

Interview by Austin Duerst

The first time I met Phillip Martin and Theresa O'Neill, I was invited down to their studio, just two floors below my brother's apartment. Inside I saw canvases of every size, propped against walls, hidden beneath pillows, spilling out of their bathroom sink like dirty dishes. The iconography of their work can be divided mostly into two categories: the portraits of celebrities and heroes of everyday life, and the colorful flowerscapes that I would sometimes see tied like pirate flags to random fences in the Clinton Hill/Fort Greene area. Blending the two subjects in recent years, the unifying characteristic of their work is a concentrated use of color, patterns and precision, a minimalist tendency that favors the clear and bold note over that of an erratic symphony. As the married couple will admit, their debt to Pop art and graphic design is evident, but in a strange way, their paintings have always reminded me of the stained glass windows of Frank Lloyd Wright, or what he might have created had he spent much of his adult life under a California sun, listening to hip hop with a book of poetry in one hand and a glossy magazine in the other.

A.D.

When did the two of you meet and how long have you been creating art together?

MARTIN

We've been working together since we met, so about ten years now. I was doing more painting than Theresa at that time; she had an acting background, which was her focus. I had this apartment in L.A. where I literally wallpapered the whole apartment with drawings. I even did my roommate's room.

O'NEILL

It was pretty special to see that for the first time.

MARTIN

I became the poster child for codependency real quick, because I was one of those guys who didn't really care what anybody thought--but I *really* cared what Theresa thought. And literally, on our second date, we were going around the apartment making changes [to the drawings] together, and it's been that way ever since.

O'NEILL

For my part, I had always made art because I thought it was fun. But my focus was very much on acting. When I met Phill, I really felt like I got a chance to develop this thing that I'd always loved but never had the opportunity to pursue in a meaningful way. Then painting took over.

MARTIN

And the love grew fast.

A.D.

When did you start calling yourselves Brand Us and what went into the development of your ethos?

MARTIN

That could be answered in multiple ways. I think the easiest way to answer that is...depending on who came up with the idea for a painting, we'd either put "P.M." or "T.O" [on the canvas.] Then we realized that...

O'NEILL

It was all *us*.

MARTIN

It was all us, you know? So it was one of those weird moments you have where you're sitting around...

O'NEILL

Mhmm.

MARTIN

...and we were talking about how we could bring it together...

O'NEILL

Mhmm.

MARTIN

...in what we thought was a cool way. And it was just one of those things...

O'NEILL

It was *us! Brand Us!*

MARTIN

It happened so quick, it was like lightning. It was amazing.

O'NEILL

Previous to that, there had been a period where Phill said to me, "If we're going to do this together, you need to be able to know that you can create work on your own." So there was a period of time where I really focused on feeling secure with my voice. Once I got through that period and knew what I was about, it very clearly became *us*. It was a full partnership.

MARTIN

The other initial meaning of it was that we were doing a lot of paintings with these political overtones--which is very rare for us--and we'd change things like

“The United States” to “The United State,” and we used the *US* moniker on those. In truth, that led into a lot of things that were going on in the air.

A.D.

What’s interesting to me when I see artistic relationships like yours is I always wonder at what point you synchronize your styles. Like you said, you both developed your own styles separately, but when you come together it looks like one entity creates each painting. So how would you describe your style, and is there a constant give-and-take of separate sensibilities?

MARTIN

I wonder so much if we have a style. I think for us, it’s more of a philosophy, and that philosophy is love. As corny as that may sound, as Shakespearean or whatever, that’s the basis of what we do. We both love each other, we both love painting, and we really have a love of other things that we try and contribute to each painting. We obviously both love graphic work, so the Pop Art style comes out of that. Also, when we were born has something to do with it. I wasn’t fixated by Leonardo [da Vinci], you know? I was fixated on comic books and all these other things.

O’NEILL

I think because our work is in large part about pulling from different sources to create a whole--pulling from different perspectives, different backgrounds and different interests--it’s really a more natural process for us to think about than trying to synthesize or find a way to fuse our “separate styles.” One of the things we want to be able to do with our work is to make it accessible to multiple interpretations. The fact that there are multiple interpretations that go *into* it really works to that end.

MARTIN

In that way, we feel like we’re giving them more of the story. Giving them more to clue into.

A.D.

So what are the sources you’re pulling from? In the time that I’ve known you, portraits and sprawling flower-scapes have been two subjects I’ve seen you explore frequently. What do those two forms mean to you?

MARTIN

We believe in people. We think people are the story of the world. You build up relationships, and that’s how I believe you move through the world. Ultimately, with the portraits, we’re starting to connect some of those stories, and that’s really important to me. I’m not so much the kind of guy who gets all psychological about them. I just like the process.

O’NEILL

I get psychological about them.

MARTIN

You cannot underestimate the level of connection that comes with [painting a portrait], and how you clue into someone's concerns beside your own. Because you really are trying to represent them as their own person. For me, it's not necessarily how I see them, it's who they are that you capture in a particular moment.

O'NEILL

What's interesting to me is the flower paintings are portraits themselves. They're inspired by a person or sometimes a work of art. But you're really channeling someone's energy and trying to capture that through the flowers. My attraction to portraits is finding that thing that makes someone totally different than someone else. Trying to capture the energy in a single instant with paint and canvas and tell the story of that moment in time.

A.D.

How well do you get to know the person you're painting? Do you develop some sort of relationship with the subject before the painting begins?

MARTIN

Yes and no. The portraits work in a few ways. For instance, we had one young lady who was a dancer, so we watched a lot of *Flashdance*. [*To Theresa*] Was it *Flashdance*?

O'NEILL

Yes, Phill.

MARTIN

A bunch of *Flashdance*, yeah. And we channeled the energy of the shoot through that. There's been other situations where other people have come into our studio, and we try to feel them out. Then you make your decisions based on what's going on. So it's been a really organic process. There's a lot more research that goes into structuring a painting than people might think, but we definitely want the subject to dictate where the painting goes.

O'NEILL

We take pictures and use those as a template before the drawing and painting begin, so the captured energy we're talking about is actually present in a physical object. It's not so much trying to imagine the psychology of the person but using the photo as a template to further represent the person and tell their story.

A.D.

What materials do you use?

MARTIN

Age old-fashioned canvas! We use a lot of house paint. It's definitely mixed media; a lot of paint pens, markers. We also really like gloss. I love gloss. If there's gloss, I'm in.

A.D.

I don't know if Phill was supposed to tell me, but he once said that the secret to the portraits is that Theresa writes out the subject's name in their eyes. It's done so small that most don't viewers don't notice it. Could you talk about that?

O'NEILL

Since one of my concerns is trying to find that thing that makes someone special, I figure there's no better place to communicate that than through the eyes. A great deal of care goes into them. The one thing I can say is that no two people's eyes are rendered in the same way--each one is a truly unique expression.

MARTIN

At this point, Theresa's got a technical facility that's off the charts, and that's evident in the eyes more than anything else. Except the coat design I saw her work out on the portrait of our friend Erin Gross.

A.D.

I like that painting a lot.

MARTIN

Oh, man. You should have seen that happen! I was sitting there in awe. At first I was like, "That's *messy*." And then I was like, "Oh *shit*, that's *phat*!"

O'NEILL

I did enjoy watching Phill's expression change.

A.D.

One of the things that always impressed me about your paintings is how clean your lines are. Even up close, it really does seem more like a graphic image than a painting that's done by hand.

O'NEILL

Phill attributes that to my Virgotic tendencies.

MARTIN

She does all the heavy lifting. Honestly, the lines are all her. My process now is a lot of adjusting or working within her lines. And I always try to preserve as much of it as I can.

O'NEILL

I like lines.

MARTIN
Theresa is all about the lines.

A.D.
I get jealous when I see precision like that.

MARTIN
I do too, Austin! [*Laughs*]

O'NEILL
One of the benefits of having the steady hand is I can give myself wicked haircuts now.

MARTIN
You know what I realized, Austin? We never answered how we met, and I think that's a fun story.

O'NEILL
That is a fun story.

A.D.
Let's hear it.

MARTIN
Literally, I was sitting in the sculpture garden of UCLA, and the sculpture garden is in between the theater school and art school. So I'm sitting there with one of Theresa's friends and then Theresa walks out of the theater building. I looked over at her and immediately told this mutual friend of ours, "That's the lady I'm going to marry." And this friend was like, "What are you talking about? Shut up! That's my friend Theresa!" I was like, "That's the lady I'm going to marry. You can hear me now. Mark my words."

O'NEILL
And then three years later he finally said "Hi" to me. [*Laughs*] So it took a while in the development...and...hold on a second, Austin, we're getting knocks at the door. [*Sound of Phill's footsteps and door opening in the background.*] Sorry about that, we got a delivery. So Phill joined a non-profit arts organization that I was a part of, and he really joined just to be around me.

MARTIN
[*From the background*] Yeah! [*Laughs*]

O'NEILL
The whole time I was there, he never said a word to me. Or at least he never said a word when I was around. So I had this perception of him being this really serious, poet guy.

A.D.

That's when you know Phill is into you. When you can somehow get him to not be his chatty self.

O'NEILL

That's it. So we were outside of a poetry reading, and Phill playfully tackled a friend of mine. And I thought: "Oh, maybe he's not so serious." Then I was passing out fliers after the show--and Phill had never passed out fliers in his life for anything--but he goes up to his friend asking for a stack, and his friend said "No" thinking he was going to throw them away. But Phill grabbed them, and the next thing I knew he was next to me passing out fliers at The Poetry Lounge. The rest is history.

A.D.

What were you both doing in California at that time?

O'NEILL

I was acting.

MARTIN

I was performing a lot of poetry and making a lot of paintings. That was my life. That was it. And I ran a pretty successful gallery for about four years. So that was a big part of my life at that time as well.

A.D.

How difficult has it been for the two of you to move to New York and make a living creating art?

O'NEILL

What New York does is it respects the hustle. If you stick in there in New York and keep making good work--because it has to be good to last in New York--you'll get a reward for that hustle.

MARTIN

You also develop a really thick skin, and you have to obviously develop your powers of persuasion. You really have to put a lot of things on the line just to make a connection. But we enjoy people. The city has been good to us, and from a financial standpoint, we are much better off now than we were when we started. From a professional standpoint, we obviously want to make that next step to connect to as many people as possible. And to be able to make the work we want to make, and not be limited by space or materials. The idea is to have the resources where you can do whatever you want to do with your work. And we're *ambitious!* I'm talking *big, big*.

A.D.

When did you realize you were starting to get some traction with your work, and how have you gotten your art out to more people?

MARTIN

One thing that really helped us was having art shows at our place--taking that initiative not to wait and to really be proactive in trying to develop an audience and clients for ourselves. The second part I think is the street projects that we do. And we've honestly gotten better, so I think that's been a catalytic energy.

A.D.

What was the reception like after something as big as the series "Our Neck of the Woods: Clinton Hill Portraits"? [*The couple painted 96 portraits of everyday people, most of them residents of the Clinton Hill/Fort Greene area.*] I lived above you during that time, and I remember seeing a change in the way people interacted with you in the neighborhood after that.

O'NEILL

A lot more people said "Hi".

MARTIN

A lot more people came up and said "Hi", but I think that change came from just getting out there and meeting people and trying to get them interested in our work. The write-up in the *New York Times Local* didn't hurt, either. So yeah, for a bit we saw some change. We still see it now, but I think that change is more directed at people knowing us and wanting to come up to our apartment and see what we're working on. And we're like, "Nope!" You gotta make sure you have enough room to paint, Austin. Everyone wants to come up!

A.D.

So what *are* you working on?

O'NEILL

One of the things we're working on is the *Super Star Series*, which is really about taking portraits of old movie stars and pairing them with contemporary phrases. We both have different relationships to what those paintings mean. For me it's about non-traditional casting, about that role that no one thinks you could do or the lines no one thinks you can say based on how you look, because that's oftentimes how decisions are made. That's what those paintings mean to me--the opportunity to tell a different kind of story.

A.D.

Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like people to know about the two of you?

MARTIN

I'd like people to know that--and you've seen it--we work incredibly hard. And we have the type of ambition where it is a function of the work ethic. That's the main thing for me: we're in the "getting better business." That's it, plain and simple.

I'm not going to pretend that I don't love art or that I'm not in love with some of these concepts that other people might not understand and maybe *I* don't even understand. But it's about the work and getting better, and making sure we continue to love all aspects of the process. That's what connects people, and it'll show.

O'NEILL

Embrace all aspects of the dream.