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# PERFORMA MAGAZINE

## Jayson Musson: “Halcyon Days”

Interview by Adrienne Edwards



Performa’s Visionaries Circle recently toured Jayson Musson’s first solo exhibition, “Halcyon Days”, at Salon 94 Bowery, led by the artist and Salon 94 director Fabienne Stephan. While Musson’s works on canvas may be making their debut here, his performances as his alter ego, the savvy, satirical Hennessey Youngman and his *Art Thoughtz* videos, have already brought him significant critical attention (and laughs). Performa’s Adrienne Edwards had a few questions for Jayson as “Halcyon Days” draws to a close.

**Adrienne Edwards: You have become so identified with your persona Hennessy Youngman. Few people realize that you have an MFA in Painting at the University of Pennsylvania. With your recent show, “Halcyon Days”, at Salon 94, in which you present a group of paintings made of fragments of Coogi sweaters, the work seems to be not only a departure in material in your work but also marks a shift in direction that extends beyond the medium. What was the impetus for this turn? How do these painting relate to your previous work?**

Jayson Musson: The impetus for creating the work in “Halcyon Days” [was] derived from a simple joke. The initial premise of relating the Coogi sweaters to abstraction came from a [blog post](#) I did as Hennessy Youngman in the summer of 2010. That simple joke, which was really just a method of helping me characterize the then three-month-old Hennessy [character], gave way to a curiosity which led to the creation of the first sweater painting about a year later. Though “Halcyon” works have fully detached themselves from the originating joke, becoming works that stand on their own formal qualities, they do begin from my sense of humor and it’s in that that these sweater paintings relate to my other bodies of work.

**Is there a performance element to these works that might not be obvious at first glance? Is it perhaps more process-driven or conceptual? It seems to me that your Hennessy Youngman persona, which has been your primary vehicle for performance, is about subversion, irony, and satire, and I see a similar ideology in this work.**

Perhaps there is a bit of performance embodied in these works. I’ve always had a tenuous relationship with object-making in the fine art sense, never feeling truly comfortable with making “the thing that hangs on walls”, what I consider the ever-dreadful and alienating inert painting. I guess I’m predisposed to works that have more charge than paintings, works that reach outside of their own history of means, so to speak. So in utilizing Coogi sweaters to make paintings, I feel as though I am performing being a painter, which creates the distance I need to fully occupy and accept my role as the creator of these fabric works. Coming to painting through the performance of painting grants me the levity I usually need to be engaged with a project. I may have some commitment issues.

**The “Halcyon Days” paintings are aesthetically aligned to the persistent technique of appropriation that has been prevalent in contemporary art and is also a foundational quality of black creativity. I am thinking especially about the spectrum of black music, from reggae to hip-hop, in which appropriation is so central. What is the significance of sampling or appropriation in your work? Does it extend beyond material (for your objects and performances) to a conceptual frame, or, to go further, to an ideology about art making at this moment in time?**

Hmmm... the answer to that question varies based on the type of work I’m making. When I was writing the posters in *Too Black for B.E.T.* in the early aughts (2001-06), my use of appropriated images was simply to shift context of the images used, really like Appropriation 101 and very similar to memes that populate the internet today. In my tempera paintings, like *Barack Obama Versus the Pink Robots*, for example, appropriation, or sampling, or whatever people like to call it, doesn’t really occur at all. In *Art Thoughtz*, the lecture-performances of Hennessy, I rampantly pilfer images. Essentially appropriation, for me, is just a tool for a job. It has definitely been made an easier tool to employ due to the availability of images on the internet, but I don’t hold it in any esteemed position in my art making.

**Do you think it is possible to locate Blackness (aesthetics, affect, identity, etc.) in abstraction? If so, how might the works in “Halcyon Days” do this?**

Blackness is manifest in the works of artists of African descent. I don't believe Blackness to be a unified concept or to be located in a signature aesthetic identity. Yes, there are historical precedents that may dictate how past and present generations of Black artists make work and what they choose to make work about, but I see Blackness as an expansive field, which will be located in any and all investigations of Black artists no matter how far those investigations take them away from assumed notions of Black art. So yes, Blackness can be located in abstraction if a Black artist chooses to take up the task of producing abstract paintings.

**Do you envision doing performances beyond your Hennessy Youngman persona? If so, how do you see performance relating to your future work? What does performance enable you to do that other artistic approaches do not?**

I definitely see myself working with performance past the Hennessy project, but my future performative works will feature less of me as the central actor/performer. I'm not actually comfortable being in front of audiences, I consider myself an incredibly inept performer which doesn't seem to come across in *Art Thoughtz* due to editing. There's a lot of cursing and repetition that the audience never sees. It's a struggle. In terms of performance enabling me to do things that other artistic approaches don't, I'm not sure really... I have a set core of values (or lack thereof) and ideas about life that I bring to art making no matter the method of execution. If anything, performance has allowed me to confuse people more than I already do.



Photos courtesy of Performa.