



ELEPHANT

5 Questions with Cole Sternberg

Text by Emily Steer, 2016

The American artist Cole Sternberg recently undertook a 22-day journey by sea from Japan's Shin Kasado to Portland Oregon, submitting his paintings to the elements along the way. The vibrant and heavily marked works are currently on show, at Los Angeles' MAMA Gallery.

Can you tell us a little about the work that's showing in the nature of breathing in salt?

The work in this exhibition is the result of my journey across the Pacific Ocean on the maiden voyage of the Ultra Letizia shipping vessel. There are paintings that were made on the deck and in my small interior studio and then exposed to the elements of storm, wind and rain and violently dragged in the sea. They lose all relationship with the human hand while simultaneously developing patterns specific to the elements. The paintings are accompanied by a series of polaroids and thermal transfers which capture the romantic and eerie nature of the trip.

The adventure part of the project is wonderful; what first interested you in exploring painting amongst the elements?

I have wanted to take a journey across the Pacific for some time to discover what the dramatic effects of the macro-environment of the sea and micro-environment of the ship's confinement could bring. I was curious to see how the works could be influenced by such an environment; an environment with limited resources and infinite beauty, one disconnected entirely from society and the internet. In the moment, it really felt like a miracle; painting on the deck on a beautiful day or experiencing the dramatic rolls of the ship during a storm were equally glorious. In the end, the work directly referenced this.

Does this manner of working translate to your more land-bound work? Have your learnings from the journey entered the studio?

Yes, I suspect this journey will come into play in the land-based work in the future. But, how so is yet to be determined, I have not got my land legs back yet to reenter the studio and address the journey directly. I'll keep you posted. In the least, it has made me think about the role erasure plays in my work generally.

What is it about giving up control while painting that appeals to you?

It is about the science experiment of it all. It is the unpredictable artist of the environment, of the sea, making mysterious choices that are beautiful and logical contrasted with the dizzying and irrational human experience. The disappearance of the human hand as the earth 'wins' visually from the final product is the cherry on the top of that letting go of control.

And finally, what is next for you?

Next is a series entitled for a moment it scraped then cooled the skin that also addresses environmental relationships and erasure, but in a very different context. It is a series of antique rugs (each more than one hundred years old) from a variety of countries and in a variety of styles that have all taken residence in Los Angeles. I've painted over components of the rugs and left each exposed to a different element of the city, giving them a new life of sorts. The rugs have seen everything from the Santa Monica Pier, to the bottom of a Hollywood Hills pool, to the runway of a downtown strip club. These pieces and the accompanying photography of their on-site exposures will be shown in partnership with LAXART and Woven in Los Angeles in April.