



Tom Holmes  
Interviewed by Anna Maydanik

**AM: Why do you place the works on chrome chairs?**

TH: You'll remember for the group show Focus Group, whenever that was –a couple years ago, I included a block of chrome folding chairs pushed against the wall. Much advocacy, but missing a candidate. I've used the folding chair a kagillion times. An ancient form, ya know the Egyptians had folding chairs. It's a quick analogy for the absence of the body. In this case, it gets ya closer to the studio. I work w the canvas propped up just like this in a chair against a wall. As a viewer, it's what I most privilege in a show. I want to smell the studio, the ways in which the object was made. I want to get as close as possible to intuiting how the artist thinks. Certainly the show began with a rather str8-ahead idea –Halloween decorations as Memento mori. But, as in life, the reasons ya get into something ain't the reasons ya stay. As I see the show now, it really isn't one thing. There seems, in the aggregate, a gentle appeal to lean-into a discomfort, a fear, a mourning, embedded in the work.

**AM: Why do you prefer vertical canvases for this series?**

TH: In the studio what is primary are compositional decisions, paint application (alla prima, bravura), but then there's not much to say about all that. All these works, of course, are formatted within the Golden Ratio and pictorial elements align to an invisible grid. I've been such a reluctant painter. I made my first oil pairing just three years ago, no lie. I kept running into the bankruptcy of the conceptual model and finding myself, in museums, enamored by painting's ability to transmit –well, transmit some anagogic thang. Good abstraction can arrive to meet you where you are. I certainly think of the works in this show as abstract paintings, but talking about abstraction is like dancing about architecture.

**AM: How do these paintings gel with their irrefutably timely subject matter?**

TH: Um, well, can an artwork be timeless without, at some point, being timely? My aspirations seem to straddle such a conundrum. In practice I'm really trying to show up, in this moment, observing phenomena as it is and not as I fancy it should be. That said, paintings as objects in the Western tradition, are often flexing some long-reaching ambition to speak to an unknown future audience. I mean, in the studio, it rarely comes to mind. There is a freighting amount of freedom while the thing is wet. The subject of mortality seems a sine qua non of this pesky human condition, no? Metaphor, however, the spoon-full-o-sugar I'm using here, has come under attack in decades, centuries, past. I best not play clairvoyant. The maker is always in a blind spot.

**AM: Why do you include a self-portrait?**

TH: Does it embarrass you? Are you embarrassed for me? I was really hesitant to include it as it feels so squarely out of fashion, but that ended up being an interesting tension. No emotion so unexplored as embarrassment. In a show full of caricatured faces it suddenly plunges into the uncanny valley, like some live-action/animated tragedy. I've only ever made two self-portraits. It takes nothing to see how I've aged, decayed, between the two.

I'm reluctant to share this part of the story, but (shrugs shoulders.) I had a cancer scare recently. Ya quickly realize just how naive ya are about ur own anatomy –where the ribs meet the spine was a blind spot, in my case. We really are so disembodied within this cultural mind-set, a brain in a glass jar.

This show, this barrage of spooks, tis a curious route to map out for a viewer –relax into this single bag-o-carcass we got. The mind-body phenomenon is a motherfucker, y'all. I'm racked



that we, culturally, can personify the most simplistic depiction, a teddy bear, but struggle consistently to find empathy for our fellow-carcasses.

**AM: Are you considering the history of certain talismans, like the jack-o lantern, when they're used in compositions? Why is the pumpkin looking at its own reflection?**

TH: Yeah, why ain't that jack-o-lantern doing its job? Get to work Talisman! What, ya think these spirits gonna avert themselves?

**AM: You include a billowing cloth in several works.**

TH: Hold up, do I include billowing cloth? Naw, it's all sheet plastic ya might use as party decoration, table skirt, but yeah it functions similarly to all the lux cloth in Baroque art. I can think of more than a few examples of Baroque era paintings where the figures interest me far less, and do less compositionally, than the voluminous folds. Some get quite abstract. There is a tendency in the larger contemporary visual field, ads & such, to utilize 3-d rendering, video game aesthetics. I liken it to a psychotic vision where none of the textures can be believed, the image can't be trusted. One of the things paint does with real economy is depict light on surfaces. My aspiration is to depict said surface textures w enough believability ya can expand into the image, into a space of meaning.

**AM: What's behind the pink curtain?**

TH: The recent past. I mean, that's my guess. Less is more, more or less.

**AM: How do you celebrate Halloween?**

TH: LOL I guess I don't really. I can't remember the last time I dressed up, or even had a Trick-or-treater. I do, usually, keep Samhain on my radar. I try to remember to clean my windows. I'm told that the ancients would have had a ritual celebration about every six weeks. That sounds about right to me. If I had a dance party every six weeks my life would be hella improved. Fascinating to speculate as to why some, primarily Fall and Winter, holidays persist while the Spring and Summer rites have somehow fallen away.

**AM: Who are the characters in the painting of three figures: pink, blue and brown?**

TH: Any sugar-addled child will recognize these three as Monster Cereal characters Boo Berry, Franken Berry, & Count Chocula. Just three guys living together in a haunted castle who fear children. That could pretty much describe queer community as well. I just love a metaphor that double backs on itself, reveals the back end. In this case, the long-branded seasonal children's cereal mascots are base on the horror characters of 30's film, and their respective actors, Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff, & Bela Lugosi. What interests me is how the characters are driven by the specific addictions of their actors. Often I'm looking to sugary processed children's food packaging to describe addiction and its psychology (mania, psychosis, depression.) I suspect our civic attitudes toward addiction are deeply embedded in a denial of mortality. Certainly I view drug addiction as a long, cowedly, and ineffectual suicide trip, the result of some profound absence of community connection necessary to human wellbeing. At a functional civic level, the monster must be made sympathetic, loved at best, connected at least; for the length we inhabit the same field of being -hows that for mysticism for ya?



**AM: What is the provenance of the images and objects depicted in these paintings?**

TH: I've done a deep dive into the makeshift memorials that spring up after a tragedy (i.e. site of mass shooting, celebrity death.) There are, in recent decades, very consistent and rather unceremonial objects that make up these temporary monuments. Ya see stuffed plush animals, store-bought flowers in cellophane sleeve, & marker on posterboard.

Of course, I love the unaestheticized accumulative nature of em. Left out in the elements even briefly there is an overlay of decay that is unavoidable and especially distressing. Perhaps it is this decay, this very apparent transience of object(s) that speaks to me. I find their anonymity deeply melancholy. The site of remembrance is so brief. A kind of stopgap civic grief.

I have to believe that ya see so many plush toys in these open air memorials because there is a very real urge to infantilize the victim –to create a sinless child lost, taken too soon. As a civic strategy to make a victim sympathetic I've grown to advocate just such a proposition. We have the capacity to imagine another person as a soft, softer, child. Within any ruinous conflict, this imagination might take us as close as possible to forgiving the enemy.

Now you ask me where the recent work is coming from –it's from these sites of civic grief, civic imagination. We depict death in some rather peculiar ways. Listen, it's a stretch, but Halloween seems a perfect metaphor for a civic description of our limited understating of mortality and its accompanying anxiety.

**AM: Is plastic waste a stand-in for grief? Does grief ever really biodegrade?**

TH: I have this idea that grief is accumulative. When we grieve a recent loss we concurrently grieve all we have lost to date. The nature of attachment might be a bit like this –to lessen the grip on any one attachment is to lessen the tie to them all.

The metaphoric analogy to plastic pollution pretty much writes itself. I should say that the work takes no moral position. It's far more objective than that. I stop short of taking a reactionary Žižek'y position, we should embrace waste, become pollution. If ya look at, for instance, Smithson's Glue Pour (1969) there tis a damned clarion gesture –what is the human good at? Polluting. The human is champ at polluting.

I get it. The impulse to describe pathology with the subject itself seems consistently unavoidable.

But, if ya had to describe the work as moralist or pleasure-seeker, it would summarily be the later.

**AM: Why do you ask us to return to Party City?**

TH: LOL it is an imperative I guess, but not one from my voice. I could have just as easily called the show "Remember, Caesar, thou art mortal." Just seems more fun.

Fans of Miss Paul's Drag Race will recognize the title as an iconic insult from season 4. Good, clean, shade.

**AM: Are you depicting memento mori or immortality?**

TH: No, no, it's all squarely in the camp of this too shall pass. And, by this I mean you, And, by you I mean me. And, by pass I mean all-the-way-dead dead.

**AM: Does the permanence of paintings arrest the free radical nature of grief?**

TH: Images, paintings in this case, function as an instant download. The eye sees, the brain records, then the unconscious sorts it all out for ya. My work doesn't need even a bit of cognitive decoding –take a load off, just look.

It's a coincidence that grief also happens in the unconscious. If we start to imagine that the body is the unconscious and it's all being written on the body, what we can allow for, in



viewing a painting, is a haptic response to the image. The image can tickle an awareness of sensations, the image can grieve through us, for us, with us.

Its so rare an event as to be an anomaly, but I've stood in front of a great work and felt my knees go weak. If ya follow the last note of a grate piece of music into silence there is a profound wisdom on the other side. In a time of a hell-a-lot-o-chatter the artist may have a mandate to create civic spaces of silence. Now that all sounds terribly earnest. Its not obvious that ya can touch the edge of enlightenment by careening into a pic of a Powerpuff Girl in a witch hat, but I'm here from the future to tell ya, ya can get there -get to a contemplative space within the image.

**AM: Have you always sought to convey memento mori using these types of readymade objects?**

TH: Sure. In the broadest strokes these paintings extend the tradition of 17th c. Dutch Nature Morte, Vanitas. A tradition of painting that, at least initially, manufactured a can't-take-it-with-ya narrative with depictions of objects with symbolic, desirous, or macabre elements. Now, much of those over-determined symbolic elements are lost on us. Ain't nobody rollin up on a red lobster and thinking "Oh that so obviously Christ, Y'all." At the risk of being anachronistic, the Duchampian infrathin might be understood as anticipating this metaphoric collapse. Oh yikes, what rabbit hole have I started down here? Well, suffice to say I've long associated objects with metaphoric potential, objects as metaphor.

Metaphor is a tough sell. To say Str8-faced the Powderpuff Girls are the Fates, a half-gallon milk jug is singledom, a Chevy El Camino is infinity, -it takes some cojones. So I just quietly put the object back on the shelf and, fingers crossed, the viewer makes the most of em. I'm tellin ya, wondering around Walmart on a hit of acid can teach ya a LOT about -well, about a lot.