



Worlds Collide! An Interview with Andrew Holmquist

Conducted by Tempestt Hazel
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If you happened to turn an ear towards the conversations taking place about art in our city over the past month, chances are you heard the name **Andrew Holmquist**. Appropriately titled *Worlds Collide!*, his solo exhibition of paintings at Carrie Secrist Gallery give a glimpse into a realm where the abstract and figurative are weaving and intertwining in a type of dance that is easy to get lost in. With the show coming to a close on October 15th, I asked Andrew a few questions that shed some light on the exhibition, why painting is his weapon of choice and what he hopes will be said about his work centuries from now.

Tempestt Hazel: If you weren't an artist, what career path would you have taken?

Andrew Holmquist: I've thought about this in the past, and the thing I keep coming back to is psychiatry. At SAIC we had to take a number of liberal art classes and the class I took on psychodynamic psychology was the one I was most engaged with. I'm particularly interested in Jung and the idea of the collective unconscious, synchronicity, archetypes and the layering of that stuff with the physical world and our experience of it. Plus, I genuinely enjoy listening to other people's dreams, which is a rare quality in people it seems. On the other hand, a psychic once told me I should move to Texas and get a job as a pilot for United, so there's always that...

TH: So, why was art your career of choice?

AH: I guess when I "picked" it I wasn't really factoring in the whole "career" side of things very much. Art has always just been the thing for me, so I didn't dwell on a lot of other options before picking this path. I've continually received attention for it and as I'm improving the audience is getting bigger and I'm able to participate in really exciting conversations. I like the idea of being paid for making really weird, deeply personal, and slightly jarring art objects that only I could think of making. Plus, being your own boss and all of that jazz.

TH: Your latest exhibition is called Worlds Collide! What worlds are colliding?

AH: This title has layers of meaning: in my work, there is a collision or back and forth between abstraction and representation which could be two worlds colliding. Also, in the process of how I make paintings there's an intuitive, flowing stage and also a slow, analytical stage and within any one of my larger paintings there is usually a tension between a spontaneous gesture and a calculated response. The title could also refer to my "world" and the Carrie Secrist Gallery "world" colliding together for this exhibition, which is a leap for both of us. Ultimately though, the title is a reference to the episode of

Seinfeld where “relationship George” and “friend George” have an identity crisis when the two sides begin to overlap.

TH: For the most part, your work moves from painting to drawing to collage. What attracts you to these mediums and in what ways do they allow you to best express your ideas?

AH: I come from drawing and illustration (I’ve been drawing Batman since before I could form a proper sentence). Painting was an extension of that. The more I did it, the more I became interested in the possibilities of paint itself, [I was] led into abstraction. Collage is a more recent thing added that is kind of like throwing a wrench into the gears- unexpected materials present new challenges and often result in unique solutions. All of these things work for me because I can control them enough to hint at something I wish to articulate, but they push back and keep things from closing down- shit can get weird in the best ways when you let it.



Stronghold (2011)

TH: Sometimes different figures appear in your work. Who are these people or characters?

AH: The figures are supposed to be stand-ins for you or me, realistic enough that you can empathize with them or recognize them, but not so specific that it pushes you out of

the experience. I want the figures in there so the abstract stuff hits home directly with the viewer- they can relate to it in a more felt way.

TH: You've said that you're open to other materials working their way into your paintings and collages. What has been the most off-the-wall item that has crept in? What haven't you used that you would like to incorporate somehow?

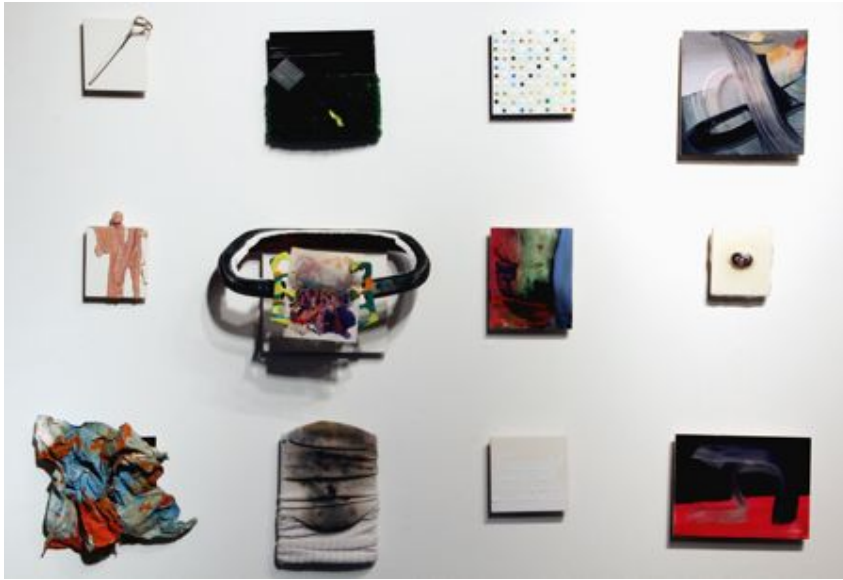
AH: The piece that's coming to mind is a small painting I made a while ago that incorporated a pizza crust, covered in gel medium, that made it look like it was a miniature dachshund taking a poop (which was actually a part of a black olive) as his master stands by on the sidewalk. I was eating leftover frozen pizza and as I was getting close to the end and I was struck by this likeness in the crust to my dog from back home, Gus. With this revelation, I decided I should probably spend the rest of my time in the studio that day making a painting around this magical item, and that painting ended up being a part of my BFA show. As far as where I want this kind of thing to go, I want to up the scale- the dog-taking-a-poop-pizza crust painting was only 8 inches or so, and it had quite an impact. If I can make something like that work on an 8-foot scale I think I would really be in business.

TH: Ideally, what impression would you like for people to walk away from this exhibition with?

AH: I want people to feel an understanding for the work, even if they are not able to perfectly sum up in words what it's all supposed to mean. I want the daily paintings in the second gallery to be fresh and raw, but have a certain feeling of completion through the whole, and I want there to be links between those fragmented ideas in the daily painting series that you can see played out in the body of large paintings in the other room. In the daily paintings I hope you can see the seeds for the larger paintings and seeds for paintings that I have yet to make. In the larger paintings I'm not trying to present a set in stone narrative or meaning, but by bouncing around between the work enough, I hope an understanding can be arrived at that unites the pieces while still remaining open to the viewers personal content that the paintings evoke. I want the show to be moving and engaging, fun and challenging, and I want people to be reminded of one of my paintings by something random that happens to them three days later.

TH: I'm really intrigued by your Daily Series—the planned and expected creation. It takes quite a bit of discipline to create a piece a day as you did. What was your motivation for giving yourself this task?

AH: This isn't the first time I've taken on the challenge of making daily paintings, and in the past it's been a really effective way to build a vocabulary of options for larger paintings as well as build momentum for tackling a body of work. Having this self-imposed deadline of consistent production results in really unexpected paintings that I would never otherwise have made. Because there are so many in the group- by the end of this show there will be 79 daily paintings on display- there isn't the same pressure as a larger painting to make things "work" in each piece. A percentage of these paintings on display at the gallery are bound to be considered failures by some, but in the whole those "failures" add to the human side of this project- you can't always be "on" and that's the way it is, but you don't need to hide that part of it either.



Daily Paintings (2011)

TH: Did you give yourself any restraints or guidelines, or have a particular focus or outcome in mind—a designated time everyday to create, a particular process problem you wanted to work out, size of the work, etc.?

AH: Before I start painting I make all of the panels needed for the length of time I set out to do the project. This establishes the range of scales of the panels I will use for the series and also establishes a visual aid for what I have ahead of me- something to pace myself with. There isn't much else that is pre-plotted outside of that, though. My goal is to approach each day genuinely- the mood I'm in, or the thoughts that have been floating through that day should be present in that day's piece. When I'm having a crappy day and don't want to paint, I think its better if I make a painting that reflects that. For some daily paintings I have the time to flip through source material or think about previous paintings and respond to those in a much more thoughtful manner. I work a full time job, so time for painting is really 'take it when you can get it.' So because it's not an ideal world, I sometimes make these paintings as an afterthought. I'm often surprised that those paintings that are tired gasps become crowd favorites.

TH: Is there a specific time when you are the most creative?

AH: It seems without fail that my most creative times are after a few hours in the studio of tinkering around or making failed attempts- just as I'm packing up to go, something will catch my eye and all of a sudden make perfect sense. Two or three hours later I've created tons of new work or found resolutions to problems I've been stuck on for a while. The trick is to come in the next day and be pleasantly surprised by all of the "perfect" solutions you madly came up with the night before, rather than horrified by all that you are capable of.

There's an example of this with two of the paintings that are in my show at Carrie Secrist Gallery: I spent hours preparing for the large painting which eventually became "Gasp"-

mixing all of the colors and mediums in large quantities, making notes for myself on the canvas, building brushes and then finally making the painting- and after all of that it didn't really come out like I had hoped. I had all of this steam built up, and all of this leftover paint ready to go, so I hastily grabbed a medium sized canvas I had prepared and ready to go and I made the painting "Phantom" in only a minute or two- and I just hit it. That painting is the only one in my show of the larger paintings that I didn't go back in to in some way. It's the moments after making numerous attempts and trying too hard that I feel most liberated and have the best flow.

TH: What were the biggest challenges and rewards of doing this?

AH: The biggest challenge with the daily paintings is getting myself to make something that I can live with after eating too much pasta and having too many screw drivers for dinner.

The biggest reward of the daily paintings is being genuinely surprised and pleased by something that I made. Having no idea what the thing is going to look like and then smiling when you see it on the other end.

TH: During *Worlds Collide!* you have been creating a new Daily Series during the run of the show, inviting people to keep coming back and see new additions on a regular basis. How will your approach now differ from when you first did this?

AH: Well, I'm in the midst of this second series of daily paintings right now, and it does have a different tone to it that I haven't exactly put my finger on quite yet. With the first series I was making the daily paintings at the same time as I was making these really challenging larger paintings, which helped them in some ways (I could coast off the momentum of the large painting for the daily painting that day), but it could also hinder them (having no time or energy to invest in a daily painting when I have to finish four large paintings before the deadline). With this second daily painting series made during the show's run, it's more of an even keel. The daily paintings are now competing with the other things I'm catching up with like sleep, laundry, grocery shopping and fun.

TH: You're not originally from Chicago and you've exhibited work in other parts of the country. Why do you choose to make this city your base?

AH: Chicago has been very good to me and at the moment I don't feel any drive to leave it. I like the art community here and the more I stay at it with painting the more I feel like I'm a part of it. There are exhibition opportunities here for my friends and I as younger artists and it's inspiring and motivating to see a really good show by someone your age. This city draws enough big name shows to its museums and galleries too, and it is not impossible to get to the coasts if there's a show you have to see (de Kooning retrospective, I'm looking at you). I have family and friends in Minnesota, where I'm from, and it's easy for me to get up there or for them to come down here. Chicago has a history to it too that unless you live here and feel it in the casual corners, it really doesn't unfold for you. I'm really interested and excited to be a part of this city.



Installation view at Carrie Secrist Gallery, Chicago

TH: How does Chicago influence your work?

AH: As a graduate of the School of the Art Institute, I had many of the cities finest artists as my teachers and advisors. The art history classes I took made a point of making us aware of the history of Chicago art, and it was many of those same artists I ended up having as teachers. Chicago has an acceptance of painting for one thing, of figurative painting for another, and of plain old bizarreness. All of these things are in line with my current interests. The Art Institute is also a huge influence, to have been able to go to school and study the actual paintings and art in their collection on a regular basis was incredibly informative.

TH: In a time when many artists choose to not be associated with a specific medium and work across many different styles, what keeps your focus on painting, drawing and collage?

AH: Painting is the best of all worlds for me- I can veer into sculptural elements (and I truly think about the layering of paint in sculptural terms) but I'm not limited by gravity and reality. I can incorporate photographic sources or transfers, illustration can float into the mix, etc – so even though painting sounds limiting, within those parameters there's a lot of wiggle room. The daily paintings keep me experimenting too- an open invitation to myself to not get too comfortable with how I tend to make an image.

TH: You've referenced some historically significant artists–Titian, Matisse and Rembrandt–as artists whose work you admire. What type of impact would you, yourself, like to leave on the art historical narrative–if any?

AH: It would be too presumptuous for me to say anything with much conviction. I feel like I'm on a roll with something right now that pays homage to the past but I think it has a unique bend on it. I'm going to keep myself busy and leave my things in place for others to talk about if they want to.

TH: If 100 years from now people were to talk about the art and life of Andrew Holmquist, what do you imagine they would say?

AH: I would hope they would say “Damn, that boy worked hard, didn’t hold back even when he maybe should have, but I gotta say, I like seeing the weirdly beautiful brew he had boiling in his mind.”

I would hope they might say “he seemed like such a nice boy, I had no idea he was into such weird shit.”

I would hope they would also say, “In his paintings you can see the qualities of a man who lived at a certain time, but also see the ineffable qualities of human existence.”