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Everyday People: Interviewing Matthew Rosenquist

by Andrew Berardini

Matthew Rosenquist's everyday people are far from ordinary. Deckled with tattoos, cellphones at the ready, hair dyed from cotton candy pink to Manic Panic's electric banana yellow peeled just so over a fringe of raven black. Dancing, pissing (beer at mouth going in, Big Gulp for all that fountains out), awkwardly brandishing a pickle jar. In board shorts and Wham t-shirts. Totally arrayed in subcultural regalia or laidback lumpen casual, each and every statuesque sculpture is too awkward, vain, and silly to be anything but individuals. Though wry with humor, any satire here is wholly affectionate.

Chopped with chainsaws and brightly painted, the rough-hewn wooden skins of Rosenquist's misfits deftly match their unrefined and working class color. A little Hogarth, a little Daumier, maybe a soupçon of R. Crumb. Rosenquist holds the democratically punk belief that everybody can be an artist, and art the most soulful expression of our shared humanity, revealed here in every splinter. For Rosenquist, we don't need permission to be beautiful.

We recently talked amidst the forest of statues in Rosenquist's studio astride the Los Angeles River.

AB: Let's start with the essentials and then let our conversation meander as we want. So how did you get started working in wood?

MR: That is a very good question. I started out as a painter. I went to grad school and started working in woodshops after to kind of pay the bills. A lot of furniture—and then I went from that to starting to incorporate it into my artistic practice.

AB: Was there a specific moment?

MR: After I moved to Los Angeles, I was living in Highland Park and there was this dump site I used to walk by with my dog along the Arroyo Seco. And I found a four-by-six piece of construction doug fir or pine. And then, I found this abandoned Barbie doll. And I took both of them home.

AB: That's a pairing.

MR: Yeah, it was kind of like— Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. I was looking at the two of them, and I was looking at the proportions of the Barbie. It was crazy—super long legs, tiny torso, big head, super long arms. I was like, "I want to try to make a version of this in wood."

Later on, I had a friend who opened a gallery in Culver City, and he came to my studio. He said, "I want to have you in the inaugural show." He came for a studio visit—I had all my paintings out—and he was like, "No, I don't want your paintings. I want your sculptures."

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That show was kind of the genesis. You can see I still paint the sculptures. I'm still kind of a painter.

AB: Did you go to school for art?

MR: I did. I went to a school in Washington, D.C.—George Washington University. I grew up outside of D.C., and my dad was on the faculty there. We came from a big family, and it was free tuition.

AB: And how was it's art school?

MR: It was very conservative. I went there for undergrad. It was a very traditional art program. I learned to paint from the model, paint still lifes, Renaissance techniques.

AB: Which is a good thing in some ways.

MR: For a long time, I kind of felt flat-footed when it came to contemporary or conceptual art, because I wasn't trained in it. But then I went to grad school at Savannah College of Art and Design. And that, at least, was like a step closer to something broader. It wasn't just like—I only knew about Titian or Tintoretto or whatever.

AB: Yeah, I get that.

MR: And honestly, that early training helped me. Especially with figuring out how to make these pieces. I had a professor in undergrad who'd always say, "Painters make good sculptors." There's something about having a sense of form and surface that translated over.

AB: Where do you feel like these pieces fit into history? Who are you looking at? Who are your influences or your peers?

MR: That's a tough question. People always say, "Oh, it reminds me of Stephan Balkenhol." And I mean, I like his sculpture, but I wasn't really seeking him out. To be honest, I kind of actively avoid too much influence. In the early days, people said my work was folk art

AB: I'm looking at your bookshelf right now and I see *American Folk Sculpture*, *Rubens*, *Warhol*. There's a certain—something—winking at me.

MR: People say there's a folkiness in the work, and I'm not trying to deny that. But what I've been thinking about lately is more philosophical. I want normal people to feel like they can make art. That it's inside of all of us.

AB: That's beautiful.

MR: It sounds crazy, I know. But I really think the most beautiful thing about being human is the creativity. Not the wars. It's the writing, the dancing, the music, the visual art.

AB: Like Pierre Bismuth said, "Everyone is an artist, but only the artist knows it."

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MR: I love that. Philosophically, I've been thinking a lot about accessibility in art. You don't have to be highly trained to do something meaningful.

AB: I mean, I came out of punk. You didn't have to know how to play an instrument to have something to say. You made a community. You could influence the culture.

AB: I relate to that so much. Same for me—punk was formative. And the values of it still guide me. DIY, making stuff even if no one gave you permission.

AB: So how did you get started making figures? And why do you make the figures you make?

MR: I started out as a figurative painter. I painted figures and landscapes. That was my thing for a long time. And even when I started doing sculpture, I didn't go abstract. I kept making figures.

AB: Why?

MR: With figures... there's something about it. A tension. A focus.

AB: When I look at your sculptures, they remind me of church figures. Like carved wooden saints—Spanish, Portuguese, Colonial—but also like public statues. The kind we still put in parks—politicians, generals, "important" people.

MR: That makes sense. And, you know, I've read that a lot of those old Greek-Roman marble and bronze sculptures were originally painted.

AB: Yeah, the Met did a show about that. Replicas of ancient statuary with full polychrome.

In your sculpture, the people are not necessarily the kind of people who usually get celebrated in statues though. They're not generals. Not tycoons.

MR: Most of the time, I'm just drawn to regular people—working-class people, subcultural people. Like the girl dancing in one piece—I didn't have any visual reference. No photos of her from when she was fifteen. I had to dive into my memory.

AB: That's interesting. The act of remembering becomes part of the artwork.

MR: Sometimes I'll romanticize something in my head, then look at an old photo and be like, "Whoa... that's not what I remembered." You build a myth in your mind.

MR: That was in the back of my head. Not at the very beginning, not in 2014, but eventually. I didn't want to carve these out of white oak and go, "Look at the beautiful wood grain." I mean—I can do that. I've worked in woodshops where the standard was museum-quality, perfection. But I didn't want that for this.

AB: Why not?

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MR: I wanted to bring painting into it. But painting, on canvas, wasn't fun for me anymore. So I started painting the sculptures. They're rough-hewn. I didn't want to sand everything down. That's a lot of labor, and honestly—bad for your lungs. All that dust.

AB: So it's a bit of health preservation too?

MR: Yeah, partly. But also—it's just better for me. I can just cut now. And I've started treating the chainsaw like a pencil. You know, drawing with it.

AB: That's such a beautiful idea. The chain becomes your line.

MR: Yeah. When it's sharp? Oh man. It feels good. It really does feel like drawing.

AB: There's a rawness to them. And I feel like that rawness connects to who you're sculpting. They're not glossy, pristine people. They're rougher. There's alignment between form and concept.

MR: Yeah. You're right. And I've made older work that was super smooth. Sanded arms, legs—anatomically correct. But it's so much work. And in the end, it doesn't feel right for what I'm trying to do now.

AB: Okay—final question. If you could speak directly to your audience, what would you want them to know?

MR: I want people to laugh. I want people to find joy in these pieces. I mean, sometimes it's on my terms—what I think is funny. Not everyone's going to laugh at the same stuff.

AB: Humor's tricky.

MR: Yeah. It's personal. But I hope people can feel the play. The care. The fun.

MR: Yeah. In high school, I wasn't bullied. But if someone tried to bully me? I could draw them. That disarmed them. It wasn't mean—it was just funny. It had power. It's like Hogarth.

AB: Hogarth is a perfect reference, often drawing the people of his time, with hilariousness and raunchiness, poverty and humanity. He really saw the people of his time, sometimes satirizing them, but always with a certain appreciation.

MR: Exactly. Just observing. Laughing. Seeing people. Not always flattering. But real.

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