



I'VE WORKED WITH **BRIAN ADAM DOUGLAS** FOR FIVE YEARS AND IT HAS TAKEN THAT LONG FOR BOTH OF US TO FEEL THE TIME WAS RIGHT AND HIS WORK PRIMED FOR A SOLO SHOW.

IN MARCH *DUE DATE* OPENED AT LONDON'S BLACK RAT PROJECTS, AND I WAS BLOWN AWAY BY HOW FAR BRIAN'S WORK HAS DEVELOPED. EACH PIECE FOUND A GOOD COLLECTOR. IT HAS BEEN A REWARDING PARTNERSHIP THAT'S TAUGHT ME A GREAT DEAL ABOUT NOT ONLY SUPPORTING ARTISTS, BUT ALSO THE CREATIVE PROCESS.

With Elbow Toe, it has been about trying to buy enough space and time for him to make the work I've always known was in him. Rather than thinking about anything commercial, I prefer encouraging him to make exactly what he wants to. Forget the market, collectors, making money—all those pressures—just make art for you. Which isn't easy for an artist to do, trying not to worry about what people want to see, or "will they buy this so I can pay my bills?" When you forget all that, however, and produce exactly that which is creatively within you, that's when the magic happens. As a gallerist I've learned about trust—trusting an artist's vision and assisting them by doing whatever it takes to provide them the space, time, and freedom to make the art that is truest to themselves. I caught up with Brian as he began work on his new collection for a show at Andrew Edlin in New York next year. —*Mike Snelle*

***Mike Snelle:* I first saw your work at the 11 Spring Street show back in 2006, and immediately knew I wanted to work with you. Your work then was very different from the gallery work you make now. It's been interesting to watch the progression. Has it always been a conscious moving forward in refining your process, or has it been a more organic development?**

Brian Adam Douglas: It's actually a bit of both. Up through 11 Spring Street it was very organic; I was really searching for a unique voice. But now that I feel one, it has been about refinement and working within parameters. It also gives me a chance to focus on content and stop worrying about technique.

The earlier collages were single portraits, but the newer works seem to have increasingly layered and complex narratives; often their meaning isn't immediately apparent. How did you make the leap from these intricate collage single portraits to the latest work? Was it a matter of spending a year on refining a process and then reintroducing the narrative elements recognizable from your street images?

In all honesty it was an act of desperation. As engaging as the portraits were, I reached a point where I just couldn't handle jumping technical hurdles anymore. I really felt the

need to reintroduce content. The first piece that I came up with was *Bears*; it just sort of hit me on the walk home from the studio. Once I came up with it, I knew right away I was onto something. The rest of the series flowed pretty quickly on the heels of those images.

The *Bears* piece, and subsequently, all the pieces you made for the *Due Date* show are steeped in allegory. *Modern Painters* remarked that “The craftsmanship is impeccable” and the “narrative is intriguing and anything but obvious.” I imagine for someone stumbling on the work for the first time it’s pretty tricky for them to unpick the intended meaning. How important to you is it that they get your intended meaning from a piece, or are you happy for them to draw their own?

I’m not a fan of spoon-fed narrative. I like elusive books, theater, poetry, and music. Most of the seeds of my work have their genesis in my own life; so unless they live in my household, the viewer isn’t going to truly understand my imagery, at least from my point of view. If anything my goal with the image is to spark discussion, and perhaps reflection. I also tend to stack messages on top of each other to both conflict with the main narrative, but also broaden it for extended interpretation.

I guess I’m asking about your view more generally, whether artwork stands alone for interpretation or whether it’s important to understand the artist’s intention? With your work I feel like you’re very open to alternative meanings, like the viewer brings their experience to the table to figure out their own version. Is this right?

Spot on. I mean, it’s nice if they understand my imagery, but quite frankly I don’t understand most of the works until I’m finished with them. In that case I’m spending months with them! My process for making the image is so fluid and tends to start from an emotional spark, that I just let the images arise of their own accord, and then shape them as I get closer to execution of the work.

How does that work? Like the meaning doesn’t present itself until after the image is complete? Then how does the impression come to you if you aren’t figuring the symbolism out beforehand?

When it comes time to focus on vision, it generally occurs best when I’m alone. I tend to quiet myself down, put on some headphones and go for a nice long walk. Then I just begin to ask my imagination what kind of imagery it wants to make. After that I just have to listen. Sometimes I’ll present the people I want to work with, as was the case with *Bears*. Then it just sort of hits me. I get flashes of imagery in my imagination. I don’t write them down right away, but I will shift my attention once I have a glimpse of an image, to then having my imagination flush it out. The more I step back from the process, the more interesting I find the images to be. As soon as I grab the reigns, my conscious mind has taken over—and that’s pretty much it for that image. At that point, the process proceeds to solving the puzzle, and that occurs as I sketch the notion out. Even at that point, seeing it on paper, I’ll begin to see more related imagery. It becomes an act of trust.

**But you still don't have the meaning yet?
That bit's still subconscious?**

I try to put that off as long as possible so that I have the room for improvisation right up until the end.

I find it hard to imagine the actual process of applying the paper. I can understand something of how a painter works, but with cut paper there seems to be this extra step between hand, eye, and canvas... or wood or paper. It seems more exact somehow. Like you're looking at the piece but cutting the paper and then applying it, as opposed to a brush stroke which is applied directly on the work.

Can you explain that?

I would liken it to drawing but not looking at your paper. I keep my gaze either on the reference of the image itself, and then I imagine the mark. I move my eyes along the reference, and I let my scalpel move in unison. Then I will put the cut stroke up to the image, and I can tweak it if the mark calls for it. Once I'm happy with the mark I glue it down. I heard my process of building the image compares to impressionism. I can understand that, as the image operates via ocular blending. But the impressionists could draw themselves out of a box. My marks operate by describing color and form in the same mark.

So you're looking at the work and not the paper you're cutting? Like imagining making brushstrokes with your eye while your hand cuts them with a scalpel?

Exactly. Sometimes I'm looking down, but most of the marks are freehand.

Your street work seems to be changing in a way that's connected to your gallery work. With the most recent images you seem to have found a way to bring the collage practice you've developed for gallery works back into the streets as paste-ups. Is this a recent development? Do both street and gallery works develop in tandem or do you see them as distinct?

It isn't a particularly new development, but it has been a while since I did them. My original intention with the collages was to find a way that I could produce images for the street that I could enlarge in a much more sensible fashion. As I turned my focus to studio work, the process became much more labor intensive than I ever could have imagined. A few of the images I developed early in the process of the *Due Date* show, before I wrapped my head around where the show was heading. I thought they didn't necessarily fit the show, but were powerful nonetheless. They also felt more suited for interaction with an external staging. I guess in that respect I see the work as distinct. The street pieces gain their power by their relationship to their environment, be it the neighborhood, the scale, or some unintended elements that just happen to be there that I hadn't considered. My studio pieces are ultimately very considered and controlled work.

The chalk drawings and fragments of text seem a really spontaneous way to work on the streets as opposed to blowing up collages or making woodcuts. Is there a particular thing that they offer that the other mediums don't? Do you view them as an extension of your sketches?

My attachment with the drawings and text is much more personal in nature than the pasted pieces. First off, it's all done in one shot, and there is also the tactile quality of getting to work directly on the surface. The text and images are translated directly from my sketchbook. I draw on the trains in the morning to warm up my hand. I end up catching people in moments where they're imposing a sense of privacy for themselves. The people I find most interesting are very introspective.

Your latest collage *The Memory of You is Never Lost Upon Me* seems to mark a breakthrough in terms of scale and complexity. Will these more complex narratives with multiple figures be a continuing direction for a new body of work?

It will certainly be a defining feature with the work going forward, but all the works won't necessarily be as densely packed. I'll continue to let the images speak to me with what they need rather than try to impose some structure on the pieces just because I can.

You recently announced your representation in New York by the Andrew Edlin Gallery, which has a reputation as being one of the major galleries in so-called outsider art. It's an interesting fit and one that seems somehow to work really well; although, clearly you're formally trained. What was it that particularly appealed to you about them?

It's definitely an interesting fit, but I feel that my work has more of an obsessive quality than other artists they represent—at least to my eye. When they approached me, and I realized that they represented the estate of Henry Darger, I was instantly blown away. I have been a fan of Darger's work since graduating college, and the chance to even have my work stored next to his just blows my mind. After a studio visit with Andrew, I knew he understood fully what I was going for with my work and was passionate to foster it. At this point it's all about working on my show with them next year.

Do you know what the theme of the show will be?

At this point I'm not quite sure. I'm reading, watching quite a bit of film, and going to the Performance Library in NYC to watch videos of some artists that inspire me.

I know you draw on novels and films in your work. What have you been reading and watching lately?

I've actually been going back and watching *Merry Melodies*, the old Warner Brother cartoons. I find the physicality and thinking extremely fascinating. I have also been

looking at quite a bit of Buster Keaton, as well as old videos of Vaudeville. I guess one could say I've been feeding myself on older comedies.

I'm also making trips up to the New York Library of the Performing Arts and watching videoed theater performances from directors such as Robert Wilson. The latest one I watched was *The Black Rider*, made all the better as the score was written by Tom Waits. I've been seeing quite a bit of live theater as well; I'm off to see an acclaimed performance of Macbeth this weekend.

In terms of what I'm reading, I just finished a couple books by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, as well as Kurt Vonnegut, and finally now—on your recommendation—about to start Damon Galgut's *In a Strange Room*.

June 11, 2011