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Michael Cho's T.O.

by Matt Ho

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“Have we met before?” asks Canadian illustrator Michael Cho as he approaches me in the far corner of Nova Era Bakery.

No, not really anyway. Three years ago we spoke on the phone when I interviewed him about the closing of Toronto's beloved Pages bookstore on Queen West for *The Liberty Gleaner's* August issue. I remind Michael of our first acquaintance and ask him if he's pissed at what the shop has become.

“What is it now?”

I tell him that the place that gave him one of his first gigs drawing the store's window signage and a spot for a book signing, is currently occupied by a posh condo showroom. He throws his head back and lets out a disappointed: “Ahhhh man.”

For the next 15 minutes we talk about Queen West's indie past and punk rock. I now listen as Michael tells me a story about how he avoided a beating from two Van Halen fans at school by referencing *Diver Down* to fake his admiration for David Lee Roth and co. “I don't like Halen, but I just didn't want to get beat up!” he laughs.

Growing up wasn't always easy for Michael. Being enrolled in the gifted program sure as hell didn't help; finding someone who shared his taste for art, literature and music without being subjected to ridicule and a fist to the face made things harder. The day he moved to Toronto, he never looked back.

“It made all the difference to me as an artist. It stopped the frustration. Man you have no idea,” he recalls. “When you're in Toronto you're talking to friends about this band that you like and this book that you read, you don't have to be ashamed of that. You can sit there and go ‘Yeah *I read* books.’”

Michael adores Hogtown, but he hasn't gone so far as to call his latest book *Back Alleys and Urban Landscapes* a love letter to it. But he does say that these were pure unadulterated joyful drawings which he hopes reveal the beauty and the moment of a place. Either way, the book feels like an homage. While one might expect dated street intersections or a sun rising over a field of grass, here you get something different. And, as the title might imply, it's also not a collection of graffiti and trashcan shots. That imagery is present in a few pieces, but it's hardly the focus. “That's so cliché man. That's like everybody trying to do New York downtown alleys.”

Instead, *Back Alleys* is a celebrated artistic rendering of downtown Toronto's residential areas based on photographs Michael took for reference; spaces with distinct features only a Torontonian (expats included) or perhaps a hardcore Scott Pilgrim fan (the original comics, not the movie) would recognize. It's an interesting series of work considering that the artist once considered working on backgrounds and landscapes as a dull process of drawing straight lines with a ruler. Michael couldn't see the same rhythmic quality he was attracted to in figures, which is what makes the book all the more intriguing. The depicted alleyways, homes and storefronts are all old, so it got me wondering: does decay, debris and the physicality of aging over the years give them a more animated body?

“Back alleys are completely different, you are absolutely right,” he says. “When you actually have to sit down and do a proper drawing, you realize there are no right angles; everything is leaning. The window frames are leaning, the door jams are leaning, any pole that is mounted in the backyard never goes straight, it always tilts, right? Then the other angles tilt back creating a rhythm and there you start seeing the rhythms of the human figure in subtle ways. Like how the leans suggest an attitude, an emotion, a fatigue or something that gives it a personality.”

Personality and *emotion* are keywords here. Both attributes are visible in the subject literally, as Michael explains, and figuratively too. Structures are inanimate objects, but they often adopt a character of their own. Who we are, how we use a space, who or what we associate it with, and the things we fill it with become an extension of a space that eventually carries a life of its own. Here, he’s hoping to project the true nature of the homes he’s captured by showcasing them from the back.

“There’s the façade and then there’s the real right? When you’re walking through the back alleys, you’re literally looking into the windows of people’s homes of their real lives they’re living,” he says. “Those front widows always lead to the dining room, and that dining room, nobody really eats in that dining room man. They only bust out that dining room when guests come over!”

Michael’s philosophy is to articulate personality and emotion in what he does. *Back Alleys* is probably his most personal work to-date. Most of the scenes are documented memories of his youth in Toronto: stumbling home from a night out at the famous Sneaky Dees bar, a warm spring day walk, reading beneath the orange glow of street lamps, to name a few. Nothing is random and nothing you see are fillers. “I would not have started this project, I would not have chosen this as a subject matter if I did not have an emotional connection to those places.”

I could be wrong, but I think Michael’s love for comics helped shape how he approaches his own projects. Comics is a medium he says he loves unabashedly because it adds an element of storytelling and extreme intimacy. The very best ones according to him are always done by one person and one person alone—“He/she writes and draws the whole thing, so therefore every word, every line, every little spec, every little dot, every shape of every letter was hand-lettered by that person and so it expresses their personality in its totality on paper.”

The book may be a bit of a departure for those who know Michael as the comic book guy due to his superhero/comic-inspired drawings that are frequently posted on his **blog**; however, his artistry is evident on every page. The minimal use of colors, for one, is often associated with his work. He has diversified since then, but look through *Back Alleys* and you’ll see that there are never more than four tones being used. Michael likes to build his work around light and shadow because it helps convey subtle emotions—“Like how someone holds a coffee cup could express their personality or how a light coming through a certain window can express a certain type of day,” he explains. It can be challenging when you’re attempting to communicate a feeling through a setting, but when done right, it becomes that much more intimate. Michael believes that it lends credibility to the story being told too. Aesthetically, it does bring a retro look, but that’s not what he’s after anymore. He’s aiming for timeless, or rather, classical as he clarifies for me. It’s a subjective term I’ve heard several definitions of, so I asked him for his.

“A quality that’s still alive because the reasons and the approach to the work was not based on some fleeting, quality of the moment, but was actually rooted in deep understanding of actual reality.”

Simply put, a visual that isn’t dictated by the artistic style of a certain period and still speaks to those who look through *Back Alleys* years down the road because everything they see is an accurate representation of a world that they know and understand. From a technical standpoint, less color means more control. It strips unnecessary layers, which allows him to balance varying elements of an image so that it’s focused as a whole. There’s more to work with and he says he

can get a better range of emotional value compared to a full palette. After giving him a puzzled look, Michael flips open his sketchbook, pulls out a green and black marker, and begins a little art demo. He starts schooling me in the concept of color relationships, shadows, lighting, and texture building as he outlines one color over the other, overlapping them, and then doing other variations of shading on paper. “When you have fewer colors you have to focus more on it, and so you concentrate on the picture more and there’s less haphazard,” he concludes.

If there’s imperfection somewhere, it’s fine. Michael describes his younger self as a very controlled artist striving to be a technician of the perfect line. Gradually, he realized aiming for absolute precision seemed inhuman and deceptive should his achieved perfection stir curiosity and questioning. Art in its rawest form brings out an energy Michael likens to a raw four-track demo versus its studio produced counterpart.

“I would rather keep the fifteen mistakes that I make in there because they’ll lend that work so much more power and zing and energy by the fact that I chose to leave them in there, that I was honest about it.”

He shows me one picture and points out how one curve was drawn really fast and how he didn’t bother cleaning up the messier lines. The pull-out College Street painting (originally done for a Toronto Harbourfront exhibition by the way) is another good example of something born without intervention. There’s a lot of liberation to be enjoyed when second guessing isn’t involved. Confidence grows, the process becomes more organic, free-flowing and enjoyable, especially when there’s an exciting level of unpredictability of what may present itself on canvas. Learning to let go is a sign of maturity as long as you don’t abuse it and it’s Michael’s idea of honest artwork—one that doesn’t pretend to be a photograph or anything else other than its original intention, and that his hand lays down every single brush stroke.

“I just want all my marks to be readable as marks made by human hands, not something that came out of some bizarre technique of manipulating this thing in Photoshop or something like that.”

Michael’s goal is to be a well-rounded artist who captures everything in life, so it’ll be interesting to see what he explores post-*Back Alleys*. He told me one idea during our conversation, but I’m going to keep quiet on the matter. As for the superhero stuff? Don’t expect to see his drawings compiled and published (“Copyrights alone would kill me,” he remarks), but Batman, Spiderman, and the rest of Marvel and DC’s finest will continue making regular appearances on his blog and tweets. Michael’s proud of his nerdy side after all.

“Let your freak flag fly man. Be yourself. You love World of Warcraft? You buy that shirt, you get that wand, you go out in the woods and you LARP that shit up. You know?”

Absolutely.

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