



INTERLOCUTOR

ROB THOM

February 15, 2021

Rob Thom paints scenes of wild American excess — vast pool parties, backyard wrestling matches, costumed marathons, frenzied crowds, masses of unleashed frolicking dogs...these are just some of the busy and never boring worlds rendered with a celebratory and satirical flair by Thom's brush.

Rob lives and works in Bainbridge Island, WA. He received his BFA from University of California, Santa Barbara in 1998 and his MFA from University of California in Los Angeles in 2004. His work has been featured in international exhibitions including shows at M+B Los Angeles, CA; China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles, CA; Peres Projects, Berlin, Germany; Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York; Hiromi Yoshii Gallery, Tokyo, Japan and Galerie Julius Hummel, Vienna, Austria. His work is held in numerous private and public collections including the Thomas J. Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Interview by **Tyler Nesler**

Your recent solo exhibition at Anna Zorina Gallery in New York featured new paintings that their press release said "celebrate [the] absurdities and vulgarities of everyday life in America." The keyword here to me is "celebrate," rather than "satirize." By depicting stereotypical scenes of "Red State" America, many viewers will inevitably see your playful and fun-loving scenarios as a type of satire. Is satire one of your main intents, or would you say that you ultimately aim to take more of a nonjudgmental approach with these works?

I guess I focused on under-celebrated American viewpoints. I depicted backyard wrestling but also Disney-esque utopias. If my work is satirical (which I suppose I would agree with) then let's say I like to look at culture from different angles. I feel like it's okay to put under-utilized nontraditional pictures into the conversation of the art world. Some of the paintings depict "safe spaces" and some are unsafe spaces and I exaggerate elements like a fisherman exaggerates the size of a fish he caught. It's fun and interesting for me to use images I find to explore a topic making it absurd or ironic for instance.

With their sprawling, busy scenes filled with multiple characters, your paintings reference old European masters such as Bruegel and Bosch. Have these painters always been significant influences for you? When did you first begin to depict contemporary scenes in this style and

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what was the impetus for it? I enjoy filling up the canvas so it is dense with information, because it reflects the age we live in. I would say that Biblical paintings that I saw as a kid were just as important as Bruegel or Bosch because of their intent to narrate. I visited the National Gallery in DC growing up and remember the 13th to 16th Century galleries were really influential. Paintings with human interaction and pathos and some wild beheadings or strangely painted rocks and flattened figures of the Pre-Renaissance – those are the paintings that stuck with me.

Aside from Bruegel and Bosch, who are some other influences for you? Are more contemporary artists such as Martin Handford and Steve Brodner an influence? (I see elements of their work in yours, for example).

I feel like all art is influential. Ancient, contemporary, even kitsch and naive work, it's all great. I'm not some master painter so Bruegel and Bosch are a jumping off point for me. Pop culture like comic books, comic strips, internet, TV, signage, all that stuff plays into my paintings too. I love elements of the artists you mention but I am ultimately trying to invent my own language.

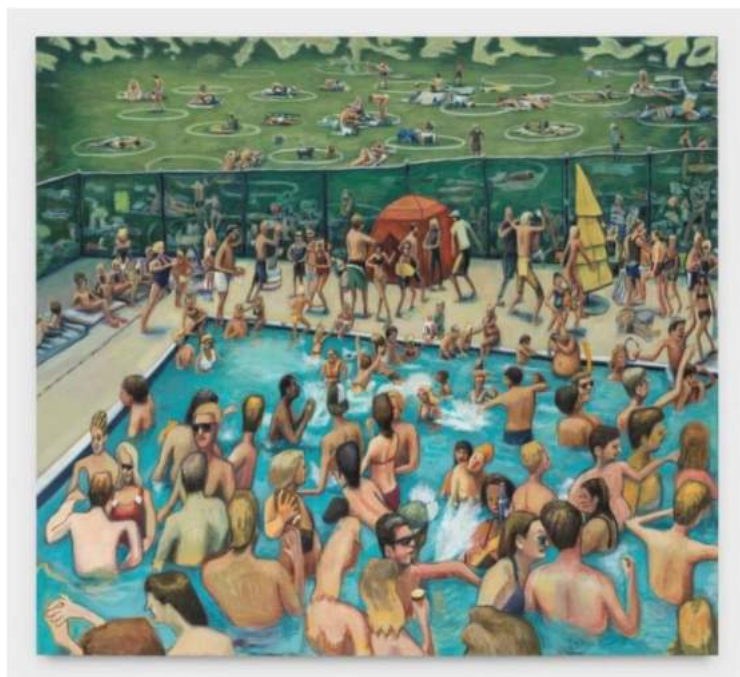
There is immediate contemporary relevancy seen in pieces such as "Community Pool," where a huge group gathers together unmasked in a large pool, while in the background on a vast lawn other groups stay together mostly within distanced marked-off encircled areas (which have often been seen in parks worldwide during the Covid lockdowns). In what ways do you think the Covid crisis has underscored or added new dimensions to your work over the past year?

Covid added a new dimension to everything. I imagine people see things in a different way now...remotely. The internet and our phones have become the messenger of info more than anything else...I saw some Covid circles on my news feed and was haunted by them. The Covid circles are unmistakable and distinct to this particular time. I added the circles late in the painting and it was like adding three exclamations.



"Runners in Park," 2020, oil, wax on canvas, 44 x 45 in (111.8 x 114.3 cm)

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"Community Pool," 2020, oil, wax on canvas, 64 x 58 in (162.6 x 147.3 cm)

Mid-pandemic I was watching a documentary and I could feel myself tensing up as strangers crowded in a subway or in some low-ceilinged room or when they shared utensils or drank from the same water bottle. I would trace the spread in my head. It became untraceable though and a bit like the painting of the "Community Pool." It's about the inevitability of failure (as humans) against germs, especially seeing how Americans were dealing with it specifically, or not.

Your paintings such as "Grotto Pool" and "Pool With Slide and Dog" have a bit of tension in them in the sense that the scenes look very inviting and fun, but they're also places that are completely artificial and probably excessively wasteful. Were paintings like these inspired by any real-life places you've visited?

I have to admit, I'm a sucker for artificial environments. I've painted four or five caves to this point, but the paintings with a fake rock simulated came from someone else's internet vacation. I haven't been to those places. The artificial and excessive became really fascinating to me when everything stopped. It's tongue-in-cheek though, the idea of presenting some ideal space or a bubble where just the viewer gets to enjoy the virtual space when even The Haves could not travel to these enviable locations. It's nostalgia for a time when we could collectively travel, and like some offering to those who couldn't afford to visit a place like that regardless of the virus. Those paintings to me were fantasy locations for all.

What do you love most about including so many frolicking and playful dogs in your works? Would it be safe to say that they often act as sly reflections of the unbridled joy that the humans in the pieces are experiencing?

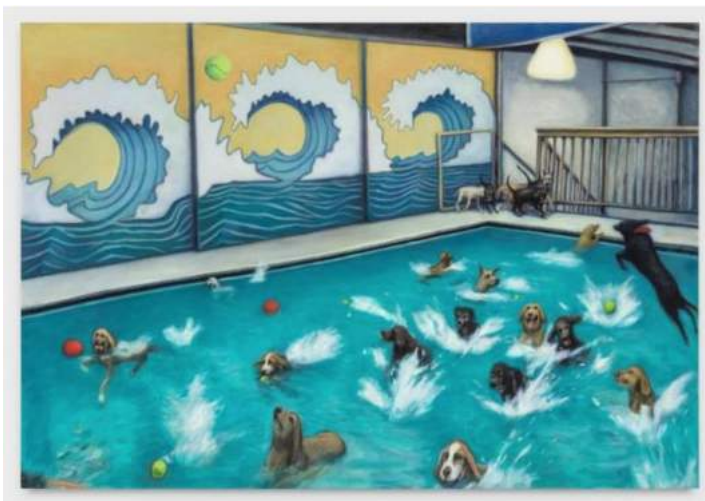
I was thinking about people in NYC during the first round of quarantines and then the worst case scenario (as I do) — what kind of nightmare it would be to be totally alone in some tiny apartment not even having the company of a dog. That's maybe how the dogs entered the paintings, as beacons of hope and goodwill. Then there is the series of paintings by Cassius Marcellus Coolidge that I love for their ubiquity in the popular unconscious. I'm specifically speaking of "Dogs Playing Poker." Maybe my paintings that include dogs are some sort of updated kitsch which I personally like. Dogs represent noble qualities to me, and are full of energy and emotion. They can be stand-ins for the human figures, but creatures that specifically ooze friendship and loyalty.

Then in a work such as the wonderful "Faux Hokusai Cooldown," the dogs have completely taken over all the fun. When I encountered this painting in person I thought it was one of the funniest and

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most joyous paintings I'd ever seen. And how do you think that adding the "faux Hokusai" waves onto the wall of the pool room specifically adds to the humor and sheer absurdity of it all?

Somebody actually painted this mural specifically for a dog pool and I copied it. I screen-shot stills from a bad quality video of dogs more or less partying in an indoor pool, making the best of things. That's what I mean when I say that all art is influential — I could copy master paintings or some painting by an unsung anonymous painter out there living among us. I don't understand why that person decided on a facsimile of "The Great Wave" for a dog pool but I like the painting within a painting idea of it, and the watered down version of that amazing wave and the idea that I painted a version of a version of the original. The flattened perspective of the original and the drawing I made — which was also flattened — made sense. It's ridiculous and intentionally so because I like that vibe. Dogs are sorta precious but the painting style is rough and raw in places and the concept is just silly as a way for me to express something without bowing to the hyper critical eye that stares upon a tiny fraction of artmakers.



"Faux Hokusai Cooldown," 2020, oil, wax on canvas, 48 x 70 in (121.9 x 177.8 cm)

There is a curious and unique blend of the surreal and the nostalgic in your work. In what ways do you think your warm-palettred tones and the wavy, almost Gumby-like stretchy limbs of many of your figures introduce a sense of off-kilter nostalgia? To me, many of the paintings seem to be mixes of memories and old 35mm color film prints that have faded or warped a bit over time...

In my source material there is that sense of nostalgia...and maybe I am sentimental and picking that stuff out specifically. I think our memories inform what we are looking at so I choose to paint stuff that works to that end.

I enjoy things like Gumby, and printed photographs and old books and that sort of thing — I choose older things rather than newer ones. I like to keep my focus on things and events that happen during my lifetime as well, probably as a way to sort them. Things from the not so distant past appeal to me. Those things of the past can be reintroduced into the contemporary and still have impact in a way that conger associations with objects, looks and situations. I am drawn to recognizable bits as opposed to abstract ones because they are more effective and I go to it because of the immediacy and ease of entry.

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"Salutations," 2020, oil, wax on canvas, 32 x 40 in (81.3 x 101.6 cm)

I think.

Do you think you have now reached your mature style, or do you see your work still evolving in different or unexpected directions over time?

I don't know what to expect in my future. My focus can change and sometimes my approach to practice does as well. I have changed my style entirely though several times and then have come back around to this way of communicating through narrative figure paintings.

What's coming up for you in the near future? Any new shows or works that you would like people to know about?

OK, sometimes I can know what to expect in the future. I am making work for a show at M+B Gallery in L.A. for this year and something is happening in Spain possibly. Even those plans can change and I will just try to roll with it. No more Covid paintings,