

Noah Becker's

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Portrait of Benjamin Franklin, 2007

Van Hanos is a New York -based painter and sculptor. A current MFA student at Columbia University, he earned his BFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art in 2001. I met Van years ago, at the beginning of my love story with this City, and we have been following each other's work ever since. A relatively outsiderish figure in the NY scene, Van was part of many interesting shows, including the recent "What the Midnight Can Show Us" at Museum 52, "Cube Passerby" 2008 at GBE Passerby Gallery and "The Form Itself" at Priska C. Juschka Fine Arts, New York. His art is nowadays showing signs of great transformation, bringing him into the realm of conceptual painting and reflecting his concern with the idea of artistic process and image making as a broad cultural phenomenon.

MA: I have been following your work for a while now, you were one of the first painters that I contacted upon moving here 5 years ago...your stile has changed immensely in the past two years, sort of splitting your production into a "before" and an "after"... can you talk about that?

VH: Well, Painting is something that I wrestle with. It's something I have abandoned two times... and I'd never thought I would.

MA: When was the last time you did that?

VH: A couple of years ago. The first time that I abandoned it I had a lot of ideas that couldn't be expressed through painting and so I ended up making sculpture. I was frustrated with the idea of representation versus... there's something about sculpture, about the presence of an object... it's something more real, you know... with painting you are always looking through the "window". Something was still missing though, and I ended up only staging conversations, I would sit down, use visual aids.. it was a kind of performance. It was frustrating for a lot of people. The thing that triggered it was seeing lectures, Beuys was an influence, but specifically a Richard Tuttle lecture that I saw... that was a beautiful work of art of art in itself. I was concerned about the purpose of art .. for my final review I used a storm window and sat behind it ... talking about painting. I drew out diagrams, then scraped it down and put the dust in a contact lens jar. The object made sense as a reference.

MA: How did you transition between this kind of approach to the first body of work that I saw when I met you, pieces like Black Portrait these were rather "proper" images and paintings...

VH: I think that there are common elements between the two bodies of work. The current works have evolved during long periods of time like the old ones, the only thing that I have

tried to remove is nostalgia, and I think that that affected the work in a lot of different ways.

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VH: It's funny, today is September 11.. I think that's a post-9/11 thing. After that point you could go in two directions: become political and confront the issues or retreat back to childhood nostalgia. As a young person I was influenced by a lot of that work because that's what I was surrounded by, but if you're going to do anything interesting in life, whichever form it takes you have to shed these initial influences ..any influences, at some point, but those were really heavy. I grew up in the bar of my godmother's husband it's called the "Broadway Central Cafe" in South Amboy NJ the logo is modeled after the Cotton Club logo and inside it was all art deco, heavy art deco, brass and checkers.. and he made these surrealist paintings and sculptures, there was something that was super nostalgic and romantic about it, and then my memory of it... Going to church was a huge influence too. With the catholic church, you tie yourself to guilt, the thing that's presented over and over is this kind of collapsing moment of sadness and triumph, and the idea of the hero, the modern, that impossible longing.. all that was a huge influence, initially, all those sculptures, those paintings.

MA: The key words of what you said, in my opinion, are "my memory of it"... you have to go back to what those things meant for you, that foggy meaning is way more interesting than the actual forms... you can really build on that... You mentioned that, as a kid, your dream

MA: The key words of what you said, in my opinion, are "my memory of it"... you have to go back to what those things meant for you, that foggy meaning is way more interesting than the actual forms... you can really build on that... You mentioned that, as a kid, your dream jobs were the garbageman (to ride on the truck and to scavenge and "find treasures" in the trash) and the ice truck driver (to make people happy)... how does that relate to your current work?

VH: As for the scavenging, a tremendous amount of research went in the background of the current body of work... it's slow painting, in quotes... it's the idea that you would spend so much time with the painting and as you live with it there's all of these subliminal imagery that will "come out", over time.

MA: one of the pieces that I was more puzzled by (and attracted to) was Portrait of Benjamin Franklin... at the beginning I was almost sure it was a copy, but at the same time it made me think of Jasper Johns, a tweaked symbol, an index of a symbol, if we can describe that image of Franklin as a symbol. I still don't know why I like it.

VH: It still kind of puzzles me, honestly. There's a reason why I started the painting, which is very non-artistic, and it is that I was reading his biography and I found him incredibly interesting, a unique figure that was really misunderstood and misrepresented in American history. It's an exact replica of a painting that exists in the national portrait gallery in DC

MA: is it "exact"?

VH: well, as much as I could get it to. I used a 3rd generation image, from the cover of the book, and what I thought was that I was making a contemporary portrait of him and the likeness of the original portrait was not so important... another image I used was about 1 inch x 1 inch, I also photocopied it... so of course it is abstracted in a certain way...

MA: I googled the image and there are so many portraits of him, they are almost all the same, the expression and the mood are so consistent... even the \$100 bill portrait follows in that line...

VH: in his time his was the most painted portrait and the most reproduced image... I was interested in the idea of him as a person but also in the idea of copy. It probably comes from the fact that I am a twin, me and my brother look very different but we are two sides of the same coin. He's now using my name as a performing artist [Vanguard] and I often sign my paintings as "Van Hanos, brother of Patrick Hanos"... but also, the thing that I was initially thinking about was a homage to Franklin, something that I would have done for myself, but then I started thinking of Washington, what he symbolized was "Rip your hearts out your enemies with your bare hands", and I was thinking of the contrast if we had chosen Franklin as our icon, if we had Franklin D.C. ... what happened in the past eight years, that "We're just gonna do this!" crap might not have happened... for a long time I tried to paint Washington in opposition, there are many representations of him painted as an angel, as a demigod. and I thought: how ridiculous and pagan...

MA: on the other hand Franklin always looks like a family guy, overweight, balding... Sometimes it is difficult to connect some of your most recent works. They all seem to be concerned with painting as a practice, creating images and propagating them...

VH: this body of work was absolutely engaged with that. I approached it dealing with the ideas of history, erosion, underlying systems... but I was also exploring painting per se. I put all of the ideas that I had at work through the medium of painting, exploring all the different techniques and how you bring meaning through them.

MA: It's like you forced yourself out of having a certain recognizable style, which you definitely had before. Let's talk about Faux Finish, the piece you recently showed in "The Form Itself", at Priska C. Juschka Fine Art. I thought it was stunning, it made me feel

uneasy, the imitation marble was kind of cheesy, and the symmetry...

VH: it's not really measured out, I just started painting from the center of the canvas, without measuring it...

MA: The painting manages to convey an idea of exactitude through the technique itself, the marbling and the shape... it's kind of diagrammatic. What did you have in mind?

VH: This was the first body of work where I thought about a series, before I made painting that were self-contained...

MA: you used to have a great stylistical continuity then and almost no conceptual continuity, the two things seem reversed now.

VH: I felt that that particular piece was needed within the body of work. That group of paintings, which is now scattered, had a structure, a skeleton ... removing one would have been like removing the leg of a table. But I still think they are all very different from piece to piece... Faux Finish is an abstract painting described through a tromp l'oeil effect, the painting technique that goes by the same name. You have these techniques to describe form and volume through flatness but then you can also just keep them flat, I was sort of toying with that idea.

MA: What do you think of the self-referentiality of so much contemporary art?

VH: uhm .. that's tough, right? (laughs) I used to think my work had a lot more in common with music than not with art, but at the same time I understand that it references art making...

MA: Who is your public? Who do you work for?

VH: The audience is most definitely the people that I look at as references. That's who I am making art for. When I was a kid I moved around constantly, because I had a twin brother, that was an instant best friend, so I navigated through people and made friends quickly, and these become my peers and my models. I also think back to my heroes, to standards in history. Ben Franklin... I think my ideal audience would include the historical standards that I have, I have always thought about how you can be great in your own context, how that compares to the history that preceded you. I think back to these heroes, like Ben Franklin...

MA: .. he's not going to come and see your shows!

VH: (Laughs) no he's not. ... I do think of real life, too. My friends, my brother... but at the same time I am always thinking of the absolute or the ideal. Perfection.