

JUXTAPOZ
Art & Culture

IN CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT NAVA

by Sasha Bogojev
September 18, 2019



After lining up praise for his recent sold-out exhibition with Night Gallery in LA, we managed to intercept Robert Nava as he prepared for a debut solo with Copenhagen's V1 Gallery on September 20th. The Brooklyn-based artist will be introducing a new series of works that continue the same body of work.

Influenced by myths, fantasy, pulsating techno, and pinball machine aesthetics, Nava's new paintings seem to get even more complex and elaborate in wild melange of unseen amalgams and creatures. Purposely unlearning the skills and creative process that earned him an MFA from Yale in 2011, Nava approaches his work with a child's free spirit, working on a large canvas as intuitively as he draws in his sketchbooks. He embraces error and irregularity as key elements of his oeuvre, continuously working to create distance between his adult self and the final result, in a practice filled with constant self-doubt through which he channels his artistic confidence. It's that unfettered charge into process that brings his abstraction into another realm.

We were happy to share a cup of coffee with Robert on a rainy morning in Amsterdam and talk about the current state of his practice, his work, and plans for the future.

Sasha Bogojev: How long have you been developing this visual language? I'm guessing this was not the original goal when you started painting.

Robert Nava: In a way, it's kinda coming back to the way it was before, like making drawings as a kid. I learned how to paint

and draw super hyper-realistic pieces by, like, 12 or 13 years old. Throughout high school, I was still doing assignments like this. Then during undergraduate, these assignments stopped and there was advanced level painting. They say, "You're an artist now, do whatever you want. You don't even have to follow the rules we were teaching this whole time, you can do whatever you want." All of a sudden, I didn't have to use oil paint anymore. I could do conceptual work, and it was like a moment of freedom, I went completely the other way around.

Was it an instant thing?

It took time. Drawing realistically for the sake of hyper-realism didn't hold much meaning for me anymore. And even looking at a Renaissance painting, I would be looking for error, like mistakes were more alive to me. By drawing things "incorrectly", I found more things to do in that realm. So that's why I find it more interesting and why I draw and paint like this. It's been like that since probably 2007 or 2008, but now it's getting really refined, and I know what I want to do more.

Is the direction going toward the abstraction? Is that your interest?

I like them both. I like that line right in the middle, tons of abstract but with things that are super familiar and memorable. I'd say I'm technically more figurative right now. But there are elements where I like to abstract parts of it.

ROBERT NAVA



Definitely, there are figures, recognizable objects, and elements. But it's rendered in a very specific way. Did you ever think of how you would describe the type of work you're making, or has someone else come up with something you like?

Some people, yeah. I've heard different things floating around between, and I don't know if these are good ones - New Myth. Also, there's already been Bad Painting, but some people are calling this a Super Bad Painting.

Haha. Or 'New Bad'?

They mean it in a good way and, if you're running out of isms, it might be something in between those two.

Would naïve be a word that describes it? How do you feel about that?

Perhaps. I'd say naïve could be similar to contemporary folk. But I'm conscious of all this and purposefully been doing this. With that, I think yeah, it is a bit naïve, but I'm in control.

I'm not a painter or an artist, so I'm wondering, after years of training to paint realistically, how difficult was it to just block it out? Unlearning a skill feels like it would be impossible.

Definitely. One thing that opened me up to wanting to make the change, was seeing the Munch and Goya drawings in Chicago. Something about those drawings was similar to capturing a soul past simple lines of rendering. I guess all of them do that, they carry past. But I had no reason to do that anymore. I mean, I tried to beat my camera, then my video camera. But those drawings went into a depth beyond nightmares, dreams, or anything from my imagination. It became fun and exciting to go the other way. Can I wrongfully draw an arm? Maybe an arm with three arms, but then you're having fun and it becomes automatic.

You open up an entire universe of possibilities

I guess, yeah. A strand of hair can become a mountain somewhere. You get into abstracting your own world, too.

Do you ever consider incorporating the realistic stuff hidden somewhere in these types of works?

Usually no, but there are some paintings that have little hints and they're carefully hidden.

And technique-wise, what are you working with? It looks like you use a variety?

Yeah, I love using acrylic, and then I definitely use crayons, colored pencil, and a grease pencil. I like my spray paint; the spray is acrylic too. I'm having a lot of fun with these paint markers that look like a giant pencil, but are actually acrylic paint. I'm having a lot of fun with those.

When you are making work, how fast does it usually go? Do you like working slowly, building it over days or is it like a one go-at-it type of thing?

Yeah, some of them are. Some take, like, a couple of days, but I dab back and take a little, kinda joust a little. I look at the work a lot and I go in and I come out. Some are one session all the way through. I think my fastest painting took me about 27 or 30 seconds, I don't really remember.

Oh wow!

Yeah, black took about 18 seconds, the red took 5 seconds and then the hot pink took only 3 seconds.

Do you have a vision of what you want to make before you start or, does it usually develop as you get in it?

Sometimes a vision will come, but more often, I go in drawing blind. Every morning, I draw in my sketchbook and, from there, something develops. Even if I don't have an idea, I can start scribbling. I can work with nothing and start with a little bit, then something will usually happen. I forgot who said it, but there's this expression that says "work makes work."

How often do you give up on painting when it doesn't seem to work?

If that starts to happen, I usually just paint it out and keep going. I try to save them. I try my hardest to not let anything go.

Yeah, I can imagine with that type of approach you might actually want mistakes.

Yeah, you work with what is truly an error. It's going to sound cliché, but my first creative art teacher talked about how there are no mistakes in art, absolutely none. I guess it's about a confidence point. If you can draw something in pen, you're badass because they don't have an eraser. Like, "Damn. Yeah, you're good but you're still using pencils, so you're not that good. This kid is using a pen and can't erase, so he's doing it better than you can." We get this little competition.

That must have been a great point in school when you were taught to get that confidence. Because, as a young artist, you're consistently doubting yourself.

I still have friends who come to the studio and tell me they think I'm doubting something. They beat me up and I do the same to them. I love it. It's kinda like a good friend, you know. Like, "Damn, Rob, that's super confident on the heads, but on the tail and leg, I can see you doubting. Right there." It's hard to figure out what exactly. But I think I'm starting to notice that confidence when I see it in other paintings. You can just tell someone went in and tried to absolutely kill it. I like to have some of that energy with my work. An 'energy in a bottle' type of thing, if it's possible.

Let's talk about the work you made for V1. What type of works did you prepare? Does it connect to previous works, or did you try something new?

I kind of just kept working out of the LA and into V1. I continued where I left off. So, I'd say each body of work is not so far apart from the other. But there are some new elements that I'm using in this one. I guess my gallery had something that was half airplane, but in this one, I show a piece that has a forklift forming into a tiger with an angel on the top. So, in some sense, I'd say they're getting a little weirder.

They do feel a bit more complex, with more elaborate concepts.

Or a girl in a castle on a chaise lounge with three arms. I know you can't see this thing walking around in the real world, but what would it be to have a flying figure with a castle on its back. I think I'm opening my imagination a little more, but the work will still be good and contain the same spirit as before.

There's fantasy, obviously, but what type of imagery do you look at for inspiration?

Nothing in particular. I mean, music brings out a lot. Techno gets my energy going. Well, anything, kind of. I just like the way a forklift looks as an object. I see a lot of industrial things like that in Brooklyn. The castle and the dragon have always been around, from mythology to movies. I play a lot of Pinball, for the colors and lights. I look at everything really, but I definitely cannot deny the mythology. Like Genesis, Pegasus returns sometimes with the fire and things.

Did you paint anything specifically for Denmark? Like Thor or Vikings.

Oh no, I didn't, I should have because of Norse mythology. It's interesting how certain mythology or religions overlap on another level. Someone was telling me about Norse mythology and a world serpent eating its own tail. And if that's the case, that's nearly close to Hobbes' Leviathan or Mexico's Quetzalcoatl. A snake, a serpent eating its tail. Especially with angels, you know. Different religions have different ones, different things they can do. Like, I didn't know a Seraph apparently has six wings. The middle ones can fly, but the two on the bottom are like shields.

That is a clever design.

I get excited about any piece of text I read and learn from. So, like three of those wings - the middle is going to be the forklift and then the legs are just bombs, and then the head. So the drawings, they open up in the morning. I turn that music on and go for it. I'm thinking about haunted mirrors. I'm trying to paint a mirror that I really like and then have like a face coming out of it. It's going to be hard to do but that will be some things for the future.

Yeah, like The Ring.

Yeah, The Ring but there was a movie about a haunted mirror, Oculus, a ridiculous movie; but it's funny. It's trying to be scary, but it's funny. So that could be a fun series of work. Haunted mirrors, you know? And I just get excited about a lot of it and I go for it.

Speaking of objects, do you have an interest in sculpture?

I think coming up in a couple of years I want to try making sculptures. It will be a question of the materials and funding, but I have some ideas.

What else do you have coming up for the year, or some interesting projects you can share?

I think the way it's going to go is Frieze London, then NADA Miami. I'll be in Miami but I don't think I can make London, because I'm returning to Chicago to visit family.

ROBERT NAVA

Robert Nava's *Mythologies* exhibition opens at Copenhagen's V1 Gallery on September 20, with an opening reception from 5 to 9 pm, and is on view through October 19, 2019.

