

ARTWRIT

Ian Swanson, painter, sculptor and sound artist

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Artwrit sat down with Ian Swanson, recent New York transplant, to discuss his move to the big apple, space to create and his work spanning several mediums.

Artwrit: We're here today with Ian Swanson: painter, sculptor and sound artist from Detroit. So, Ian, what brings you to New York?

Ian Swanson: Well, I'm here right now getting my masters degree at Pratt for painting. So, concentrating on that, but doing a lot of other things as well. I've sort of been meaning to get here.

So, what do you see as the biggest difference in the art world between Detroit and New York?

Size and money. *[laughs]*

Very obvious stuff.

Yeah, pretty obvious. I mean... I think the scene there is just as strong, if not stronger in some aspects, as the scene here. It's just that it's much smaller, it's pretty insular, but there are a lot of people doing a lot of exciting things.

Kind of more grassroots oriented?

Yeah, it's a tighter-knit community, too, you know? People sort of know each other, if you're in the scene, you sort of know people. Everyone knows each other, it's like a little family.

And you were involved in a gallery space there, is that right?

Yeah. In 2009, me and two friends, my friend Chris Samuels and Lindsay Yao, we started a sort of artist-run space at the Russell Industrial Center, which is a converted automobile body plant that is artist studios, galleries and some other things. The place we started was called ORG. We did that for about a year, showing some friends and showing some other people. Also, some people from New York showed there, a collective called Cornrow Rider, they're still around. I did that, and then I helped start this other spot called North End Studios, which is another studio and gallery that's still going, although in a different spot now. They just recently moved into a new area, but that was in a ten-story building *[laughs]*, that about a dozen of us had.

Wow. So there's a lot of space opportunities in Detroit.

Definitely.

That's a difference, probably, in coming to New York.

Yeah. There's a lot of space. A lot of space at inexpensive prices.

Do you want to continue on in those kinds of endeavors?

Yeah, absolutely! You know, financially here it's a lot more difficult to start a physical space. You could do an apartment space or something like that. It's something I'm definitely still interested in. Lately, too, I've been thinking about the possibility of a digital space and an online gallery for Internet-based work.

Yeah, you recently did a project where you started a website and kind of housed some of your own pieces, right? Sort of a digital gallery exhibition?

It was just sort of an experiment.

How did that go?

It was an interesting sort of thing. It was just an experiment to see how people would engage with something like that, in a virtual space. But it was fun; it's hard to judge but I think some people went to it. *[laughs]*

Yeah, definitely. So obviously you think a digital presence is important in 2012.

Super important. Definitely.

But do you feel like it takes away at all from the experience?

What do you mean by that? The experience...

Of seeing a piece of work.

I think it's just a different experience. So I think if it's addressed from the get-go, you know, that this is the situation that's being set up and you're engaging with the work in a particular way, then it's just as valid. It's just a different experience, so it needs to be self-aware in that regard, that this is the way people are interacting with something. And I think it's an important thing to just put a spotlight on in some way, because that is the way in which a lot of people are interacting or seeing contemporary art nowadays. If you're not in New York, or if you're not in one of the hubs, the way people see work or find out about people is in digital space. Most people look at JPEGs, not galleries.

Absolutely. It's reaching a bigger audience that way.

Right. So there's an interesting thing. I'm curious to see where that will go or what that really means for visual art; especially being a painter, it's particularly interesting for me, being someone who deals with images.

Definitely. In some ways it's less elitist too, anybody can get access to it.

Right! It's very much... Yeah, that's a good way to put it. *[laughs]*

So, what are you currently working on? What's the most recent thing that you've done?

The most recent thing I've done is a performance.

Tell us about that.

Okay. It was a thing I just did at the studio that was a three-hour performance, trying to test some new ideas about endurance performances. The title is strange; it's called *CT-60-X-3-180*, which is just a code for cipher text. Sixty, which is just minutes; sixty minutes times three. It was three hours, so sixty minutes times three, one hundred and eighty minutes. So that's what it stood for. I used a password generator from a website that supposedly generates break-proof passwords. So, I generated like... I mean hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds of passwords, and put those in a file. Every letter got converted into the word in the phonetic alphabet for it. So, "A" is alpha or something, for instance. All the numbers and the characters remained those. So the performance, I was just reading this really, really, really long string of sort of jargon text for three hours and speaking it into a headset microphone into a computer that was converting the speech in text-to-speech software. Capturing the computer's attempt to capture the actual dialogue, so at the end of the performance I was left with these two transcripts of the original text and what the computer interpreted my speaking of the text as, which was interesting. *[laughs]*

Very interesting. Is performance something that you've always done, or is it becoming more prevalent in your work?

It's something I've always sort of messed with. I think I've engaged with it a bit more seriously in the last year or so. I was accustomed to it from a background in playing in bands and noise bands and performing things like that, that in some aspects were sort of performance art on occasion. Yeah, last summer in July at my gallery in Detroit I did pretty much the first public performance thing I did. That was probably the most ambitious performance I have done, too, that was called *Total Id Pigs*, that I was really happy about and it encouraged me to keep up the practice of performance.

Do you ever work collaboratively?

Yeah, occasionally. I haven't so much lately. I think talking is a big part of my practice in general, which I think is collaboration in some way: maintaining a relationship with artists and talking about ideas and those things daily at the studio. I did used to do a collaborative project with the same guy, my friend Chris from Detroit, that I started ORG with. Years ago, we used to do a collective... Well, "collective." I use that term loosely because it was just the two of us, called the Debt Collective, that was pretty much just all about site specificity and responding to a space on its own terms. So we wouldn't buy anything.

Interesting, got it. So would you say that your work is site specific now? Or is it just more studio based?

I think it's both. I definitely am really interested in studio practice, you know... I mean, primarily, right now at least... I'm engaging a bit more specifically with painting, because that's just been something I wanted to engage with. But I think at the end of the day, I think about the work in terms of its relationships with each other and its relationships with the space. So, while there are specific objects in some way, the way in which they're installed in the space, which pieces in particular are installed in a

space, generate a different type of dialogue, so there's a lot of things to play with there. I think any installation of work is site specific in some regard, at least for me.

Can we take a minute and talk about your paintings then?

Yeah!

Could you talk about the materials, or the choices that you make about the materials that you incorporate? And maybe talk about the texture in the paintings and the color choices?

Yeah, sure! Well, right now they're pretty much all acrylic and caulk, which is different actually for me. The last work I was doing was a lot more engaged with materiality. I think this most recent body of work, the most recent series of paintings are still concerned with materiality in some way, but I think also more concerned with the history of painting and the act of mark making and ideas related to images as opposed to support. Whereas before I was doing a lot more work with resins and caulk and lots of pouring things and things like that, and I was peeling paintings off supports and putting them back on. I sort of abandoned that; I mean, it's still there on occasion, but, I don't know, it started to feel... a bit contrived in some way. I guess I just lost interest in that investigation. I don't know if there's that much to investigate *[laughs]*, to be totally honest. I know that it's something that a lot of people do, so I think the new paintings, at least the ones I've been working on this year, are sort of engaged with the history of geometric abstraction in some way, and sort of engaged with the history of minimalism in painting. So there's a lot of spatial concerns happening, just on a formal level in the paintings, and I think that sort of dichotomy between virtual space and physical space is there. I'm interested in the way things photograph, as well as the way they appear in reality or something, for instance. I think that's where the materiality is still present, and I think the formal elements are tools towards making the work engaging on both of those levels, whether seen through a screen or seen in the gallery. I'm trying to make it just as successful either way.

Great. Maybe just real quick let's talk about the sculptures a little bit, because I know you had an open studio recently and you had a viewer who was kind of captivated by one of your pieces in your studio.

The fan one?

Yeah, and he was trying to understand how you put that together and assembled those pieces, and where you procured the material.

The sculptures are a bit different. I mean, I think they're completely related to the paintings in some way, but the paintings are dealing with painting on painting's terms and the sculptures are dealing with sculpture on sculpture's terms. Although in a lot of cases, the sculptures are referencing painting. The one you're talking about is called *Hawaiian Breeze*, which is just the name of the fan. I've been using display racks, which at first I just found a couple randomly on the street and I was like, "These things are great!" So I started collecting them and by happenstance I kept running across more of these abandoned display stands, and I was like, "Okay this is weird." It's funny, and now that I'm looking for them I find them all the time. There's something about presentation. So the piece you're talking about is

a tower fan inside a sort of display stand that probably had sunglasses or something on it, you know. And it's just a microphone hooked up to the fan to an amplifier that sits on top of the display that just has the sound of the fan. It's a sculpture that's, you know, an appropriate material that's meant for selling something, and the thing that's being presented to you is something ephemeral: It's sound. The piece is just a few things put together, and the entire thing is just sound, which is something you don't think of as being tangible, in some way. And the other thing that interests me about these display stands too is that I think... it reminds me of... There's something about economics in there to me. Not only because these things are meant for selling something to somebody, but a lot of times in Detroit when places would go out of business, first they'd sell off everything and then they'd start selling the displays, just sell everything in the entire place. It reminds me a lot of those sorts of things and I used to go to those things all the time. Everything must go, just gut the whole place. *[laughs]*

That's great! So do you have anything coming up that we should know about? I know you just got done with a bunch of exhibitions.

I have a solo show in Detroit in September.

Oh great!

At Re:View Gallery, some other things that may be coming up in New York in the fall.

Okay, and what is your website so we can keep ourselves abreast of your progress?

It's just iancswanson.com

Great.

Apparently, there's another Ian Swanson that took ianswanson.com

***[laughs]* Well, thanks so much for your time.**

All right, thanks so much for asking me to talk to you guys!