

INTERVIEWS

How Meditation Has Inspired an Artist's Vision

When artist Aaron Fowler discovered he might have been a father, he created a powerful series of works about how it's “okay to not be a perfect person.”

Sarah Rose Sharp



Part of Aaron Fowler's *Donkey Days* at David Totah Gallery, installation view (image courtesy David Totah Gallery)

Artist [Aaron Fowler](#) manages to invoke a tricky tension in his interdisciplinary and immersive works. Fowler balances the oversize nature of emotion and human-scale drama with the intimacy of personal experience in densely layered pieces which he physically constructs in close quarters, before assembling them into large-scale finished presentations. He recently installed the connected exhibitions, [Donkey Days](#) at [David Totah Gallery](#), and [Donkey Nights](#) at [Salon 94](#), both of which deal, in different ways, with a constellation of concerns and points of inspiration in his life — particularly his interest in meditation and his efforts to negotiate a surprise case of potential paternity.

Fowler took some time out for a phone interview on “this donkey chapter of life” with Hyperallergic, during a break from work on the West Coast, where he is creating a 20-foot heart sculpture that will debut at Burning Man this year.

Looking at the emotional attachments and sandy dunes playing across the space at David Totah, one can imagine no greater metaphor for Fowler’s current work than entering a surreal desert landscape with the biggest possible heart.

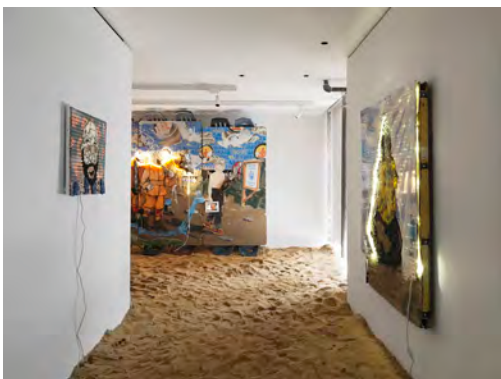
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Aaron Fowler: It [the Burning Man piece] has been taking a lot of time and energy. It’s a human heart sculpture, made out of a bunch of speakers. Twenty feet long, and you can walk inside of it.

Sarah Rose Sharp: *And it has a heartbeat?*

AF: Yeah, we’re going to have stethoscopes, where you can listen to your heartbeat through the speakers.

SRS: *So that gives me a bit of an idea of what you mean by “immersive” — I haven’t seen Donkey Days in person, but it sounds to me like it was sort of installation works. How are people supposed to interact with it?*



Donkey Days, installation view (image courtesy David Totah Gallery)



“Donkey Gods” (2018), installation view (image courtesy David Totah Gallery)

AF: All my work is playing with

installation, but I also play assemblage and collage, you know? *Donkey Days* is a body of work that I made the last couple of years about meditation. I filled the space with sand, which I’ve never done before, and I was making a bunch of my paintings about speaking things into existence. Part of what I wanted to speak into existence was this idea of building a utopia. So the sand symbolized the West Coast, a place I love a lot. I feel like it’s a place to build. I’ve been painting myself as a pioneer; that show is me and a bunch of my friends as pioneers, walking to meditation.

SRS: *And do you have a meditation practice?*

AF: For sure, yeah. I try my best to meditate for at least an hour a day. That came from when I went to this meditation retreat called Vipassana — it's like a 10-day silent retreat. I went to one in Massachusetts. You go for 10 days, and you can't talk the whole time, and you meditate from 10 to 12 hours a day. That was maybe October, two years ago — from then, I've had a practice.

SRS: *Do you feel like meditation has had an impact on your work, or is it more generally about your outlook or how you process reality?*

AF: Well, my art has always been this tool to deal with my reality, you know, and deal with my traumas, and things I'm trying to figure out in life. And meditation is very similar in that way — this type of meditation focuses on the sensations, what you feel in your body, and try to make your heart, your body, and your mind be together. It's trying to take you out of using your mind so much, and focus on how you are connected to your body.



"Donkey of the Lou (Self Portrait)"
(2018), installation view (image courtesy
David Totah Gallery)

SRS: *So it sounds like you're saying the sand is a reference to the West as an idea, but I wonder if having the actual sand in the installation is also way of trying to ground viewers in the physical quality of being in the gallery?*

AF: I was mindful, when I did decide that I wanted to use sand in there, that I wanted people to take their shoes off and feel like they're on a beach or something — feel comfy, feel at home. But I wasn't aware of how sand

being in the space was going to suck people in so much. I didn't know it was going to make everything so silent, or have such an effect on the space. I had no idea.

SRS: *And David Totah was up for it? Or was it a tough sell?*

AF: It's funny, David is such a crisp person, before I talked to him, I didn't know if he was going to be down for this. Everything is so clean in there; it's probably the last place that would do it. But fortunately David is a special person, and we have a special connection, where he's just like, "I trust you. Let's just do it." He was freaking out — but, I don't know, he was cool.

SRS: *So your hope is that visitors to the gallery just kind of sit down and meditate there?*

AF: Exactly, yeah. Just kind of be in a space where you can feel at home and do your thing, and also look at the work. Spend a lot of time, because there's a lot of layers to it. The basement where I work in New York is where I finished both of those pieces [begun in St. Louis] and it's a low-ceiling, tight space. I kind of work in a nest where I can barely see the works, so my experience of the paintings when I'm making them is very intimate. I never see it fully together, because they're so big. So I wanted people to have the intimate feeling I have when I'm making it.



"Donkey Beating" (2018), installation view (image courtesy David Totah Gallery)

SRS: *It looks like you do a fair bit of self-portraiture, too?*

AF: Well, the hanging figure is myself, but it's myself as a donkey. I made that piece the night before the show, or something, and it was this piñata full of sand. I cut a stuffed donkey toy in half, and filled it with sand in the middle, and put cardboard around it to make a tube, wrapped it up, hung it up, and basically took a stick and just beat the crap out of it for as long as I could. We put a camera on my head as I was doing this [which became the video that plays behind the hanging figure], and it wouldn't break. I had to put screws in the tip of [the bat], to make it break. It took an hour and some change to beat this self-piñata up. But I feel like it was a way of me dealing with this chapter of my life — this donkey chapter.



SRS: *Can you talk about the works in Donkey Nights a little bit?*

AF: I wouldn't call them paintings — people have called them assemblage or collage, you know? I would call them vessels — or something — of energy. There's a couple of pieces in there that are medallions. When I make art, I'm always making [it] from a place of where I'm at in life, and what's affecting me in life.

Maybe two years ago, this girl I had dated in St. Louis called me up, and basically her child might have been mine — the girl is nine right now. So I thought I had a daughter for a while, and I had to make my way through that, to figure out the next move, to figure out if this little girl is mine or not. Throughout trying to figure out if she was mine or not, I was making art about what I would do if I was a father. My mom would send me pictures of her, from Facebook and stuff — and she [the daughter] always has this mascot in the background when she wins stuff, like a beauty contest, or spelling bee, or a talent show [at school] — there would always be this donkey mascot in the background. I had this funny idea — I was making this painting of me carrying her out of St. Louis, as something to speak into existence — if I was her father, how would I approach her for the first time, if I was to meet her? I had this idea that it would be cool if I was this donkey, because this donkey was a familiar thing to her whenever something good happened to her. So I was joking around, maybe I should make myself a donkey, you know? And when I had the idea, I just couldn't stop. I kept finding donkeys everywhere. So I went for it. There's a painting [in *Donkey Nights*] that's me showing Logan, the little girl, how to draw.



"You Are Not the Father" (2017–18),
installation view (image courtesy of
Salon 94)

SRS: *And I see from the title that it turned out that you aren't the father?*

AF: I'm not the father, yeah. So that's the pain of me dealing with that. There's Maury Povich on TV in the background.

SRS: *What does the donkey mean as a metaphor to you?*

AF: When I went to meditation — it was around the same time — I realized how I'm not a perfect person, I have a lot of flaws myself, and it's okay to have flaws, and it's okay to not be a perfect person. The donkey, to me, represents accepting who I am, good, bad, and ugly, and completely just own[ing] that. It created a freedom for me in my work.

SRS: *It's kind of unglamorous, so it frees you up?*

AF: Right. It's like, I'm already a donkey, so I can only go up from there.

Donkey Days continues at David Totah Gallery (183 Stanton Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through August 25. Donkey Nights closed at Salon 94 (243 Bowery, Lower East Side, Manhattan) on August 10.