

Ferro Strouse Gallery interviews  
Juliana Merz and Harry Cushing  
in advance of  
**MUSH**  
opening November 14, 2013  
7pm-9pm  
160 Water Street, Brooklyn, NY  
  
ferrostrouse.com

*Where did you two meet and how did you get together?*

HC: We met on a sort of job interview.

Julie was helping a friend get his Italian fabric company launched in New York and I was interested in selling his line. He asked her to meet with me to see if I was a “good guy.” Begrudgingly, I think, she agreed.

We met in front of the Met.

By the time we walked the block to the Nectar Coffee shop on Madison Avenue we were in love.

JM: Harry and I met as a result of a friend asking me to meet with Harry in order to help him assess whether he would be the right person to head the East Coast division of the fabric distribution for his company here in the US. (It's an Italian company in Milan). We made a date to meet on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum on a hot, July afternoon almost nine years ago. We went to the Nectar Cafe a block from the museum to chat, and basically fell in love immediately.

We spent the entire rest of the day talking about anything and everything other than this business proposition. It was around midnight when we finally parted ways. It was incredible and still is. We're lucky - it just keeps getting better.

*Do you steal ideas from each other? Do you talk about your art at bedtime? What do you talk about at bedtime? Do you see the show as the work of two entirely autonomous bodies of work that just so happen to be curated in one exhibition, or are there connections? If so, what would they be?*

HC: Essentially, Julie taught me how to paint and without her encouragement I would not be spending my days in the studio. For the first couple of years, I would try to get something on paper or masonite or cardboard and she would come in to my studio in the evenings

JM: We DO steal ideas from each other all the time. It's really not any different from being inspired by some element of a painting (or anything else for that matter) that you might see in a museum or gallery or book - the only difference is that we know and talk about what

and just say “no,” “I don’t think it works,” “Derivative” or whatever. It was a bit brutal for a while and I often thought I’d never get anywhere but she continued to encourage me.

Occasionally, I would get very upset because I did some things that I thought were pretty good but I quickly realized that she was right and that I liked what I had done because it looked like something that resembled art. At that point I was just so pleased that I could come up with something that even looked like what is generally regarded as art. So in a way, the process was a bit of a deprogramming. I had to get rid of all my preconceptions of what the kind of art I could make would look like and resist the references and crutches and figure it out for myself. We didn’t plan for the process to happen that way. I really admire Julie’s work. Those lush brush strokes, the beautiful gestures, the nuanced color palette, the way the components relate to each other, the developed aesthetic.

I look at her work and it’s just so refined and composed and facile looking. I wanted to be able to paint like her but quickly realized that I just didn’t have the ability – so that also pushed me to figure something out that worked for me.

Now that I’m up to speed a bit more we do steal ideas from each other. Our tastes are very similar and we have many of the same influences from the world of art, fashion, music, film and literature. We look at a lot of stuff together and analyze what’s good and bad and why. So we are sort of intertwined on numerous levels. I think this is why our work looks good together – it’s not so much something that can be identified but something that just is.

we might use that the other one has already employed in their work. It’s a fun and lively exchange, and it’s not that threatening because we would never obtain the same result from any given element.

Sometimes we get the same idea at the same time, probably because we share so many experiences and discuss them to great length. Recently we were looking at the latest Prada show together, and the next day Harry was onto glitter and I was onto Paillettes. We had both thought that they would be great as an element in our paintings. We’ve both been experimenting with using them in our new work, and the applications and feeling are entirely different from one another even though the inspiration was the same. Looking at Harry’s work has freed me up a lot. It’s made me experiment more - which has been leading me to what I think are more interesting paintings. I have more fixed ideas about composition and rhythms in paintings than Harry does which probably keeps me a little hemmed in at times, so when I see a successful painting that Harry’s done, and am aware that he does not follow this sort of “rule book” like I do, helps me to let go in my process quite a bit. There are also those days when I come home, see a really good painting that he’s made, and feel like throwing in the towel. This is actually a positive thing - because it prompts me to improve and push my work more.

We do talk about art at bedtime. Does my work suck? Does Harry’s work suck? Is it beautiful or interesting? Are we delusional to think it’s good? We talk about films we’ve seen, what we’ve read, what to make for tomorrow’s dinner, who we saw that had a great outfit on, who is smart, who is stupid, how lucky we are, how fucked up the world is...

I think that there are strong connections between Harry’s and my work. Most of all, I

would say in the colors and mood. I think that we both make optimistic paintings that are both strong and soft and we are both very interested in making paintings that don't look too belabored. I don't think that either one of us is trying to relay some complex "message", even if Harry's work does contain text. I also think that we're both very interested in beauty in our work, but are both interested in what that means and in utilizing typically "ugly" elements in order to get there in a more visually stimulating way.

*Harry, do you like other "text" paintings, or just your own? Are you making text or paintings, or both? Graffiti? When did the text start and why did it start and is it now stopping with the glitter blots?*

HC: I like the work of Basquiat, Twombly, Schnable and they all use text in their work so I suppose I do like other paintings with text in them. Text for me was borne essentially from desperation. I couldn't get to where I wanted to go and I was just desperate...Julie and I had just returned to New York from Italy where I had seen a lot of graffiti and it was beginning to occur to me that this was a universal language and that man had been scrawling things on walls forever. I was also very intrigued by the tools of the graffitist – the spray paint and the markers. Again, I wasn't getting to where I wanted to be with paint and brushes, although I do use them in my work – and I thought I could get somewhere with these tools. As an art form in itself graffiti isn't particularly interesting to me but the element of time communicated through layers of tags and the wall that supports all those tags is really interesting. Text in paintings is interesting to me because it adds another layer to the painting that is non-visual. In a way I suppose its not particularly subtle but I like the fact that it can prompt the viewer to ask questions. I don't know what is going to happen with the text – it seems to be slipping away...the current glitter paintings both began as text paintings. One was called AWETHENTISSITY and I can't remember how the other began.

*Julie, I like how you divide your painting space into rectangles. What accounts for this? The boxes make containments, but then the brushstrokes are spontaneous, and the paper pieces (I want to call them "vapor trails" or "tails") stick out and weave around. Are you thinking about boundaries? Where are the boundaries? When did you first start hanging paper tails onto your paintings?*

JM: Because my paintings are made up of numerous components, and the content of each component is usually a wild mixture of expressive and impulsive gestures that are meant to feel as natural as possible (in the sense that the might look almost as if they could occur on their own with not too much human intervention), I use the rectangular shape in the components to bring some structure and order to the composition and also complement and add tension to the more

organic shapes that they contain. I also like to interrupt and cut the flow of the painted gestures in certain spots in order to push the eye to something stronger and use those juxtapositions to help guide the observer's eye across the painting in a way that makes for additional movement beyond what the gestures themselves provide. The paper "trails" are utilized for exactly the same reason as the rectangular divisions, to pull the eye to where it is needed in the composition in order to keep the flow and movement going. I liked the idea of this softer material, paper, sort of imitating the shapes that I paint - and I feel that the fact that they project from the surface of the painting makes them much stronger than if they were flat and 2D. This allows for a seemingly delicate component to supply more impact than it might otherwise be able to do. I like these "vapor trails" to look as spontaneous as possible, and in fact, some of the forms that they take come from simply dropping them down onto the finished paintings and looking at where they land and then judging whether this shape and placement adds to the paintings strength and or tension.

*What is your favorite book?*

HC: I am in the process of reading Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, which I am really enjoying.

JM: Well, I loved "God's Little Acre" by Erskine Caldwell. I read it a long time ago but it has always stuck in my mind as a mini masterpiece that is so poignant and relevant even today.

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