

# ARTPULSE

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# POETS, PAINTERS, AND SERVANTS

## An Interview with Craig Drennen

Craig Drennen is a painter of unpopular culture. For five years he made work based on the 1984 movie *Supergirl*, a spinoff largely regarded as a failure and left out of the Superman canon, and from 2008 to the present he has worked with *Timon of Athens*, a rarely produced, unfinished play by Shakespeare. Drennen is realizing *Timon of Athens* character by character through works built from references that are temporally and geographically at hand, suturing the works more tightly to the artist than their source text. A broad range of illusionistic devices and drawn and painted marks are gathered together to create personas in a way that is neither explicitly pictorial nor plainly descriptive. The character Poet is represented by a painting of the word “Hello,” a basketball and a 24-second clock, while a photograph of a vampire and a monochrome painting become the character of the Old Athenian. What we are left with is less a reimagining of the play than a representation and performance.

I had the opportunity to interview Drennen while he was preparing for his shows “Poet & Awful,” at Samsøn Gallery, Boston, Mass. (Oct. 31-Dec. 17, 2014) and “We Should Talk to Each Other, The Cloud and I,” Byrd Gallery, Georgia Regents University, Augusta, Ga. (Oct. 30-Nov. 21, 2014)

BY COLLEEN ASPER

*Colleen Asper - I'd like to begin where you begin, which is in selecting a preexisting cultural production as a point of departure for making work. You've described this as, 'an empty cultural bandwidth within which to house my own subjectivity,' and I totally get that, insofar as the subject of a work for a lot of artists is a somewhat arbitrary place to stage something, and that something is always at least going to have a relationship to our subjectivity. But what does it mean to house your subjectivity in particular characters?*

**Craig Drennen** - There's an openness that comes from starting with something that already exists. And also—and this goes against my nature slightly—it meets the audience halfway, in a sense, because my subject is something they've at least heard of. If they don't know *Timon of Athens*, they've at least heard of Shakespeare. So the work becomes a meeting place where the audience and I can learn things at the same time, since I don't arrive in the project with any superior status necessarily. And I like that as a starting point.

*C.A. - And yet your sources aren't populist—if anything they are iconic for their lack of popularity. Why work with what culture has produced only to reject?*

**C.D.** - No you're right. The sources aren't exactly populist sources, and they were never popular in the way that you're describing. It was always really important to me that sources I use be abandoned. I think of it architecturally. Both *Supergirl* and *Timon of Athens* seem like abandoned buildings that I inhabit for a while. That sounds odd, but it's how I imagine it.

*C.A. - So I know with Supergirl you claimed to have only watched it once.*

**C.D.** - That was a valid claim! I really only watched it once.

*C.A. - Ok, ok—I believe you. With Timon of Athens, was there a similar attempt to limit your engagement with the source?*

**C.D.** - Just the opposite. I read *Timon of Athens* constantly. I've

easily read it 25 times, and on every plane trip of more than two hours I read it again. That helps me prepare for developing new characters. I need to reread what that character actually does.

*C.A. - Can you say something that came out in, say, the 25<sup>th</sup> reading, that didn't appear in earlier readings?*

**C.D.** - Yes, the most recent character I started up this year is Poet, who has some of the first lines in the play. I've read the play so many times and I always slip right past the beginning, but this most recent time I read it, it hit me how the characters say hello to each other in an overly friendly way, an obsequious way. And I live in Atlanta, so I might say a very Southern way. Suddenly it became crystal clear to me that the Poet pieces should say hello to viewers.

*C.A. - Poet is a character you described as having a 'trophy case aesthetic.' How did you arrive at that?*

**C.D.** - I'd say it's twofold. One is that I like how welcoming the vernacular of sports seems to be. So when you enter a new town you might see signs that say 'Hello from' the local high school basketball team. I like how that's an accepted way of welcoming strangers into a community. So again, it goes back to Poet and how to be welcoming, almost in a small-town kind of way. But I live in Atlanta, close to where the Atlanta Hawks play, so there are lots of ephemera saying 'Hello from the Hawks' or 'Hello from Atlanta, home of the Hawks.' I find that gesture analogous to Poet's behavior in the early part of the play.

*C.A. - Was Poet in your recent show, 'Awful & Others' at Florida Mining?*

**C.D.** - No, Poet has only been shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Georgia, where it was in a show curated by Hope Cohn that opened in January. The show's theme was sports, which turned out to be interesting.

*C.A. - How so?*



Craig Drennen, *Awful Inside, Florida Mining*, 2014, performance, 30 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

C.D. - Those moments when art and sports overlap are interesting to me, like David Hammons' basketball rims or Koons' equilibrium tanks. Actually, as much as I like the equilibrium tanks, I really love Koons' early Nike poster pieces, because I think the world of art and the world of sports are both controlled by money, but the world of sports has something different in that it has a clear meritocracy in place. If an athlete or coach can't deliver the goods, they get kicked out. If they can deliver the goods, they get rewarded. That value system is very appealing to folks out in the world who don't feel like they experience a meritocracy anywhere in their life. Sports present a parallel fantasy world where participants are rewarded according to what they can actually do. The art world does not have that same value system. And when I hear anyone moan about the 'crisis of criticism' I think it's because they want the critical establishment to assert a value system for them. Maybe that's what good critics do, although a singular value system would be a huge step backward as well.

C.A. - *Could you make that specific to your work? If there were a value system there, what would it be?*

C.D. - Well played ma'am. I'm acting like I'm getting a drink but actually I'm just stalling for time to think of an answer. A physical habit starts to seem like a value system. If you do something every day it's because in some way you must value it. So I learned how to paint the same way I learned sport skills as a kid: practice in isolation. I didn't have a sweeping panoramic training in painting, so I would just learn how to do whatever the next thing was that I wanted to accomplish. I just

taught myself what I needed to know next. I think I remember hearing an interview where Matthew Barney says something similar, in regard to his early football training. It was about taking inanimate material—whether it's a football or a sculptural material—and bringing life to it.

C.A. - *That makes me think of the way you use trompe l'oeil in your work.*

C.D. - Well, it really comes from my work in the early 1990s in New York City where I used found objects and assemblage. I was used to using real materials, and when I switched to full immersion in painting I maintained that desire for the experience of a real, actual-size thing. It comes from trying to give the impact of the real, at the actual size of the real, in a way that might outlast the real. But it's always within a larger framework where I try to make the paint do lots of different things. I'll try to make the paint be decorative, or painterly, antiquated, illusionistic, and so on. Both *Supergirl* and *Timon of Athens* are based in acting because they are both theatrical, and that's very important to me. Whenever I can get the paint to do a wide variety of things successfully, I feel like that's acting, as if an actor comes out onstage and presents four or five different characters with four or five different accents and personas using only the instrument of their body. I want to get the paint to act convincingly. So the use of *trompe l'oeil* is part of a larger agenda to be a really good actor.

C.A. - *Would you say the same thing about the looser gestures in the work?*

C.D. - Oh absolutely.



Craig Drennen, *Hello From Hawks 1*, 2014, oil, alkyd, pencil, crayon, and spray paint on canvas, 7" x 64." Courtesy of the artist.

C.A. - *So you will pick up a brush and say, 'Now I am a gesture painter?'*

C.D. - The short answer is yes. I treat it like any other sensibility that I can inhabit.

C.A. - *Do you feel that the painting is in quotes then?*

C.D. - No, I don't think so, because that seems distancing and ironic and I want just the opposite. I want a sense of closeness similar to what a great actor can provide, where it feels real every night when they're performing the same script.

C.A. - *It's a funny inversion, this idea that a gesture can provide immediacy without having to be 'authentic.'*

C.D. - Well artists our age were taught to distrust all that. And maybe rightfully so, because the generation just before us might have made poor use of what was at their disposal. I still think that with all of it you can actually be a painter without any part of it being in quotations. That's my hope anyway.

C.A. - *Can you relate that to one of your paintings, at how you arrive at the different elements? For instance, what about the separate panel with 24 in the Poet pieces?*

C.D. - It's a 24-second clock. The discourse of painting gets to set up a new offense! Not sure if that means I wanted to produce my work faster or not. I put 24-second clocks on this first batch of Poet paintings. But the next batch may or may not have them. Maybe the next will be a 23.

C.A. - *What can happen in making the painting in 24 seconds?*

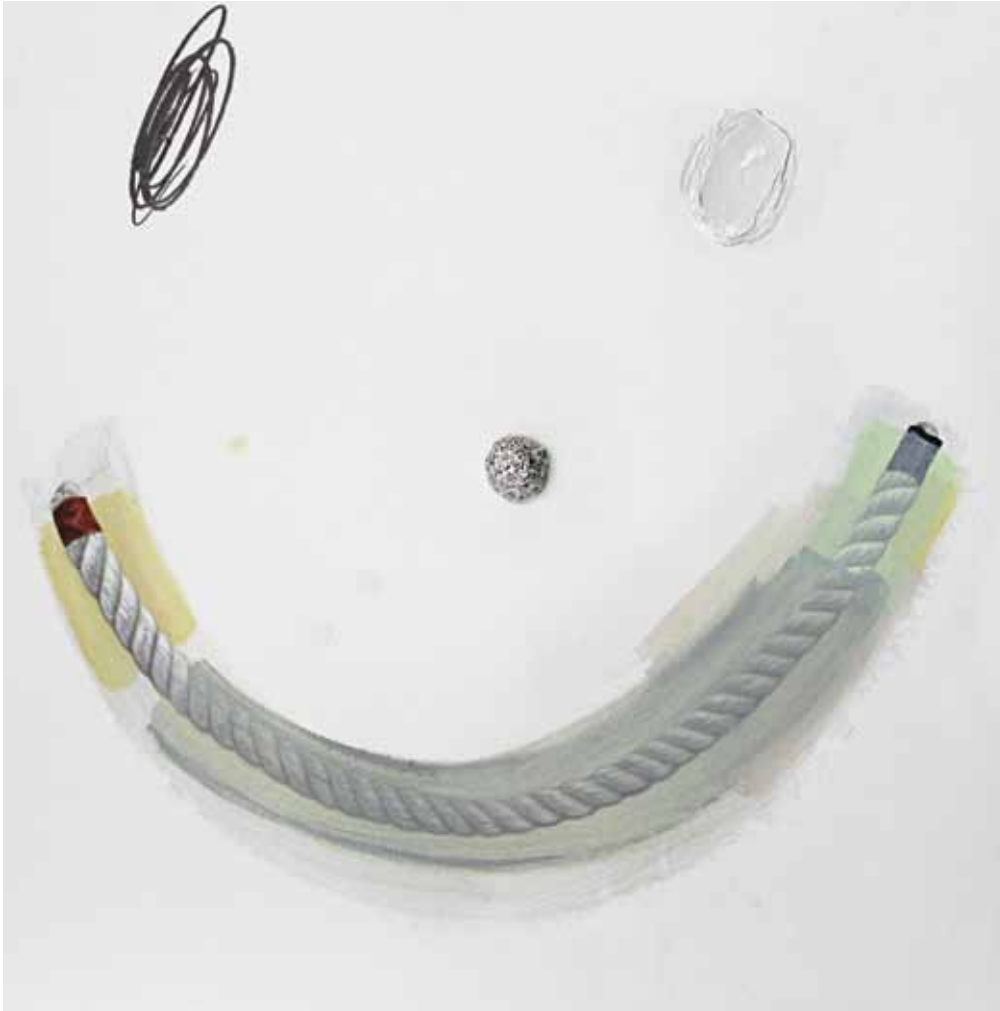
C.D. - It's a mental exercise. It's not literal. At first I was thinking of using actual electronic 24-second clocks, but that seemed like too much of a one-to-one correspondence. I really like it better as an image. It is very specific, but if viewers know none of this and just see it as a number at the top of a painting that's fine too—as a registrar's number or random counting system—that's equally satisfying to me.

C.A. - *Can we talk about the work in the Florida Mining show? What characters did you take to that show?*

C.D. - Well I agreed to that show, which came about quickly, because I was interested in doing another performance dedicated to Apemantus, a 'churlish philosopher' in the play. I've done versions of the performance before, but this time I wanted to really make the performance fit into the overall texture of the exhibition. Florida Mining was totally on board with that. And I wanted to do new versions of the Old Athenian character too, which requires wall painting in conjunction with a vampire image. Old Athenian is always a vampire plus a monochrome. Those were the key pieces I wanted to show. It was in my head that I needed to work through those characters more thoroughly, so I needed a venue to do that. I was very pleased with how the exhibition turned out.

C.A. - *Your paintings are often made up of areas of dense rendering or mark making and then expanses of empty space, but the Old Athenian is particularly extreme in this regard—why is he always a vampire plus a monochrome?*

C.D. - I think the terms of Old Athenian were always much more clear to me. I wanted to combine three things that were old and difficult



Craig Drennen, *Servant 6*, 2012, graphite, acrylic, oil, aluminum foil on paper, 25" x 25." Courtesy of the artist and Saltworks Gallery.

to extinguish—digitally reproduced images, vampires and monochromes. The vampire image is Udo Kier from Warhol's *Blood of Dracula* and it's a digital photograph taken from a TV screen of the DVD of the original film. And I wanted to see that heavily mediated image connected to a monochrome painted directly on the wall. To be honest, I'm really attracted to monochrome painting. This might just be a way for me to rationalize my interest in it.

C.A. - *Someone told me that monochromes are the works most often defaced, which makes sense, both because they are most likely to irritate viewers expecting an image and because the open space is a sort of invitation to graffiti...*

C.D. - Well maybe they think they're driving a stake through the heart of that vampire.

C.A. - *And what about the philosopher Apemantus? This is the only character you have realized as a performance. In it, the performer wears a large papier-mâché head while playing Courtney Love's Awful on guitar. If I understand correctly, the first couple times this was performed you were the performer, but not with the more recent performances.*

C.D. - The two times I've included the performances as part of gallery exhibitions, I did not perform. I liked being free to move around and experience the performance as an observer, which feels more like painting, where I can see it while it's happening. When I'm the performer my awareness is completely different and I can't perceive the formal elements, like whether I'm still lit properly or if the sound is deteriorating. It still feels like me even when it's not me. I've had great performers

collaborate with me the two times I've done indoor performances, and I think my degree of satisfaction stems from how well they did. But I have done all the outdoor performances.

C.A. - *One of the translations in your works is typically between a film or text that is intended for performance and the static world of paintings and objects. Does it feel strange to be doing performance?*

C.D. - Yes. It's a huge jump for me, an unsettling jump. But it seemed necessary for the work. The character Apemantus just wanders in and out of the play making devastating comments to the other characters. Because his character is so public in the play, I thought it should be performative in some way. So the decision to bring performance art into the mix was a response to the character, not because I had any latent desire to be a performance artist. I admire performance artists and have huge respect for anybody who takes that on.

C.A. - *Are there characters in the play you identify with more than others?*

C.D. - I think you have to identify with all of them. That's where the acting comes in. But the characters I've made the greatest number of are Painter and Servants, which might mean that's who I identify with the most. With the very first characters I did, the Mistresses, I started out not identifying with them, but by the time it was done I could identify with them much more. But that was the beginning of the whole project, so I was learning what to do.

C.A. - *Are you saving Timon for the end?*

C.D. - I kind of like the idea of him being second to last. ■