

THE SELF-REFLECTIVE PAINTINGS OF JOHN REUSS

German/Danish mixed medium painter John Reuss lets us in on his stylistic approach to visualizing alienation and loss of identity

Published:
March 11, 2017

Words:
John Reuss & J.Scott Stratton

Artist Links:
johnreuss.com
[Instagram](#)

What stood out to me the first time that I stumbled across the artwork of John Reuss in early 2016, was the apparent struggle for identity within the subjects on the canvas. They didn't come across as some personal cry for help, or some visualisation of the artist's own inner turmoil, but rather as the documentation of someone who knows the feeling of alienation, which occurs when you live life on the border between two things.

In my opinion, people that exist between definitives—governments, families, cultures, artistic practices, etc.—and grow up on the borders between these concrete bodies, tend to have more experience with identity loss than those that plant their feet firmly on one side or the other.

You can see it in young Danes, whose parents came from other countries—trapped within a struggle for which culture to identify with. You see it with youth that grow up in the suburbs—caught between a longing for big-city excitement and the cultural safety of a small town. And you see it with people that live on the borders of neighboring countries—creating their own mash-ups or either culture and language, without firmly identifying with one or the other.

John Reuss is one such man that understands life on the border: Literally. Born German. Raised in Denmark in a small town just one hour north of the German border, his work reflects a sense of multiple personality, alienation and cultural disassociation which has surrounded him for the better part of his life.

I would remiss to make the statement that his work is a reflection of a type of an identity crisis within himself. It would be more accurate to say that his work is a product of a knowledge, understanding and observation of life on the border between two things.

There is also a sense of solitude in his work, which is reflective of his own personality as a “reclusive thinker”. There is a calm serenity within the subjects on his canvases, while at the same time, there is often a blatant turmoil.

Reuss expressed to me that his work is very process based, with paintings evolving as they progress, and I got curious as to how this process unfolded between a concept of alienation and spontaneous workflow.

You've stated that your work explores this concept of alienation and identity loss, can you elaborate a little on this?

To me those concepts are tightly connected – maybe it's not always about the loss of identity as it is the questioning of the same. We live in a very fragmented and turbulent world—too me everything is sort of in disruption and that has a certain effect on the people who live in it. My work is my comment on that—trying to convey all the psychological and existential turbulence this might set in motion! I understand the concept of alienation on several levels though – and the angle I chose differs from work to work (and I regularly deal with more than one of these angles in the same painting)

In general, there are 3 categories I work with: **Bodily**, **Social** and **Internal** alienation.

The Bodily alienation has to do with the concept of bodily integrity – how our bodies are conceived and felt from the within, how the flesh exists emerged in the world. Where do “I” end and the surroundings start – what is the connection between ego and flesh, etc.

Social alienation is pretty much self-explanatory – it is about feeling alien or strange in social situations and human interaction.

Internal alienation is the concept of feeling that there are things going on in your (sub)conscious mind that you feel a certain dissociation with.

That is also why I see a tight connection to identity here – identity being the amalgamation of our physical, social and internal existence. The disruption of these factors will inevitably have an effect on your identity.

Did your upbringing on the border between two cultures influence this concept of identity loss?

To some extent, yes. Being sort of a tourist in either culture makes you neither one or the other. I was sort of an alien either way. That has followed me from way back when and into adulthood – I have tried fitting into all sorts of (sub)cultures but always felt more like an observer or stranger than actually included.

So the feeling that my identity is fluid, separate or different from everyone else has certainly contributed to my interest in the internal life of other people, in how we see identity and how we relate not only everyone else – but ourselves! In some ways, my work is my way of trying to connect.

Your particular style is quite unique, can you tell me how you developed your style?

I started out painting what I could see (naturally) and then did a lot of experimentation into various techniques and –isms.

In my teens, I discovered surrealism. I realized how art is a great language for the unseen, unspoken and what goes on “in between the lines” – from here I slowly got more and more process driven in my approach to the canvas. My style and technique is somewhat eclectic and draws on all my experiences from the experimentation and work I have done in the past.

How does a piece go from ideation to inception for you? Where do you begin, and how do you know when you are finished?
I sketch directly onto the canvas, often very natural drawings. From there it is a whole lot of layered painting and drawing, letting the process inspire and guide me.

I like to alternate between a very structured and a much more intuitive approach during the process. I have no plan as far as the outcome – often I'll change the initial composition and motif drastically several times during the process.

Deciding when a painting is done can be tricky – all I can say is that there has to be a very subjective feeling of “this works”. And sometimes I'll realize I was wrong and revisit an already “finished” painting.

Stylistically, your work is congruous, but do you work within series, or is each painting have it's own conceptual background?

I do not really work in series – I see every painting as a fresh beginning. As my paintings are very process-driven, the individual pieces can come out very different while still within my overall style & concept. Often the next painting in the stream of works can hold a partial reaction to the previous one.

As you have garnered more attention as an artist, can you tell me why you have not relocated to a larger metropolitan area—east to Copenhagen, or south to Berlin—where it would be natural to expand your network?

I really love big cities – for recreation, networking and fun. However, for work, I like to be more uninterrupted and I am a reclusive person by nature. I enjoy living and working in a space without too many distractions.