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# Collective Chaos: David Ball

by Matt Ho

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It's generally believed that artists and musicians will create some of their best work when they enter an intense, emotional, and at times negative space. A tumultuous suffering has given birth to some of the most memorable songs and paintings in recent memory. Think about what Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* would sound like if Ian Curtis wrote sit-down campfire Jack Johnson-esque songs instead. For the longest time, this was the state that San Francisco-based collage artist **David Ball** lived and worked in. He describes it as living in chaos, and it's this chaos that was once the perpetual point for inspiration in his approach, process and execution to art.

"I think I'm inclined towards darker work and I think more aggressive work," David says. By "aggressive" he's referring to both the visual and the physicality of slashing brush strokes and striking attacks against the canvas; a method of madness if you will.

"The strokes themselves, even though they're not narrative, are evocative of emotion. I think in that sense it's already laying a template of emotion down and that tends to dictate, to some degree, where the piece grows."

*Itch*, *Wail*, and *Con* are a few examples of pieces born out of aggression in process, or as David describes them, "born of anger." There are less hostile work, but grimmer emotions are evoked. *Lost* revolves around the idea of displaced affection, while *Victim* addresses the dysfunctional pattern of incest. Aesthetically, the lighter palettes can project a melancholy, and at times, a brooding undertone that serves as a companion to the abrasive nature of some of his art. At this point, it's easy to label David as the tortured artist.

He's not.

There were two years when he almost quit art, but not all reasons were in relation to personal issues. David started to realize he had put too much focus on commercial work, a common dilemma several individuals face in a creative career.

"I was really derailed," he recalls. "I finally reached a point where I was like, I prefer to do stuff that I want to do. If I'm surviving as an artist, great. If I'm not surviving as an artist, so be it. But at least I'm doing stuff I like. I think as soon as I kind of took away that pressure of career, it was much easier to make art again."

It was a chance for David to make art on his terms, but more importantly, to shift away from pessimistic work. He was sick of the idea that people liked him for "negative shit" and feared he'd only be able to make art by remaining in a state of constant turmoil. That is not to say he was going to suddenly devote himself to making fluffy happy work, but he's not opposed to fun whimsical themes either. Change was necessary.

"I was trying to make work to shock me out of the rhythm I've been in, the expectation people had of the stuff I did, and what I thought to be a very toxic cycle of needing to be in an unhealthy state to make art."

The need for new direction was also his way of tackling boredom. David enjoys illustration, but the process grew dull and the work became predictable. Being able to mentally picture the final outcome of what he's working on in the early stages spoiled the fun of it all—"It was pretty much excitement for about two days and then 40 or 50 hours of drudgery."

Collage became his escape from routine, but David's initial relationship with it was a shaky one.

"A friend started using some collage components and it both irritated and inspired me. I guess I saw it as cheating. I was interested in what I saw there, but was jealous because of my rigid beliefs about drawing at the time. It seemed too immediately self-satisfying for the artist."

In other words, he couldn't really see any level of skill or technique involved, which he admits was hypocritical at the time considering his admiration of Marcel Duchamp. But the idea of experimentation lingered, so David started off a few pieces in his sketchbook. He took it more seriously when it caught the attention of his friends, leading him to devote a year to cutting out thousands of magazines to create a massive archive of material. David's wall is plastered with clippings he'd literally harvest off of to work with. In the earlier days, the walls were filled randomly, but it became visually distracting and light exposure was causing the material to fade. Now he'll only put up what's necessary.

"It made me realize that if I wanted my work to have any longevity I would have to set up a more archival process to protect the collage material."

David describes his first round of collage work as gritty and apocalyptic, which is a perfect complement to the chaotic nature of collages; the way it's assembled from dismembered bits; the raw, disjointed, yet complete look it presents. His recent work though, is incredibly fluid. The marriage between painted sections and magazine clippings brings such an effortless flow to the composition to the point where nothing feels random, and everything seems to have a purpose.

"I think there's something gained from pulling things together and being able to have the skill to balance many outside influences," he says. "I believe that it is my nature to want harmony from discord. Ideologies, faith, society: they are all attempts at bringing harmony from discord. The therapy of the act of creation for me is an attempt at bringing to the general chaos of life into harmony."

The early 2000s was when things got interesting. David started introducing surreal, abstract components, and the beauty of it is how it became that unpredictable process he was looking for. He still sort of has to work within a system due to the limitations of the materials—"I can't lay down oil if I'm going to be gluing down collage material on top of it because you can't glue collage material onto oil," he explains, but the goal is to form ideas more organically. This involves letting his guard down and engaging his instinct, or as David puts it, "following the path of least resistance." Each piece tends to start abstract, which means there's no meaning or sentiment attached to what he's doing until it's done. There have been a handful of pieces that were actually planned beforehand (2/50 is the statistic he gives me), but otherwise, he's usually walking in blind. Roughs are used once in a while, but David feels that it makes his work "aesthetically contrived." This is where surrealism comes in.

The surreal aspect enters when David conducts what he calls a "mini organic Rorschach test." The idea is to stare at what's on canvas and wait for an image to slowly present itself, which is similar in concept to the actual inkblot test, but minus the therapy. It's an instinctive process that requires patience and a tricky one to explain. David calls it tapping into the unconscious or tapping into the dream state ("Not that I'm in a delusional zombie state," he clarifies). So how do you do this? It's important to note that his definition of the dream state is more metaphorical than literal. The dream state is a "focused meditation" on "what" the surface suggests, and the "why" he explains, will reveal itself "by comparing the components of the piece." Still with me? The best way to understand it is the idea of playing with perception – hence the Rorschach test.

"If one starts with a variety of variants on Rorschach ideas, introduce the seven basic principles of perception, while also occasionally deconstructing (deliberate

disruption or change to surface) to confuse, you become involved in an oddly semiconscious conversation with the self.”

The same idea applies to the process of cutting and observing the material as well.

“I believe that the pieces that we cut out, the way we cut them, how we use and perceive them provide another interesting variant of unpredictability to the process, and can often speak to a subtext of deeper feelings beyond the envelope of the final piece’s primary developed intention,” he says. “I feel like re-exploring and reconfiguring collage material makes people have to play with their ideas of perception a little more.”

The third **video teaser** to his Harum Scarum show in San Francisco is a brilliant example of what he’s saying. The question now is: what does a meditative approach do for the work itself? For one, it brings a level of honesty, although David readily admits that that’s not always the case; it’s a battle between contrivance and honesty. But he does feel that art will project a certain truth if the artist is willing to reflect on their inner self and reserve judgment on what they see.

“I think that most people are not that introspective and don’t look that deeply into their formative relationships, how they become who they are, the impact those things have, the things that they repress and the things that they fetishize and want, but don’t declare. I think in that hazy state between consciousness, and I guess kind of like the preconscious dripping out, things manifest themselves. I feel like if you can get them to manifest themselves before you have the opportunity to see what you’re dealing with and censoring it, then you kind of have to look at it and grapple with it.”

Visually, it presents more whimsical/abstract imagery, which in effect, serves as an interesting contrast to what David’s expressing, whether it’s personal expression or social commentary on subjects like war and politics. At times, his work reads more like a narrative as opposed to a critique with all the fantastical landscapes and characters/animals occupying the canvas. It’s not wrong to view it as such either. David’s OK with viewers bringing their own creative interpretations and he’s not the snobbish pseudo-intellectual type who will call you out for an “incorrect” read. The message behind his work is never ubiquitous anyway since it’s often hidden in allegory. The point is to open up imagination, but also for David to feel less exposed if what’s presented is indeed self-referential. It sounds contradictory when I talked about bringing honesty to art earlier, but I never said you’d get the whole truth. It’s about finding a balance between making a statement and open interpretation.

“I feel that hiding something in allegory or metaphor or some kind of illusion is a way to still get to what I need to get to without feeling too vulnerable.”

The biggest challenge David faces is maintaining a fresh process and staying truthful to the idea of opening up to new elements. Despite his organic approach, he’s still a perfectionist and when I ask him how he feels about self doubt and failure now, he laughs and jokingly says, “Oh I’m still as crippled as ever!” It’s a daily battle, but when in doubt, he’ll remind himself that you can’t plan for perfection and that letting go of control is OK.

“You don’t have to be perfection on every level of perception and I think that’s the danger. To be hyper insecure is to prepare something for every possible criticism, but you can’t, you can’t.”

Introduce a little anarchy, upset the established order, and let everything turn to chaos. Sometimes, it’s exactly what you need.

Photography by **Shaun Roberts**





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