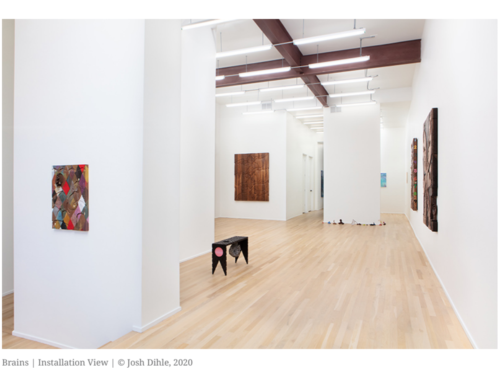
Ally Fouts / January 7, 2021 / Art

Artist Talks: Ally Fouts & Josh Dihle


Brains | Installation View | © Josh Dihle, 2020

Esthetic Lens presents another installment of Artist Talks. Artist Ally Fouts visits *Brains,* an exhibition featuring the work of Josh Dihle at Andrew Rafacz Gallery.

I step into Andrew Rafacz Gallery to check out the current exhibition, Brains. For a moment, I am the only physical human occupying the space. However, I'm not alone as I am surrounded by other beings, enveloped in their thoughts. I feel as though I have stepped into the center of a fervent crowd, all watching me and conspiring. Surrounding me are large wood carvings, raucous paintings, and surreal objects staring back at me as if I have interrupted an urgent discussion. I eagerly meet with the artist, Josh Dihle, to discuss these astounding works.

Ally Fouts: There are many different mediums present in this exhibition. I'm curious about your approach to making these works, if it's similar across the board, or if it's different for all of them?

Josh Dihle: *"It all comes back to drawing. Drawing is the root of everything here, and then it grows in different directions. In this case, with tools that I use in my carvings, they turn into volumetric forms, that's the line work as a form of drawing. With the paintings, a lot of the things that I'm dealing with and developing comes from my sketchbook. There's a commonality between materials in a fairly instinctual way."*

Them | 24" x 18" | oil on linen | © Josh Dihle, 2020

Thinker | 5" x 5.5" x 6" | air-drying clay, marbles, enamel | © Josh Dihle, 2020

AF: Within the carvings, I notice there are notches carved out and perfectly filled with an object fitting snugly into the holes. I am wondering if you create these notches first and then find objects to fill them, or do you have specific objects in mind and carve notches to fit them?

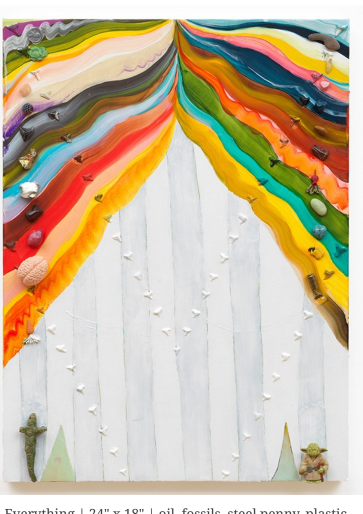
JD: *"I almost see the objects as another form of brushstrokes. I work on these so that they're like drawings, but also paintings, and there's on the fly decision making that's happening there. Sometimes when I'm working in a volumetric material and carving, it calls out for a different kind of stroke or mark. Walnut is not a neutral material; it is something from the world, it was a living thing, it has imagery already in it with the wood grain pattern and the flowing forms within. That's a big departure from paint. Obviously, pigments come from all over the world, there's a story and history behind all different colors too. But this is really tangibly and overtly a piece of the world that I am then working on. So, when I'm going for another type of mark, or I want to do another overlay of information, the thing that I'm going to go for is a piece of the world for that collected element as well. I have buckets and bins of things in my studio that I collect: bullet shell casings from in front of my studio building, fossilized rocks, my dad's old toys, or my coin collection. There are things from all over the place that end up in there. It is a determined decision to place an object and then carve out a notch for it on the surface."*

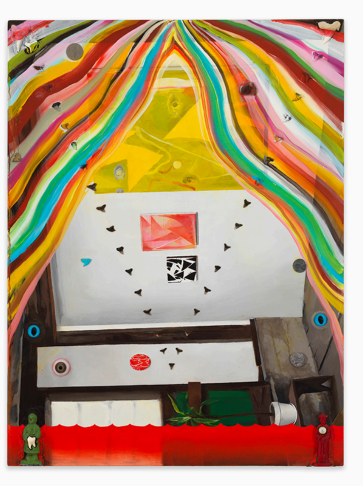
Sample | 66" x 50" x 4" | casein, rocks, fossils, human tooth, coral, colored pencil, walnut nuts, bismuth, plastic toys, metal lid, beach glass, 9 mm shell casings, memory card, plastic fruit, steel penny, mercury head dime, uvarovite on walnut | © Josh Dihle, 2020

Sample (left) | 66" x 50" x 4" | casein, rocks, fossils, human tooth, coral, colored pencil, walnut nuts, bismuth, plastic toys, metal lid, beach glass, 9 mm shell casings, memory card, plastic fruit, steel penny, mercury head dime, uvarovite on walnut | © Josh Dihle, 2020

AF: Do you see collecting as part of your artistic practice, or do you have an entirely separate collecting practice that finds its way into your artwork?

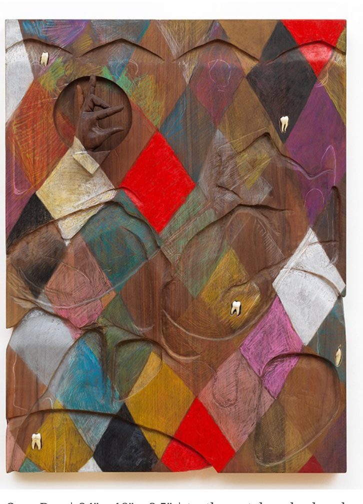
JD: *"I only collect as a form of material gathering for the work. I like collecting because it sensitizes me to things when I'm walking through an antique store and think, that's an interesting thing, that could be something to use. It's not as if I collect these things independently of the artwork. Except for when I was a kid, I did have a coin collection, so there's this collector's impulse there, but it's really in the service of gathering materials for the work."*


Everything | 24" x 18" | oil, fossils, steel penny, plastic vegetables, bead, plastic brain, 9 mm shell casings, rocks, bismuth, plastic toy, human tooth, abalone shell, and glazed ceramic on linen over panel | © Josh Dihle, 2020


We | 24" x 18" | oil, fossils, rocks, plastic toys, human tooth, glass eye, plastic eyes, steel penny, arcade token, aluminum, bismuth, and faux pearl on linen over panel | © Josh Dihle, 2020

AF: I notice a consistent symbol in the work is teeth. Can you tell me a bit about your interest in teeth as objects and why they have a significant place in this body of work?

JD: *"There are a couple different kinds of teeth here. There are fossilized shark's teeth and human teeth. The fossilized shark's teeth are either collected by me personally or somebody has given them to me. Many were collected on the beaches in Maryland, which is where I'm from. They're 30 million years old, which to me is pretty incredible… that these are out in the world and washing up in the sand. It takes probably 10 or 20 minutes to find one. They're these little markers of time and concentration and careful looking. For me, they serve a visual formal function in the painting as another form of mark. They are very much a piece of the world. This was something that belonged to an apex predator 30 million years ago and served the purpose of cutting through flesh. It's an incredible and jarring thing to think about. I studied biology before I became an art person, so I'm into this stuff. As far as the human teeth, I originally was using my wisdom teeth in my work, but only had so many…. They're a little bit like memento mori, or little markers of death and passing and a life lived. For me, a lot of these pieces, especially these ones that hold objects inside of them, become like medieval reliquaries. The object of worship that would hold a saint's toe bone, for instance, and it would be carved in the shape of the saint or something like that."*


Cave Dog | 24" x 18" x 3.5" | teeth, pastel, and colored pencil on walnut | © Josh Dihle, 2020

Nether Eye Looking Bench | 20" x 30" x 10" | wenge, fossils, plastic frog, acrylic, graphite, oil, found objects | © Josh Dihle, 2020

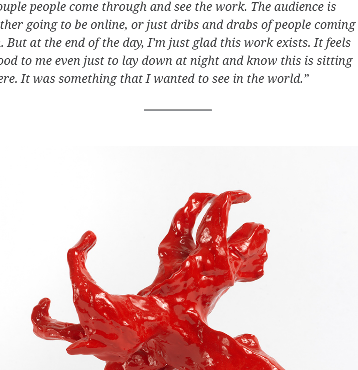
Nether Eye Looking Bench (detail) | 20" x 30" x 10" | wenge, fossils, plastic frog, acrylic, graphite, oil, found objects | © Josh Dihle, 2020

AF: From looking at the artist statement, I understand that each piece functions as its own brain, each piece has its own consciousness. When you put them all together within the context of this exhibition, does it feel like your collective consciousness?

JD: *"No, I try to keep myself out of it, so they become like the consciousness of others. They are something that I make, so the consciousness sort of flows through me; I often wonder about them in the same way that probably a lot of people who look at them do. When an actual face shows up in the work, or something that feels like a presence or consciousness that could be looking back at me, then the piece becomes mysterious to me. To gather all these things together…it's a bit of a crowd. This room is populated, nobody's allowed in unless they have an appointment. But even at night, when the lights are off, I imagine these thinkers are here, contemplating each other.*

Brains | Installation View | © Josh Dihle, 2020

"Something I've been thinking about in this weird time is that people aren't packing the gallery. I'm delighted when even just a couple people come through and see the work. The audience is either going to be online, or just dribs and drabs of people coming in. But at the end of the day, I'm just glad this work exists. It feels good to me even just to lay down at night and know this is sitting here. It was something that I wanted to see in the world."


Red Animals | 6" x 6.5" x 7" | air drying clay, enamel | © Josh Dihle, 2020

AF: There is an apparent sense of energy and comradery present between the works. I can feel that being strongly activated even without a viewer present. How were you able to capture that energy?

JD: *"I try to be really tuned in to the materiality of my things and to make conscious choices about what I am using and why. I also want the work to be very present and I try to be very present with the work while I'm making it. I'm not trying to remove and refine necessarily, it's more about posing questions that sit right on top of each other rather than offering a clean- cut resolution."*

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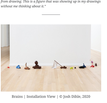
Brains | Installation View | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

MC: Moving over to the small objects on the floor of the gallery, can you tell me about them? Are they found objects?

JD: *Yes, I made them all, they have some found elements in them. I have been making them for a long time, I made some of them in the past as well. It's like a game maybe is a metaphor, it lets of the other things are vehicles that I carried out of nature. This is a solid piece of wood, I found it in a forest, I made a hole embedded for the eyes, it came from drawing. This is a figure that was showing up in my drawings without me thinking about it.*



Brains | Installation View | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

"This show opened on November 2020. There have been a lot of changes since then. I've been working on a lot of pieces for different reasons, whether it's Black Lives Matter or Trump flags. Cars are this weird symbolism that we've developed in the period of capitalism, I'm trying to make a piece that is a kind of sunken ship that there very well may be an anchor is not future of wine bred. The pieces are my mind and playful, and there's this kind of sunken ship mentality, I'm trying to make a vehicle with little theologies attached to them, like wooden flags".

Sedan with Flag | 1.25" X 2" x 5.5" | walnut, cloth, string, rock, bell, bead | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

Truck with Flag | 7" x 4" x 12" | walnut, cloth, string, 9 mm shell casing, bead, shell, rocks | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

Car with Head | 4" x 3" x 6.75" | walnut, shells | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

Lima | 2" x 3.5" x 7" | walnut, rocks, meteorite, shell | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

MC: *Another apparent repeating symbol in these works is the image of a car. Where does this interest in the car come from?*

JD: *"For years I had a car that lived in my studio, she was kind of a studio assistant. I have had a number of cars in my life in arizona Egypt very were deities, and to me they are these mysterious, mythological, spiritual, symbolic, and they are kind of a way, I wanted to listen, life in Egypt, I was thinking maybe this car is my oracle. It's like a Greek tragedy where the mechanic is the foreground and the hub-caps exists are in the background. You can ask a life of a dead. Is that it's also in ours thing that shows up?"*

Vienna | 14" x 18" | oil, rocks, and fossils on canvas | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

MC: *Color plays a colossal role in the power of this show. It's obvious that you pay critical attention to the color choices you make. Tell me of intensity, what medium do you consider your background?*

JD: *"I'm a painter, I teach in the painting department at SAIC. For me color is very much a felt thing and I tend to use color all over the place, I don't necessarily think about it, I just do it. I have a people painting in the show, because now, there are 12 different kinds of people in there, but it's still a people painting. The wood is a kind of a frame, I'm using the wood as a frame for the painted materials here. It's a set of forensic samples, anthers and stones. They're very closely matched in value and in hue, so you have to look very closely to see the difference. I'm using the wood because I want the viewer to really have to peer into the surface and look for illusionistic space. It's important to me that the color serves as a unifying guide to the image."*

Purple Pond | 24" x 18" | oil on linen over panel | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

Blue Core | 24" x 18" | oil on linen over panel | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

Yellow Pond | 24" x 18" | oil on linen over panel | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

MC: *From my understanding, you would be less interested in carving a solid color or painted piece of wood than one with an organic wood image?*

JD: *"When I carve wood that's just one color, it ends up being a kind of a frame, I'm using it as a frame. I want the wood surface which is a little bit less compelling than the really rich colors of the darker woods. When I wear a sweater, I want to look at my face, I don't want to look at the sweater. I want to look at the face. Wood is an interesting substrate for me because it's a frame, I want everything else to be in the foreground. It's a body that's not a body, it was once, but is no longer. It is a place where consciousness can live that is not inside of a body."*

Lasertan II | 12" x 10" x 2" | rocks, caseins, and colored pencil on basswood | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

MC: *To Nature.* I notice what appears to be a stack of profiles of a face. What is the source for these faces?

JD: *"They're all based on markings of my own face that I did with my left hand, which is my non-dominant one I did it over and over and over and I made a number of faces. I'm using the profiles of people who are not me, but come out of my profile. Then I coded them up. It's a sort of a collective consciousness imbued into the wood."*

Tasters | 30" x 30" x 2" | walnut | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

Tasters (left) | 60" x 30" x 3" | walnut | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

Brains | Installation View | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

MT: In the windowsill, I see small sculptures containing objects within them in the same way that the larger carvings do. You follow this process of creating and filling nutches with your collections often and in different ways. It feels nearly compulsive. What drives this desire for you?

JD: *"There's something about embedding and putting something inside of another thing that feels good. It's a little bit like a soap opera, there's a character and then there's another kind of unknowable with within me as embodiment."*

Fertility Hand (front) | 6.5" X 6.5" X 5.5" | walnut, rocks, metal bells, bead | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

Witch Hand (back) | 6.5" X 6.5" x 5.5" | walnut, meteorites, glass marbles, shells, rocks, human teeth, plastic toy | © Josh Dibbs, 2020

To Alyssa Friend: I have a number of little white things and they're stuffed simply by just being white. There is a tag bead from a

"They become containers or holders, like a reliquary that hopefully will last through time. That's my insurance against death."

Brains | Installation View | © Josh Dibble, 2020

AJ: *You create a perfectly fitting home for objects with such a noticeably high level of organisation, it feels like part of your biology. Do you consider yourself an organised person outside of art as well?*

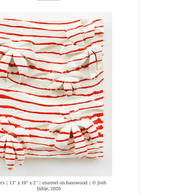
JD: *"I'm fairly organised. My studio is pretty clean, and I keep my calendar fairly ordered. I'm not totally type A, but I do have that slightly controlling impulse, certainly with material. My thinking can be messy, and I like that part of myself and try to embrace it. The matriballing of materials is just part of how I'm wired."*

Seer | 60" x 49.5" x 3" | oxidized walnut | © Josh Dibble, 2020

Seer (right) | 60" x 49.5" x 3" | oxidized walnut | © Josh Dibble, 2020

AJ: *Did you make these works with this specific exhibition in mind, or is this exhibition a collection of different bodies of work?*

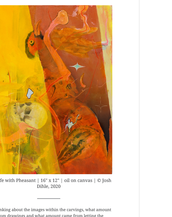
JD: *"I would say most of this work was made with this exhibition in mind. It was time, but also the body for me at a pivot point. A couple of these bigger ones I started in 2018 and finished in 2019. I made two of the large carvings without knowing how they were going to be displayed. At that point, Andrew and I started talking more seriously about doing a show. I wanted to make sure I had a couple more that were the same size and shape."*



Eaters | 13" x 18" x 2" | enamel on basswood | © Josh Dibble, 2020

AJ: *The volume of work all having been made within the last one or two years is quite a feat. What do you credit your prolific nature to? The simple impulse to create or good discipline?*

JD: *"I have a good discipline. This is something I tell my students too. (fucking love what I do. I love this. It's not a forced happy thing necessarily, but it's a daily ritual of coming in and making and scratching different kinds of itches needed to help me see the world in a new way. Spending eight hours in the studio and then noticing new connections in the things around me is a really good feeling."*



Still Life with Pheasant | 16" x 12" | oil on canvas | © Josh Dibble, 2020

AJ: *Thinking about the images within the carvings, what amount came from drawings and what amount came from letting the wood guide you on the fly?*

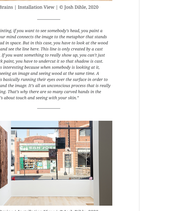
JD: *"In Eaters, I drew a figure half submerged in water and moving through a swamp. I have a lot of dreams like that... I'm moving through a swamp, and unable to see what's under the water. It seems like a pretty obvious metaphor for the subconscious attempting to process and orient in your life and in your relationships. I'm trying to figure out what's underneath a repressed rock, or a pot that boiled in plain, but I didn't know what was going to happen around it. Then, as I gradually developed the background, it occurred to me that this figure is blind and that's why it has these long fingers. It's this post-human future where the body is morphed to experience its environment in a different way. It's blind and surrounded by a lush cosmic landscape. In each step of the way, I will make more drawings and fully myself visualize."*

Feeler | 66" x 51" x 2.5" | walnut | © Josh Dibble, 2020

Feeler (left) | 66" x 51" x 2.5" | walnut | © Josh Dibble, 2020

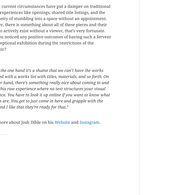
AJ: *If your background is in painting, where did you learn how to carve like this?*

JD: *"A few years ago, I was getting fed up with some large paintings I was making and thought, I am going to make a dining room table. It was my hobby for a couple months. I learned enough to be comfortable making these carved panels. The actual carving itself, I just figured it out. I never took a sculpture class or anything. I sometimes look at old Greek relief carving and see that they were doing the same things."*



Brains | Installation View | © Josh Dibble, 2020

"In a painting, if you want to see somebody's head, you paint a head. Your mind connects the image to the metaphor that stands for a head in space. But in this case, you have to look at the wood surface and see the line here. This line is only crossed by a cast shadow. If you want something to really show up, you can't just use black paint; you have to underlay it so that shadow is cast. This gets interesting because when somebody is looking at it, they're looking at the surface of the wood, but the shape of the viewer is basically running their eyes over the surface in order to understand the image. It's all an unconscious process that is really interesting. That's why there are so many carved heads in the work. It's about touch and seeing with your skin."



Brains | Installation View | © Josh Dibble, 2020

AJ: *Post-current circumstances have put a damper on traditional gallery experiences like openings, shared site listings, and the spontaneity of stumbling into a space without an appointment. However, there is something about all of these pieces and their ability to actively exist without a viewer, that's very fortunate. Have you noticed any positive outcomes of having such a fervent and exceptional exhibition during the restrictions of the pandemic?*

JD: *"On the one hand it's a shame that we can't have the works presented with a works list with titles, materials, and so forth. On the other hand, I appreciate that people are coming to the show and having this rare experience where no text structures your visual experience. You have to look it up online if you want to know what the titles are. You get to just come in here and grapple with the works and I like that they're ready for that."*

Learn more about Josh Dibble on his Website and Instagram.

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