



Looking for U: In Conversation with Joshua Hagler

Joshua Hagler is a multi-disciplinary artist known for his large-scale oil paintings depicting chaotic arrangements of human figures, often psychologically charged and in varying states of tension and conflict. We sat down to speak to Joshua in tandem with our Summer Group Show: *Looking For U*.

UL: Artist residencies have been a regular feature of your life as an artist over the last few years. You were awarded a place on MICA's Alfred and Trafford Klots Program for Artists in Brittany, France in 2017 and recently attended a year-long Roswell Artist in Residence Program in New Mexico. To what extent does the distance away from your home in Los Angeles affect the type of work you make and why?

JH: In the past eight months I've spent in New Mexico, I've never felt more at home in my work. The relationship that I have to the landscape here, simply by walking out onto my back porch every morning at 5:30 as the sun is beginning to rise, the way I can see the horizon in every direction, is important. Presence and recognition are two words that come to mind. There are things about Los Angeles that I like, but I can't say it felt like home, nor was San Francisco in the twelve years I lived there before arriving in L.A. That New Mexico has been able to provide so much time and space probably makes moving here late last year the most important experience for my work.

UL: Your 2011 video piece, *The Evangelists*, contains a 3D representation of the face of a neighbour who started a fire which tragically burned down your apartment and accompanying studio. In lieu of such a painful experience, what motivated you to trace this person down and include him in the piece?

JH: Well, to clarify, my neighbor, who started the fire, suffered from a mental illness and was not in the presence of mind to think about his neighbors. He believed that demons occupied his studio and he was trying to get rid of them. So, because I knew something about what he was experiencing, how he was unable to control it, I never really felt negatively toward him. We were lucky in that no one was hurt. So for me, it was really about the prevention of entropy. I didn't want this all to be for nothing. There was incredible value, three years later, in inviting him to collaborate. It was remarkable to see everything come together and to make something that could never have been anticipated.

UL: Your artworks regularly include subject matter ranging from figures, faces, and animals to historic artefacts and mystical places. Do you have a preferred subject matter?



JH: My subject matter is never really about missionaries or cowboys or astronauts or even a natural landscape, but uses signs and symbols for the potential of what they might reveal in direct contradiction to the historical or traditional intentions of this imagery. I'm trying to reflect something of the collective panic being felt by anyone paying attention to our political landscape now while finding some poetry in doing so, if such a thing is possible. I think of my subject matter almost startled into being by the world I live in, by its often invisible antagonisms such as whiteness, fundamentalism, and the inheritances many of us ignore or take for granted.

MOST OF WHAT WE THINK WE'RE REVEALING TO EACH OTHER NOW WILL NOT PROVE TO HAVE LASTING MEANING FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS, AND THE MEANING THAT THEY DO GIVE TO IT WILL NOT BE THE MEANING WE THINK IT HAS NOW.

UL: We understand that your paintings are as much an excavation site by technique as they are conceptually – they present an authentic and interesting interplay between old and new. How do you gauge the balance between uncovering and adding content?

JH: I think about the paint on the surface as something to be wiped off or, in some way, removed to reveal what is beneath the surface. There is something meaningful to me about seeing a picture decay even as it comes into focus, and somehow that's reflective of that kind of sublimated violence I'm talking about. I am not delicate in the way that I handle the paint or the canvas, but the balance itself is delicate, and there are rules. The process is actually very difficult to control, which was an intentional obstruction I put in front of myself so that genuine discovery could be made possible. You can't know what you're making. You have to put your faith in the process once you commit to the canvas.

UL: Your influences quite clearly extend beyond the realm of fine art. Who would you define as your most unusual influence?

JH: Well, I think the person who has most impacted my thinking about painting in particular is my partner Maja Ruznic. She's definitely unusual. And always two steps ahead of me.



Installation shot of Hagler's *River Lethe* solo exhibition at the Brand Library & Art Center, CA.

UL: Your recent exhibition, *The River Lethe*, centered on to the cultural amnesia and psychological repression emblematic of white nationalism in America today. What would you describe as the most culturally significant forgotten historic event of 21st century white nationalist America?

JH: If we're talking specifically about white nationalism, we can think of the present movement as a logical end stemming from the 18th-century invention of whiteness in the American colonies for the sole purpose of suppressing slave revolts. The origin of the term "white" as it was coined to describe what privileges a male person could enjoy is what is missing from the consciousness not only of white supremacists but of average white people in America who tacitly abide the white supremacist structures put in place long before we were born. Lethe, the spirit of forgetfulness or oblivion, in archaic Greek mythology is a good metaphor in this way, because, to drink from it is to forget who you are. This was understood among the Greeks, that all drink from the river before being reborn, and that to become the person one is meant to become is to reconnect with what has been forgotten.



UL: For the *Looking For U* exhibition, our artists have responded to themes of identity and communication in relation to modern technology. Would you describe our intertwined relationship with technology as a mark of progress and innovation or a source of darkness in the modern age?

JH: Well, I think it would be simplistic to think of it as an either/or proposition. Can we imagine living without a sewage system, irrigation, bridges, electricity for longer than a camping trip? But I think it's worth using the question as an opportunity to think about the word progress. I do worry about current trends in consumer technology. I worry about the narcissism, isolation, stress, loneliness, envy, and sense of incompleteness it seems to engender in people. More complicated is the way in which our behaviors with our technology inform what we're shown through it, so that our worldview is formed in an echo chamber of people who never challenge what we think. We are absolutely not equipped with the wisdom to deal with the unintended consequences just around the corner, if not already here. Anyway, I think I was mansplaining all that to my friends at halftime during the World Cup Final projected from my computer via Hulu Live TV. Then I checked to see if I had any new followers on Instagram. I had five and felt pretty good about myself.