

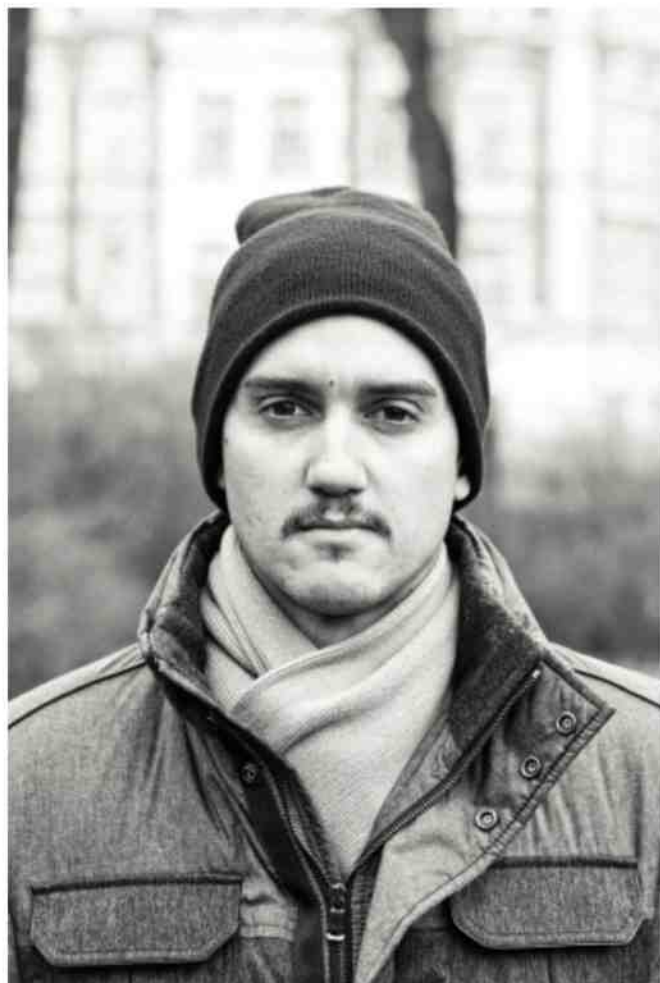
## VERTICAL

## Robin Rhode

Mrz 14, 2013

Although South African artist Robin Rhode paints in the streets, external walls do not fully showcase his art. They merely present an abstract excerpt instead – one that only becomes whole via photographs documenting the evolution of his work. As such, the 37-year-old's works are like urban theater or flip books rather than street art. Either way, they illustrate evanescence and our fast-moving natures.

After studying art in Johannesburg, Rhode traveled to Berlin for a three-month residency – and stayed. We met him in his studio in Prenzlauer Berg to discuss his relationship to graffiti and street art, and the influences from his native land.



Vertical: Is your background in graffiti?

Robin Rhode: That is an interesting question. People might think that I come from street art or graffiti, but when I grew up in Johannesburg, there was in fact only a limited amount of street art and graffiti. What was mostly painted on the walls was in fact political and social commentary. Or protest art rather than graffiti art. These social commentaries, texts, images of society et cetera were painted crudely on the walls of neighborhoods that were plagued by crime and social issues. It was only in early 2000, when I finished my studies, that people became a little bit more conscious about it. Some graffiti emerged but they were neither massive nor developed. However, at that time, I indeed associated myself with graffiti crews, even though they saw me as a conceptual artist rather than a graffiti writer. Today, my relationship to graffiti artists is interesting as I tend to 'cross' the graffiti that has existed on the walls for some time, and replace it with my visual narratives that are ephemeral.

WE: Which angers graffiti writers, of course.

RR: Exactly, and for obvious reasons: The first issue is that I cover an existing piece of graffiti without replacing it with another new graffiti artwork. My wall paintings are abstract traces of performative actions. The painted marks relate to a particular moment in the visual narrative that is captured on film. I have had numerous arguments with

graffiti writers in the past that in a way helped me to understand my artistic process deeper – especially with regards to public space, ephemeral wall painting, and more importantly, the commitment needed in engaging with this form of public art.

WE: In what way did these discussions help you?

RR: Because they complained that I am neither doing a tag, nor a piece, nor something recognizable. They didn't understand why I do abstract works. And that made me think about my artworks, especially the end result of my works that is abstract, at least as a stand-alone image.

WE: ...which are eventually not even comprehensible.

RR: Indeed. The end product of my works doesn't communicate like graffiti does. My work itself exists in another form – not in street art, but in photography or film. And this is what I began to understand through my dialogue with graffiti artists.

WE: What does this mean for your work?

RR: I am currently in a phase of contemplation. I am thinking about how to convey the idea that is behind my works without depicting the physical progress – without capturing each phase individually through photography. The end product on the wall embodies all previous steps, but how can I realize that idea on another medium such as a canvas without using a character and photography? That is my challenge now. In fact, I like the mentality of a painter and his conviction, commitment and dedication to the canvas. It is a bit romantic, but I think it is really important to have that kind of relationship to your visual language.



WE: The progress and photos bearing witness to it are an inevitable part of your artworks.

RR: Yes, it is actually the most fulfilling part. Not only because it is traced back in my end result, but also because the process influences my artworks. When I look at my works, I immediately remember the process and what happened when I was working on the walls. My works are influenced by so many external issues that are invisible for the viewers as I do not depict the elements outside of the photographed frame. It is about autonomy instead. The work should speak for itself, no matter if it came into being in Mexico or Johannesburg, or in any other city in the world.

WE: What do you mean by external issues? Are you speaking of people who observe you working?

RR: Yes, and many other factors. For this image, for example {he points to his work 'Brick Face' on a table in front of us}, we had to lay a bloody sheep head aside to be able to start working on that wall. And for yet another piece, we went on a lot of garages without permission. Suddenly, some Nigerians came and locked us up. We were threatened. We didn't know if they were going to come back and beat us up. They ultimately just told us to stop. But as we were nearly finished we refused and continued quickly. That mood definitely changed my way of working. Instead of painting and erasing, I only painted. In the end, the image is full of fear.

WE: Speaking of environments, did your works change when you moved to Berlin?

RR: Yes, totally. This is why I go back to South Africa so often. Firstly, I go back to use natural light and secondly to be inspired by the environment. It is a massive change. In Africa, it is like a theater on the street – the people are the audience. Working there includes a social dimension that influences my process. And I think this gives my works authenticity. Working in Europe is a lot more cleaner in terms of the social surroundings. Here, I focus on the idea and the concept rather than searching for social engagement; thus working here allows me to execute certain ideas as efficiently as possible – by focusing on issues such as exploring wall drawing techniques.



WE: Are your works political?

RR: Not at first sight. But I think I do discuss political issues in my works without being too obvious. In some pieces, there are indeed political overtones relating to African politics and identity. I am just thinking of one work where I, respectively my doppelgänger, murdered a life-sized painted piano – the physical actions mirror the violence within our society. The character in the images throws stones at the piano, hits it with a machete, throws petrol on it and burns the painting, finally he hangs the painted piano by placing a noose around it's neck. So it contains a lot of political uprising about anarchism which contrasts drastically to the character in the artwork

who appears classical in his black suit and tie. Politics are thus disguised in the aesthetic of the character who acts out fragments of violence towards his musical instrument.

WE: Do you call your characters “doppelgängers” as they present your art and you feel represented by them?

RR: Yes, as they reflect myself and I choreograph their movement. Every photograph is highly considered.

WE: Their styling seems to be similarly sophisticated. Do you consider fashion important for your work?

RR: It is like a material that I use. Sometimes I want to represent a certain movement such as street or hip hop culture, another time I am just trying to hide the identity of my doppelgängers and make them somewhat anonymous. As such, I like to use hoodies, hats and sunglasses.

WE: And suits. Do they eventually hide formlessness?

RR: Indeed. They reflect a working man who is confined within the strict structures of his job. Plus, they help me position the work into various places and moments in time. Of course, I am using contemporary approaches in terms of the material, but I still like to take my works back in time by utilizing other details.



WE: Have you ever been your doppelgänger yourself, too?

RR: I have performed live extensively in museums and contemporary art spaces. Just recently, I found a video from a performance in 2005 in Paris. When I watch it today, I actually don't believe I did that. I was crazy and the things I was doing were mad. During one performance, I dived into the museum's fountain fully clothed, I swam, jumped out, ran into the museum and did a performance totally soaked. I don't think that I would do that now. Would I still have the courage?

WE: Do you plan each working step before going out today?

RR: No, I just have the first established idea or a certain composition. And it is all I need. I just do the rest intuitively.

WE: Is your first idea the end product or the first image?

RR: I have the first image in mind and then I just take it from there.

WE: Either way, you have to work very painstakingly in order to do what you are doing.

RR: I indeed do so. I like numbers and have utilized numerics, mathematics and science a lot. Meanwhile, I can really calculate how my works come into being at best.

For one work for example, I used the x shape of the Barcelona Chair as my starting point and worked out my own formula. But I also tend to work completely intuitively.

WE: Are you still working illegally today?

RR: No, at one point I decided to find walls that I can work on stress-free and legally. Thus, I hired one in Berlin Friedrichshain. I think, the progress can affect the result and I felt working illegally was a trap for my work.

WE: What trap do you feel when working illegally?

RR: That the issue of time becomes too influential. You have to go faster, faster and faster trying not to be caught. So, your lines are ultimately dictated by the time pressure and not by you.

WE: Which can eventually create a positive effect, too.

RR: That is for sure. But at one point, when I did loads of illegal work, I wanted to develop further and this is what you usually need time for. I wanted to do more intense and complex drawings and challenge myself to make an epic artwork. Sometimes I need four days for such works.