

IN CONVERSATION WITH SAMUEL STABLER AND JUSTIN ADIAN

How to make a painting? Friends and neighbors Justin Adian and Samuel Stabler have distinct, evolving solutions to the old and constantly renewed question. These involve foam, canvas, and various hardware sculpted into unnamed shapes and coated with a range of enamels (Adian), and intricate reimaginings of historic paintings and cinematic heroes in a “stupid” palette (Stabler).

We talked at The St. Catherine in Brooklyn.

Adian: (to Stabler) I hung your piece last night in the dining room. It looks good.

Stabler: The dining room is a good spot. In the hierarchy of places, there's the dining room, the master bathroom, and the bedroom. Those are the top three right there. It's Henry VI and Ferdinand IX—two portraits of the respective monarchs, sixty-nining.



Above: *Samuel Stabler, Untitled (Politics), 2014.*

Wolf: (*to Stabler*) You employ lots of historic imagery. Where do you find it and how do you choose it?

Stabler: Paintings I like. Paintings I know. Paintings I think about on a semi-regular basis. Things that I've become aware of through my art education. It started from there—is this knowledge for knowledge's sake? Which is a great thing, but what am I going to do with it? So I draw them from memory. Its now evolved to where I go on specific searches for specific things: I look for war paintings that show dead people, or political paintings that have someone looking at you.

Adian: Or a rearing horse?

Stabler: Or a rearing horse. The idea of using immediate, deep-seated subjects expanded into film, where I was trying to remember films that I watched growing up, with my parents, my grandparents. I really like Westerns primarily. I can look at Gericault, look at all his work and find different pieces, and I can look at *Magnificent Seven* and within one film find a thousand different things—there are different ways of finding what's valuable.

Adian: With the Westerns, there's a definite hero element. In *Magnificent Seven* especially, each one of those characters has a moment where they're bigger than life. Some of your source paintings are all about a man having one of those moments, whether they're portraiture or scenes from a war... larger than life.

Stabler: Maybe that's why I'm drawn to them. You think about *The Raft of the*

Medusa. What a wonderfully absurd painting... sometimes I look at it and I'm like, 'This is fucking awful.'

Wolf: So when you're taking all of these characters from different places and putting them together, what's the best case scenario? What do you want to happen to them?

Stabler: I don't usually think about it like that. I want to reinvigorate the works, in a way. I like the idea of making these things that I can consume so readily on my iPad and make them my own. There's a very direct joy in knowing that I've just taken this work and made it mine. I enjoy putting my mark on that and owning it, in kind of a crass way. At the same time, I always love the original piece and hopefully I haven't made it look like shit.

Adian: It's not homage, but it's not ignoring the fact... I guess we don't use the word "fan" in the art world.

Stabler: I'm a fan of these works. That's where it all starts—I'm a fan of them.

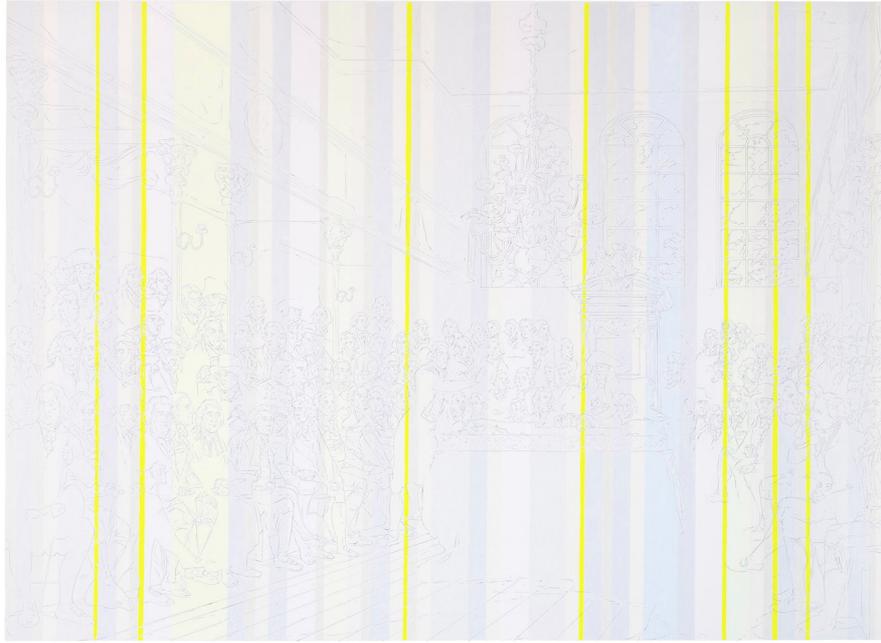
Adian: There's a utility to liking something, as an artist. Because if you like something, you're going to use it somehow, even if its not totally transparent.

Wolf: So what is Henry VI subjected to? What happens to these guys before the painting is finished?

Stabler: I'm focused on every element of the original portrait. I can tell you what shoes he's wearing, why he's wearing a golden codpiece, why he's got...

Adian: Syphilis?

Stabler: Well, odds are. But the act of looking at the same piece for so long is more than I do anywhere else. I don't do it in a museum, I don't do it online or in a gallery. But when I redraw it, I give the appropriate time to whatever I'm consuming.



Above: *Samuel Stabler, Untitled (Politics), 2014.*

Adian: Do you ever work with a piece that you don't like?

Stabler: Yeah, the series I'm working on right now of political paintings—parliament paintings, American politics, a painting of the Declaration of Independence.

Adian: Do you ever think of how you could fix those paintings?

Stabler: Oh, all the time. You look at this thing for so long. There are these tricks that the artist used to make a political painting interesting. Think of a painting of C-SPAN—that's basically what these source paintings are. They're terribly boring subjects. So they use these tools: usually there's someone looking at you, and the way that this cluster of people are sitting has a very nice rhythm. It's very visually, aesthetically pleasing. It's like in a Caravaggio painting: why is there just one spotlight in this chamber? That's been something new—painting works that I didn't know before and I don't love, but the act of redrawing them has made me more interested.

Wolf: What role does color play in your work? There's lots of neon.

Stabler: Well I had a highlighter, and I was trying to draw these old masterpieces from memory. There's a hierarchy of color, particularly when there's a cost associated with each pigment: more important colors cost more money. Jesus would be in the purple robe. So I was thinking, where does highlighter fit into that? This is a new color, it's a postwar color. How would it fit into that hierarchy if it could? Would the divine dove be glowing neon? Would it be the dead in the altarpiece? Would the devil be yellow, because it's not a pleasant color? I like thinking about that.

The neon came from that thinking and has evolved into a character, almost. It occupies a space. I like the experience of doing an entire piece, and having to look away because I've been looking at it too long. I had never experienced that with any other color. I kind of like that. It's got a depth that other colors don't.

Adian: It's kind of strange. It's not gold and it's not yellow. It's kind of a stupid color.

Stabler: It's stupid. If it existed in the High Renaissance, would they be like 'No way, don't use that one'? Unless it were made of some rare material. It's also the perfect backlit color. I was trying to do it with gold, but the neons—these new, gross colors—lend themselves to that. No other color does that. Gold is the closest thing.



Above: *Justin Adian, Spectre, 2014.*

Wolf: Justin, do you work with toxic materials?

Adian: Yeah, absolutely. All the paints are oil enamel. And there are spray paints, oil-based. And all the glitter spray paint is certainly toxic.

Wolf: Why do you work with those specific paints?

Adian: Oil gloss enamel is self-leveling, and it has a similar sheen to heavily glazed, solid, primary-colored, regular oil paint. Really shiny. Like the vinyl look for cars or speedboats. Or when you see a fiberglass bar that's red with gold flakes in it. I love that.

Wolf: I never really thought of your works as paintings until you told me they were

paintings.

Adian: I don't care about the language around them. I think of them as paintings because that's the language I learned early on. I used to quibble with people who said "Oh, these are sculptures." I don't give a fuck. They're art. I paint the entire surface. It's gotten to the point where even the back is something—you just usually can't see it because it's on the wall.

Wolf: As in your recent "backlit" works shown at National Exemplar.

Adian: I started with that a long time ago. Guys like Irwin got me thinking about that—that even the backs of works can do things. And just light. Getting light out of paint, as opposed to any sort of artifice or actual illumination. It's nice to make the thing kind of vibrate on the wall. I think of the wall as the ground, and then the painting. And if the painting can speak directly to the wall—whether it's in a corner wrapping around, or reflecting on the wall—then it's an interaction with the ground.

Stabler: It's a further blurring of that line between painting and sculpture.

Adian: Right. In history, paintings always had huge frames. And forever, paintings have been built into the wall. No one argues that frescoes aren't paintings, even though you can't move the motherfucker, you'd have to move the entire wall.

Wolf: I was once looking at a triangular work of yours, and you told me it was about the pyramids. Is your work representational?

Adian: It's representational of what I'm thinking of. A Warhol *Camouflage* painting is representational of the pattern of camouflage. But it's totally not representational. Same with the shadow paintings. I have a hard time understanding artists who say "I'm totally non-representational." I don't know where you start with that. Maybe just show a can of paint, I guess.

Wolf: I recently discovered your zine, *Nerve Endings*.

Adian: I've done a bunch of zines. I come from that culture. Second-wave punk rock, zine culture, fan magazines is the language I speak. As it started to have a little bit more success, I wanted my buddies to have a way to disseminate art that I might like to other people who might dig it. That's all it was.



Above: *Justin Adian, Vamp, 2014.*

Wolf: What role does chance play in your work?

Stabler: (*to Adian*) I like how your work is very controlled but the tools you use leave space for chance.

Adian: There are so many artists—art—I like who take pride in the fact that you can't tell whether they used a brush. That always blows me away. You're hiding it, but at the same time you're using this tool, and you're getting something out of fighting with it. I can dig that thinking, but it's just something I'm so far removed from.

I let things run, but there are many artists who really control where those drips go. When I work, if I want to have some drips, I'm just going to let it go and that's where they're supposed to be. At this point, there's nothing hard about getting what you want out of materials. Someone's already done it, figured out a way to do it, and if you have the time you can make any material do anything.

Wolf: Which materials are in your paintings, besides paint and canvas?

Adian: Ester foam and plywood. The plywood dictates the shape. The foam mimics the shape of the plywood. The canvas is stretched on top.

Stabler: There are also metal elements, sometimes.

Adian: The back of the painting. I used to make paintings mounted just on MDF, which I would rejoin with various braces.

Sometimes I think I don't ever do anything new—I just kind of put together things I've always done in different ways. I've always loved the way hardware looks. In new works, I use metals I find on the street and screw them into the painting—screws, plates. It's kind of weird. I never thought I'd be that kind of artist, finding things on the streets of New York City. I just found a trailer hitch off of a city truck—its heavy as hell. It's orange and beat up. I was totally stoked about finding it, and lugged it all the way home. I've had it in the studio for two months. The idea of finding something on the street and screwing it through a painting... it seems so weird.

Stabler: You're that asshole?

Adian: When it works, it works.

Wolf: Who are your influences?

Adian: There are so many—Oldenburg, Palermo. Lynda Benglis, I think she's super overlooked. There are so many of them. I take from so many people. I feel like I like more stuff than I dislike, and I'm okay with that. There's all these people spending their lives making things that they want us to look at. We should look at them.

Samuel Stabler's Untitled (Politics) series will debut in a namesake exhibition opening tonight at Garis&Hahn gallery, New York.