

Right: *Gunslinger*, 2007. Acrylic and collage on construction debris netting, 82" x 82"
Below: *Strongman*, 2007. Acrylic and collage on construction debris netting, 68" x 91"



Aaron Johnson

Priska Juschka Fine Art

Using an innovative painting process and unique language, Aaron Johnson creates seductive works that deliver a biting critique of the overall current state of society, and its American constituent, in particular. Figurative in form and conceptual in nature, these paintings are replete with contradictions and seemingly infinite bits of information that are amalgamated to illustrate the continuous struggle of man and the beast that lives within.

Johnson's "mad science" process has been the subject of much acclaim since he introduced it into his work approximately two years ago. It directly corresponds to the works' conceptual intent—to "dissect society from the inside-out" and expose its underlying corruption and misguided actions. Johnson begins his painting process by delineating a rough composition upon a sheet of stretched plastic, and then fills its backside with magazine collage and acrylic paint. Once the composition is complete, he transfers it from the plastic to stretched orange synthetic construction mesh by covering it with a thick layer of clear acrylic polymer.

Similar to the manner in which this intricate process challenges the limits and essence of the medium of painting, Johnson investigates the physical and mental structure of our culture through contradicting elements of both form and content. On the whole, the works are dominated by clashing components: the use of collage bits vs. swooping painterly gestures, rigid geometric forms vs. organic ones, or the expression of subjects of attraction vs. repulsion and lust vs. battle, to name a few. Their overall structure also holds an inherent incongruity, where the constrained Modernist grid provides the foundation upon which the ornate and chaotic scenarios unfold. Even the leading characters are forever teetering on a fine line between beauty and the grotesque.

This plethora of disparate languages is partially owing to the medley of cultural references that Johnson incorporates into each work, including Indian painting, vintage textile design, Abstract Expressionism, and Op-Art. These diverse styles clash and coalesce, forming a unique visual sensation that resonates with the viewer and prompts one to search for the meaning both within and beyond the surface of the painting. In *Gunslinger* (2006), the body of a male creature is splayed open, his intestines revealed, privates fully exposed, and limbs exploding outwards. He displays characteristic symbols of both soldier and cowboy—an overt critique of the interchangeability between the two in today's fundamentalist culture. Further criticism is embodied in the multiple eyes dispersed throughout his body, undoubtedly becoming inundated by the surfeit of information he is taking in. Thus, with this creature, Johnson renders the underbelly of human opulence brought about by overindulgence and hyper-consumerism.

In the painting *Strongman* (2007), Johnson portrays a muscle man dressed as a circus freak. Despite the character's attempt to portray invincibility, he appears to be struggling with his very own emblem of power—the barbell. This object, composed of a two-headed fend, is gnawing at the figure's arm on one side and invading his privates on the other. This image introduces the deeper socio-political significance that underlies Johnson's entire oeuvre by referencing the inflated American ego, the need for power and spectacle, and its self-destructive ways of war and excess.

By way of these works, Johnson points to the animalistic nature of the human being, and what would become of our society if it were to shed its decadent outer layer and allow its inner drive to take charge of its actions. One must ask if Johnson's work is truly closer to mirroring our worst nightmare, or rather, if it is a reflection of our very own reality.

Written by Yaelle Amr
 Images courtesy of Priska Juschka Fine Art

