

fluorodigital

ESCAPING THE NORM: ROBIN RHODE

Creating performance from his wall drawings, artist Robin Rhode, transforms his marks into imaginary worlds. fluoro spoke to Rhode about his connection with the streets of South Africa and the power that came with embracing his creative spirit.

Based in Berlin, Rhode spent much of his younger years in the South African city of Johannesburg. Aware of the social dynamics of the city, he sought to use art as a form of expression utilising basic materials, such as charcoal and chalk, and charging them with social meaning.

(f) As a child what did the streets mean to you as a playground?

(RR) The streets have become a lot more dangerous since when I was a child, there are more out of bound areas compared to when I was a child growing up in Johannesburg.

As a child, the streets were a site for games and sport. I spent a lot of time skateboarding on the streets. Drawing and graffiti didn't come about until my teens! It was a site for a lot of freedom. The street was our cricket field, the street was our soccer field, it was a space to have some kind of communal activity.

When I go back to South Africa I am shocked by how out of bounds this space for freedom has become so charged and problematic.

(f) You mentioned that you didn't draw or paint?

(RR) Besides drawing the outlines of a cricket pitch or soccer field, I wasn't going out drawing on the public walls until my high school days. I began to align myself with street culture, meaning urban youth culture whether it was music, art or fashion. This came about in my late teens as a way of self-expression.

(f) Was there a moment when you realised drawing/art was your calling?

(RR) Very early I realised what talents I had compared to what I didn't have. I realised I could do art better than anything else.

I knew that this was my only means of escaping and also a way of developing and growing as a person, I embraced this creative spirit from my teens.



(f) What were you escaping from?

(RR) I guess it was escaping from the norm and also trying to set a new kind of agenda. At a very early age I was conscious of the social dynamics of where I grew up. I wanted to create a new kind of creative position within that and establish something new.

My creativity set me apart, because I was quite timid small and skinny, so I didn't have a lot of self confidence. Art really allowed me to mature and gave me self-confidence. Art also set me apart from the other teenage adolescent groups; it distinguished myself amongst these groups.

As Rhode guided fluoro's Associate Editor, Audrey Bugeja, around the NGV space, she was able to gain an insight into each of the pieces on display, their materials, layers and position over the globe. Rhode was eager to discuss key works in detail uncovering each layer, and their unique message.

(f) Chalk, charcoal, house paint ... why do you work with basic materials?

(RR) I try to select materials that are quite basic due to its economy of means. The materials become a critique on economic production. Using a piece of chalk or charcoal can become quite a political tool as a means to critique financial and political powers that determine our visual environment.

Basic materials can have a far more powerful meaning than something that has an overabundance of financial support. It allows me to have an infinitive mode of creative expression.

(f) What makes you want to dabble between these mediums?

(RR) What determines these materials is the idea of drawing. Drawing is my guide, not ideas. Sometimes I don't have concepts, but I might be thinking about how I can express a line or a mark. An example is this work, [referring to opposite image 'Stone Flag'] where I have used painted bricks as the medium.

(f) Are you a street artist?

(RR) If I say I am not, people will say nonsense, you work on the streets all the time! I consider myself to have parallels with street artists. My work is obviously coming from a street art perspective, some people see it as some kind of urbanism.

Street art is the most extreme form of expression and it is becoming so nouveau. Young people now are giving up studying accountancy to become street artists; it could almost



be more financially viable to become a street artist!

(f) Tell us about your canvas... the wall.

(RR) I have been using a wall in Johannesburg, for some of my work, for many years now. It is in a very dangerous part of the city. I have a good rapport with the community they really love to see work on this wall and they are conscious of my role as a street activist.

I call this my theatre, because the processes are like an open theatre with people coming to watch: people coming home from work; children on way home from school; homeless people and drug addicts they all come and see what I have done.

(f) Do you feel the community of this area in Johannesburg can relate to a work like this [referring to opposite image 'The Point of Vanishing']?

(RR) No. It is about the absurdity of creating something that is so distant and making it possible. There is no ocean in Johannesburg it is not possible, the ship has no real significance to that part of the country. However, it is a colonial ship, so it does have a reference point.

It is about making the impossible possible in that space. One can express an idea in a given moment in a given time in that location.

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Robin Rhode's first Australian solo show 'The Call of Walls' is on view until Sunday 15 September 2013 at The National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne Australia.

www.ngv.vic.gov.au

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