



LOS ANGELES
I'M YOURS

Artistic Information: An Interview With Jesse Stecklow

by Kyle Fitzpatrick
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Place does not matter to Jesse Stecklow. Los Angeles to him is a transitional place, a place for him to learn more about himself and his practice. The young artist and designer is a rising senior at UCLA and is caught at a unique intersection most twentysomething creatives face: what's next? Since technology has complicated all aspects of life, allowing for perfection and hyper-connection to be achieved, what is left for you to do?

"I'm trying to get done with school as quickly as possible," he says seated at his studio desk, a space he only has because he's taking an art class that includes room to make. "I'm graduating in three years total: I should be a junior—but I'm actually a senior."

Jesse was born in Cambridge, near Boston. His father is a journalist and his mother is a painter. They moved to London when he was very young and he describes his childhood as always "being taken to openings in a stroller." He lived between Europe and Boston for much of his childhood and spent his high school senior year at a study abroad program in France. Now he is in Los Angeles, a place that represents transition for him.

"I guess coming to LA was mostly for the [UCLA] program," he says. "I was going to attend RISD but it was important for me to be in a city, even as weird of a city as LA is. I wanted to be somewhere that's a little less traditionally motivated. My major is Design Media Arts and I focus on Graphic Design. The art stuff kind of comes outside of that. To be honest, LA seemed really arbitrary to me at the time. It's been interesting."

"LA was never really a place that I thought I would end up. I realized for undergrad it really doesn't matter where you go so much as the communities there are to engage in. It seems a little more vibrant than what I was looking for out East."

His simultaneous connection and disconnection to the city is a result of his being in school. He's in a position that easily could enable his being a visitor to the city, a fact that makes integration difficult.

"It took a lot more for me to find people who were a little bit more motivated to produce right now and find a scene that I felt like I could connect with. Joining Jogging and working with those artists out here really facilitated community. With Content Is Relative, for Christine and I, it has become more about finding the most we can do when we are here."

"School for me is a set of resources," he clarifies. "It's about exploiting them."

Jesse doesn't dislike UCLA as a school but he has found himself wandering, needing to pursue more on his own to be challenged. He's at a curious moment in education where the best opportunities for learning are made yourself. It gets back to the idea of what's next. "I had to pick an area to focus. I've been focused more outside of school. Things like the Hammer Museum—which is where I work—are a great resource. There's a lot to be had there."

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Jesse's work is conceptually motivated, he is very immersed in theory. He's juggling a lot of topics, all of which are modern predicaments technology has afforded us. "I'm not so interested in Internet art or making an Internet formed entity," he explains. "I like trying to find people who are interested in negotiating the online world as a reality for further extensions of your work. Your work can take on further life online and then disperse. That in itself is a great influence on what I'm making. You don't have to engage the subject matter in order to be aware of the reality of where your work goes. That's kind of what my work is about right now."

He explains his current body of work and the practices they come out of. "I started out by making a series of painting and using them as the jumping off point for different versions. I've always been around painting and have painted for a while but I've gotten underwhelmed with the physical realities of that. I wanted to regain some of the facility I have in digital editing but through painting."

"Within a given studio session I'm able to paint, shoot, and edit. It's a lot more organically produced since I have this space. I've been trying to work toward a hybridization in my practice. To me the work can exist simultaneously. I'm focusing on three different areas: the formal realm, where you can engage with it compositionally; from there, something is happening with the history of painting and photography and how that converges with the infinite set of versions you can get with images; and then the third area enters image culture, turning the work into flat images that become about navigating dispersive networks. What kind of value systems and sculptural formats they form into are important too."

"There are traditionally motivated, preserved works that I make and some that are printed on aluminum, which is super thin and will have a gestural image quality because they are tossed into a space. The flatness of the aluminum will contradict the trompe l'oeil formal aspects of the work. I've definitely been interested in putting methods of understanding communities online into a physical space, breaking down traditional value systems."

Information is critical to Jesse, making his paint images artistic/scientific hybrids. He's attempting to figure out how to use this data now. "I'm devising a system for representing the idea of dispersion in a physical gallery space. I'm getting these passive dispersion samplers that attract vapors, which are used by factory workers, and attaching them to the aluminum pieces in a show so that, after the show, it will have a data set which it aggregates. Every other place the work is located, it will continue to collect another set of data. There's something about the intangibility of a network that is familiar to this process. It's less important what is in the air but the aggregating of a history, implying that a gallery is not the final resting place for a work."

But where will all this information go? How will it exist in his work? "I'm still negotiating that," he says. "It can exist as an image, it can exist as content online, it can exist as a stack of documents that sits in a folder behind a desk. In some ways, it is an extension of the work itself. I've always struggled with text in work as a designer so it makes it difficult to negotiate those choices as an artist. To me, this is an opportunity because it is a readymade data set that I have no control over. I like that idea."

"I definitely like to create new formats for discussing these topics," he adds. "In some ways, they are super traditional since they are about painting and they are on the wall right now. I want to break that down more and more—but it has to start somewhere. The other images are at a starting point for all of this: how do you paint in an arbitrary way that signifies a larger history of painting that isn't so caught up or direct?"

"Painting for me is about material," he says, standing. He points to two hung, slate colored canvases he's been experimenting with. He dips a brush in water and paints a few shapes on them: they slowly fade. "These are clay. I'm interested in creating a painting that demands to be photographed. These panels are cast in clay so that when you paint on them they have a three minute duration of painting which demands that you photograph it."

You could equate it to something like a SnapChat painting. I don't necessarily like that allusion but what is interesting about SnapChat is the screenshot function, the need to preserve these three seconds... These two images are the same painting but are after a period of drying time. Clay is a really seductive material. I like exploring a format that requires a form of documentation in order to continue."

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These types of intellectual conversations are a part of Jesse's Los Angeles existence. These things that he is trying to express are very similar to how he views the city: a slightly uncomfortable place that requires a special understanding. "I feel like there are a lot of people coming to LA from places like Chicago or Berlin," he says. "That's exciting. It feels like there is something happening here."

"But LA is really spread out," he adds. "I've only grown up in cities where you rely on major transportation systems. I don't drive, which has always made getting around an issue here. LA is a really good place to work in because you can live in a city and also afford space to get away, to feel like you aren't controlled by the city lifestyle."

"The communities in LA have really helped motivate me too," he adds.

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The irony is that Jesse doesn't feel that being an urbanite is imperative anymore. You could actually live anywhere. "I think I'm less focused on the post-modernist, twentieth century idea of a city as being the center of a big scene or movement. That's breaking down at the hand of the Internet. Given the facility at which we can communicate and join communities and engage collaboratively without relying on location helps to destructure that idea. It helps to live in a major city—but if you don't, you can't help but feel connected to a larger group."

"I'd like to finish school and get into an affordable studio space," he says, explaining his future plans. "As far as grad school, I don't know. It'd probably be in Europe since I'm a dual citizen and it would be cheap for me."

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"As far as the future of my work and interests, right now I'm working toward generating groups of images that, within an exhibition space or space of meeting, can break down outside of a distinct series. The gallery space is just a stopping point on a continually malleable, expanding circuit."

"I want to produce a lot," he adds. "I want to create enough to form a network that I can pull from."