

FINANCIAL TIMES

12/06/2014

ARTS & GIVING

HOW TO SPEND IT

PROCESS-BASED ART'S RISE

By Pernilla Holmes



Anyone who has ever had a tooth drilled knows the feeling of leaving the dentist's office with lips involuntarily grimacing as the anaesthetic numbs the senses. Now imagine a painter who has similarly lost all feeling in their hands. This is just one of the techniques that New York-based Ryan Estep – one of the cutting-edge artists at the forefront of the current zeitgeist for process-based art – has devised in his highly performative, almost ritualistic art practice, where his methods and materials are as important as the abstract paintings themselves.

“I layer the lidocaine [the numbing agent used by dentists before uncomfortable procedures] onto the white,” explains Estep, “which has been painted around the edges with black paint.” At this point he takes the canvas off of the stretcher and, in a nod to his former work as an art technician, restretches it, but this time disturbing the still-wet borders and creating smudgy mistakes as he loses all feeling in his hands. This audacious dulling of the senses raises questions of authorship, randomness and the very idea of painting – while also creating beautiful works.

“The materials and methods sit mostly within the canon of manual labour,” Estep explains, hinting at the discrepancy between the physical work that goes into his paintings and their eventual impracticality. Asked about the safety of the procedure, Estep, a robust and charismatic 33-year-old, shrugs his lack of concern. More worryingly, he then laughingly recalls one time when he got the measurements wrong and lay completely immobilised on his studio floor for several hours.

Whether worn-out, weathered, chemically treated, submerged, bleached, beaten, fire-hosed, woven, trodden-on, photo-based, silver-coated or any number of other methods currently in play, process-based approaches to making art have reached new heights in today's emerging art scene. Process-as-subject has of course long existed – as in the experiments of 1950s abstract expressionists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Jackson Pollock, 1960s colour-field painters such as Sam Gilliam, and the ephemeral works of Eva Hesse – among many. But after the slick, high-concept, hands-off art that reigned throughout the 1990s and into the Noughties courtesy of artists such as Jeff Koons, Gerhard Richter, Andreas Gursky, and even Damien Hirst, it felt almost revolutionary when, around eight years ago, artists such as Norwegian Fredrik Værsløv began leaving his canvases in his mother's backyard for months on end through Oslo's harsh winters, retrieving them, throwing boiling chemicals on them and, when he felt they were ready, displaying them as beautiful pieces of abstract art in his Terrazzo series. Or when American artist Oscar Tuazon placed canvases on the ground and proceeded to walk, weld and whatever else on them over several months while making his large and heavy iron-and-wood based sculptures. The canvases are then stretched over a frame and displayed as paintings (from \$35,000), such as *Untitled*, 2012, their rust stains, drips and general grime – often referred to by others as studio DNA – alchemised by the shift in context into genuinely stunning art.

Fast forward several years and the major art fairs over the past 24 months, such as Art Basel, Frieze Art Fairs in London and New York, Art Basel Miami Beach and New York's cleverly curated Independent Art Fair, make it clear that process-based art, and what it is progressing into, has taken a serious hold on the art market, driven, perhaps, both by genuinely great ideas and shrewd collectors.

The waiting lists to buy the most interesting of these artists – Ryan Estep, Wyatt Kahn, Andrew Dadson, Israel Lund, Oscar Murillo, Garth Weiser, Gavin Kenyon, Jessica Dickinson, Ethan Cooke, Dean Levin, Kaspar Sonne, Michiel Ceulers, Analia Saban, Josh Tonsfeldt, Ayan Farah, Mark Barrow and Brent Wadden among them – can be very long indeed. In addition to that demand, frissons created by the occasionally exponential prices achieved at auction drive up gallery prices fast. Recent examples include Israel Lund's 2013 *Untitled* painting which sold for \$125,000 this May at Christie's, over 16 times the \$7,500 it fetched from his gallery show the previous June; or internet artist Parker Ito's *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, which fetched £56,250 against an estimate of £10,000-£15,000 at Sotheby's this February.

Young galleries selling this work are thriving, and major commercial galleries, such as Marian Goodman, in London, Paris and New York, and Zurich's Eva Presenhuber, who represent more established artists, have begun to absorb certain of those young artists into their exhibition programmes, such as London-based Colombian Oscar Murillo – for whom paintings (price on request, from David Zwirner) are only a small part of a hugely multifaceted larger practice – and New Yorker Wyatt Kahn, born in 1983.

"I would like the viewer to experience the errors in the process that reveal my hand, and a very human experience of imperfection," Kahn has said, pinpointing a calculatedly casual approach to material and suggesting a desire to contradict slick and machine-produced consumer pieces. His most distinctive works to date are pieced-together segments of stretch canvas of different sizes, dimensions and shapes, hung on the wall – part sculpture, part painting (with prices fetching up to \$45,000). The interplay of form is so dominant in the work that it's easy to overlook the richness of the surfaces. A keen experimenter, Kahn's neutral tones have depth and variation, the result of the artist stretching each panel twice. The first layer is a brightly coloured canvas, or hand-drawn coloured patterns, over the top of which he then places a thin linen canvas that obscures the colour altogether but creates a nuanced shade in the linen and the impression of depth – a reference, perhaps, to the limitations of vision.

Celebrating colour more viscerally through his processes is Danish artist Kasper Sonne. In something of a departure from previous pieces, his recent series of paintings is made by applying brightly coloured industrial paints to canvas with a roller, creating a smooth surface free of any painterly gesture. Sonne then throws chemical solvents at the work – purposefully destroying the perfect finish in a politicised statement, yet in so doing creating gorgeous, splashy works such as TXC52 (\$15,000) and TXC59 (\$15,000).

Such unusual materials and methods of construction are seminal to process-based work, exploiting the balance (or imbalance?) between what art conveys and the physical object itself. In another series (with works priced between \$10,000 and \$20,000), Estep (of the lidocaine paintings) works with dirt from his native Michigan, where he was brought up in a hockey-loving town where his father has a construction company. Back in his Greenpoint studio, the dirt is mixed with an organic disinfectant and heated to 600 degrees to be sterilised. He then applies the dirt to canvas through specially created iron screens in the form of Ben-Day dots – the perfect 50/50 ratio of dark/light dots used in old comics and graphic design, and by painters echoing them such as Roy Lichtenstein. “At first I used silkscreens,” says Estep, “but the dirt kept breaking the equipment, so I had to find another method.” There are clearly more experiments to come. On a recent visit to Estep’s studio, I glanced into a bucket to discover it full of dead locusts, a small sampling, it turns out, of the massive amount Estep has recently ordered.

“I feel process-based paintings like Ryan’s are performance pieces,” says New York-based dentist Avo Samuelian who, together with his husband Hector Manuel Gonzalez, is a major collector of emerging art, and has a great eye for spotting talent early. Samuelian regularly changes the artworks that hang in his Manhattan office – offering patients the opportunity to ponder new movements in art while he sees to their teeth. “Process works transcend the two-dimensional to offer us a glimpse of the artist in action. And they are beautiful.”

Among the artists he collects are established names such as Oscar Tuazon, Fredrik Værsløv and Wade Guyton, as well as relative newcomers such as Julia Rommel and Ryan Estep, several of whose dirt works he owns. “Ryan’s sterilised dirt works are manhandled during his process,” Samuelian says, when explaining his fondness for them. “This mishandling causes scrapes and ‘mistakes’ on the canvas, showing the process and the moment when the works were made. The larger canvases show shoulder and knee impacts, and sometimes his head.” And if key undercurrents to process-based work are fallible human touch alongside expanding notions of what art can be, more recently a number of artists have taken these ideas a step further. Very slow, hands-on, traditional craft techniques, such as hand-loomed and weaving or handmade ceramics, create time-consuming, one-off artworks that fly in the face of their generation’s love of the immediate and general state of impatience.

“For us, the laboriously handmade aspect of our work represents a commitment to the ideas we are working with,” says New York artist Mark Barrow of his collaborative textile-and-paint works made with his wife, Sarah Parke. “It is in part a reaction to the proliferation of highly produced, machine-manufactured objects in contemporary art.” The couple is based in Sunnyside, Queens, where the lion’s share of their duplex apartment is dominated by tools that include a large, wooden handloom – a beautifully cumbersome piece of equipment that is a potent symbol of hands-on work.

Parke began weaving because she loved making tactile, textured and strikingly coloured things by hand. Barrow, who in conversation comes across as part scientist, part philosopher, became fascinated by her work, and how the ancient practice of textile-making correlates to digital technology. “I am really interested in this collapse of time,” he says. In one series, CMYK (from \$25,000 to \$40,000), Parke designs and weaves a fabric using threads in colours of printing – cyan, magenta, yellow and black. Barrow works out the percentages of CMYK that make up each of the colours in the composition, and then: “I use small dabs of white paint to cover the fabric in the different ratios, blocking out portions of the coloured threads.” His painted dots are so small and meticulously applied that the eye can only separate them from the fabric itself at very close inspection. It’s hard not to marvel at the zen-like physical perseverance behind the thought process.

Also working with handlooms is 35-year-old Canadian Brent Wadden, who sources second-hand yarns from eBay, Craigslist, Kijiji and anywhere else he can find them. “It’s rewarding using the refuse from someone else’s projects,” he says by way of explanation, “and transforming it into something completely different and beautiful.” A painter who took up textile weaving about four years ago, he remains proudly amateurish – his technical inconsistencies chime with the different materials he uses to create varied patterns and textures,

which are impossible to replicate. Error and imperfection, coupled with his striking geometric designs, are a big part of what becomes beautiful and unique in the completed work (from about \$20,000).

Museums have perhaps been more wary of embracing a trend with such immediate market legs – though this may be partly because of the necessary time lag it takes for a museum to produce a careful and considered programme. The majority of the artists that are part of the movement, are, after all, still in their twenties and thirties and their career longevity remains to be seen. MoMA New York's hotly anticipated show *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (from December 14 2014 to April 5 2015), a survey of 17 of today's most interesting artists curated by Laura Hoptman, will include several of the more established names associated with process-based work (as one part of their more diverse practices), including Oscar Murillo, Joe Bradley and Josh Smith. Progressive institutions such as St Louis's White Flag Projects and private foundations such as the Rubell Family Collection in Miami are key in following such young trends, as is New York's MoMA PS1. This last gallery recently had an exhibition by Gavin Kenyon who, for some works, stitches various fabrics together to create bags as moulds for large, totemic and fantastical concrete sculptures (from \$8,000) that resemble shapes including handcrafted columns: part poetic and part grotesque.

For all of the fascination with material and how it can be manipulated, at the heart of process-based work is perhaps the larger question exploring the dichotomy between art as a physical and a social construct. Argentine artist Analia Saban – who has been in numerous museum group shows internationally, including at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris; LACMA in Los Angeles; and Marco in Vigo, Spain – plays with this discrepancy by creating works, (from \$20,000 through Sprueth Magers) that dissect paintings and pull apart their layers. In certain works she unweaves the canvas. In others she paints white on canvas – sometimes resembling the white paintings of Robert Ryman – and uses a laser to create a delicate and very beautiful lattice of acrylic paint. In still further works she dips the canvas into a bag of acrylic paint, waits for the paint to set, then removes the bag leaving a sculptural mass of paint with a canvas sticking out. Canvas is often thought of as the “support” for paintings – but in these works, that relationship is inverted. By exploring the most essential aspects or components of an artwork, Saban – like many process-based artists – questions why certain materials are valued by society as art. In doing so, she captures that little bit of magic that occurs when the transition from material to art takes place.