre-modern aspect of the show. These paintings exist in the most classical sense of painting: to transcribe history as a means of documenting events. The role of painting "pre-photograph" allowed humans to visualize an image of history. My portraits are recording two unrealistic extremes of our day--complete utopia via technology and neo-barbarian Mad Maxism. They are fantastic stories that hopefully force us to consider how our perception of the future shapes our destiny. In the end, the work presents two polarities and leaves the realistic grey area unrepresented. Sometimes you need to invest a great deal of effort into the works that exist to force the viewer to contemplate what is absent. All of these images are so neat and well produced that they rely on our collective understanding of Hollywood's structure of creating fiction.

AC: The subjects of the paintings that represent our "clean future" are women and those representing our "dirty future" are men. What is the significance of choosing these polar opposites?

JB: To be completely honest, I feel that aggression and violence are historically masculine in nature. The ideas of promise and fertility were essential in defining women. Their reproductive potential is woven into the cleanliness of digital technology: the earbud cord even leads to a grommet near their belly. I mean "fertility" in the sense of economic or aesthetic, more than biological.

I needed the women to have an anonymity that modernism always promised, a clean white space that has inevitably affected the practice of art in a great way. The men stem from a post-apocalyptic setting, mostly displayed in these basement and bunker settings. They are the scavengers of civilization, and exist in a singular anarchistic state. This is a crucial division between the social orders of the genders. The female paintings take on an almost communist sensibility in terms of solidarity. I've always been at odds with this depiction of uniform in sci-fi films. It seems like such a communistic utopia, while feeling like it's trying to exist within a wildly exaggerated version of capitalism. In short, they can be compressed into simple ideas like disaster vs. peace. I've reconciled with the fact that they can be as deep or as shallow as you wish of them.

(Actually, right now Rob Riggle, of The Daily Show) is dressed in Mad Max gear a la Thunderdome, set in a skit in "Bartertown, OH" commenting on the price of gas for this Memorial Day weekend. Apparently these ideas are more prevalent in pop-culture than we realize.)

AC: The work in Rapture is connected conceptually yet presented in a number of distinctly different forms of visual media. How should the viewer evaluate your seemingly disparate forms of expression?

JB: Do we understand the world around us only through the narratives broadcast over AM radio? No, we compile fragments of information from the internet, television, radio, newspapers, books, and personal interactions. I think this structure of working is infinitely more logical than making all paintings, at least for my subjects. I am trying to mimic how we understand anything in contemporary life by experiencing a tactile barrage of images, objects, and media. In my experience, most viewers approach it like they would approach any other form of information, trying to understand its singular content and relating it to the world at large. This is also why I have explained this format as an unearthed time capsule from the near future. What stories, ideas, or feelings have I deemed relevant to include in this time capsule? It is your job to use these clues to understand the larger picture as a recording of our moment in history.

AC: The iPod is so ubiquitous today, what is it that interests you about this technology?

JB: If you look at Kubrick, or early Lucas, they were insistent on responding to modernism in their set designs, and in so doing, helped give an image to the 'modern future'. Somehow this has translated to Steve Job's view of a seamless design future. I am interested in the psychology of deeming something white, seamless, and glossy as a depiction standard for 'objects from the future'. The iPod now responds only to human touch and has the ability to isolate you from your environment for days solid, if you desire. At least your old Sony Discman would inevitably stop after 70 minutes on a CD. The form of an iPod is about personally condensing history and physicality into something invisible and extremely expansive. It has completely re-invented the way we interface with music and ultimately a huge form of creative expression. I also like that it is already dated. This is why I used the old 3rd generation iPods in the sculptures.

AC: The images in the John Titor series are photographs of an American landscape. How does this relate to his prophecies and your theme of a time capsule from the near future?

JB: Well, I come from Middle America and I have a great affection for early American landscape painting. The story of John Titor is way too long and ridiculous to describe (go to johntitor.com), but he posts web board messages from the future with predictions about an American civil war in 2008 after the election--a rural vs. urban scenario. This is where the Titor images stem from, a frozen wasteland of debris from a once thriving economy set in the barren wilderness of Kentucky. These photos are certainly the most tangential of the exhibition, but I was fascinated by these prophecies from the future that utilized the technology of web boards, and outdated computer parts (read the John Titor story). I sometimes feel like the vast landscape of our nation isn't contemplated as often as it could be in contemporary art.

AC: Do you consider your work to be equally influenced by history, politics, and contemporary technology or is there one that plays a larger part in your conceptual process?

JB: Recently, I've been completely influenced by the immediate present, current events. Responses to these many circumstances are processed through other histories, politics, and narratives. I hate to give one hierarchy but I am admittedly an inherently political artist trying not to fall into the traps of prior political art. Everything is about trying to understand this insane mess that I feel like I live through. I take a lot of global issues very personally, and this compassion can weigh on me sometimes.

AC: You have also integrated issues connected with the war in Iraq, including a video of the hanging of Saddam Hussein. How do you expect the American viewer will react to these slightly more jarring references?

JB: I expect that 70% of the viewers will watch a bit of the video loop (that plays on a Motorola RAZR phone) and not get what they are really watching. I have already showed it to some aware citizens, and it took them a while to realize what it was. This is good though. I can't have it hit them over the head. The video only contains the abstract black space of the footage after Saddam fell through the hole--the part not played on CNN, etc. You see him swing into and out of the blackness on his noose. The display format is quite disorienting, and I think that works in my favor. I'm really not concerned with their response to 'jarring' content. This is reality. It is factual. People's lives are taken daily for a variety of reasons across the world. What is jarring to me is the fact that one of the most iconic events in the late 20th and early 21st centuries was captured on a cell phone video and immediately disseminated to the world. It sounds grim but I was waiting with bated breath just before this event because I knew something like this would happen, and I was prepared to absorb it into my work.

AC: How has being located in the American mid-west influenced your art making?

JB: Growing up, my connection with the world was entirely virtual. Now I am able to travel more but I still process information virtually. (Also, see landscape comments above.)

AC: Although much of this work seems to look outward to our culture, rather than inward to the individual, what are the autobiographical elements in this series?

JB: Ha, this is always everyone's crucial question of me. I prefer to be thought of as a director who chooses specific topics in order to illustrate my feelings on humanity and the world around me. Bob Dylan was so powerful because he made sense of his personal life by commenting on a political climate. I am trying to understand my time and life cast against the narratives of war and digital culture. I'm not interested in making overtly personal work because those ideas can always be inferred on my choices of subject matter. The craft of the work also allows me to step outside the conventions of the handmade object, as if all of the works are artifacts gleaned from our time.

-Alex Couri