

Angel Otero on His New Painting Technique and First Hong Kong Exhibition

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Ahead of two museum retrospectives in America, Puerto Rican artist Angel Otero is presenting new work at his first Hong Kong exhibition at Lehmann Maupin, which runs until July 2.

ARTINFO spoke to the painter about this new series, which involves an innovative medium developed by the artist called “oil skins,” as well as his Hong Kong city highlights. Excerpts:

What can visitors to your latest exhibition expect?

My recent series strongly mirrors printmaking, specifically etchings. Many of the images were created by removing paint to create negative space, as you do in printmaking. The imagery in these new abstract paintings comes from many different artistic references that I was inspired by. These collected image references are then layered and manipulated so that eventually a new abstract image is revealed.

Some of your works use a technique called “oil skins.” Could you explain what it is and why you chose to work using this technique?

The process starts out with the creation of a painting over plexiglass. Once dry, I will construct another painted layer on top, inspired by a different reference. This layering is repeated until I feel that the work is finished, at which point I remove the plexiglass from the wall and pour a thick layer of oil paint on top. After letting the plexiglass dry for a month or so, I begin scraping and removing the paint using blades, exposing hints of the layers of the images beneath the surface. After this, the “oil skin” painting is peeled off, draped, and collaged onto a stretched canvas. Though the painting process begins as conventional, the finished work more closely resembles a collage. While process is key, I find it to be my route to my own language of abstraction, obscuring and distorting the original references until I have transformed them into an entirely new visual work.

What other artists inspire your work?

Many artists have inspired my work throughout my practice, such as Stuart Davis, Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, Sam Gilliam, Cy Twombly, Jack Whitten, Pablo Picasso, and Jackson Pollock, to name a few.

Could you choose an exhibition highlight and tell us why you chose it?

For me, the highlight of my show in Hong Kong was “Wind Ballad,” which was in response to an etching by Jackson Pollock that I found. I didn’t realize that it was Pollock that made the etchings when I first came across that specific piece, which was unexpected. The awareness of an artist making something completely outside what they are known for really resonated with me, particularly as I evolve constantly within my work as well.

Normally, when I begin a painting I imagine what it will look like when it’s finished, but because the process is so organic and difficult to control, the end result is a surprise and often quite different. However, in the case of “Wind Ballad,” it not only turned out to be a successful painting, but I feel that the end result was the closest to how I had hoped the finished piece would be.

This is your first Hong Kong show. What sights, bars, or restaurants have you enjoyed in Hong Kong?

The dinner for the exhibition opening was at Chachawan — it was a wonderful experience and the food was fantastic, and beautifully presented. However, my favorite part was wandering the city and randomly discovering all these little gems of bars and restaurants. I also dined at a restaurant near the hotel I was staying at called Luk Yu Tea House, which serves traditional Hong Kong cuisine. It is more of a classical, historical environment, in complete contrast with the futuristic feel of the city, and a welcome break from the fast pace of Hong Kong.

“Angel Otero” runs through July 2 at Lehmann Maupin.

