



"The history and challenges that painting puts forth thrill me. Art is a complex and powerful phenomenon. The way politics, philosophy and religion have changed the world, I believe art can also make a huge difference."

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SPLASH OF COLOUR

Painting is what his heart longs for. Latin-American artist Angel Otero plays with colours and mixed media to produce astounding and unanticipated outcomes that at times even sweep him off his feet. He talks to Priyanka Chakrabarti about his journey into the world of contemporary art.

He was only 11 when he knew that he was born to be an artist. "I was standing in front of a huge painting at a museum in Puerto Rico. The painting must have had so many stories to recite but I was just not interested in the narrative part. I was simply astonished with the colours that were incorporated in the painting. The perfect mix of thick and thin layers, the techniques and processes captured my interest. I felt, I wanted to do this," says Angel Otero.

The now 31-year-old artist resided in Puerto Rico until moving to Chicago at the age of 24 to earn a MFA degree at the Art Institute of Chicago. Otero's work is heavily influenced by his life in Puerto Rico and his relationships with family members, most conspicuously his grandmother. "My grandmother is very special to me. She has a very beautiful and crazy outlook towards life that has influenced me a lot. Apart



The 31-year-old artist's expressionistic work is displayed across museums around the world.

from that, certain elements of personal relationships work as catalysts that often helps me construct my art," says the artist.

Otero's subjects refer to reminiscences of his past, as well as an emphasis on materials and process-based art, which is apparent in the amalgamation of painting and assemblage that surfaces in his work. Often intertwining traditional Spanish Baroque imagery with personal subject matters, Otero employs eccentric techniques creating large-scale, vibrant expressionistic concepts that bring to mind the works of eminent artists such as Willem de Kooning, Philip Guston and Georg Baselitz.

Soon after receiving his MFA degree, Otero was included in the exhibition 'Constellations' at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, in 2009 and in that same year, he was awarded the prestigious Leonore Annenberg Fellowship in the Visual Arts. He has had solo exhibitions at Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago



(2009) and at the Chicago Cultural Center (2010). His recent exhibitions comprise 'Touched' at Lehmann Maupin Gallery, 'Misericordia' at Prism, Los Angeles and 'Memento', a solo exhibition at Lehmann Maupin Gallery.

Otero's process is inspired from usual artistic traditions, but he challenges those very principles by using techniques like 'oil skins' to build up his surfaces – a method in which he pours paint on glass to dry, then peels it off in sheets. "With paint, I want to give a sense of profusion, unbalance, objective, valour and perseverance within form, colour and texture in every painting. I blend contrasting, conventional and unconventional materials to get unusual outcomes that even leave me spellbound at times. I mostly create collages of dry oil paint. I paint multiple layers of oil paint on glass, which is later dried up and scraped off. The result is an absolute surprise that delights my senses," he smiles.

The very institution of art and painting inspires Otero. "The history and challenges that painting puts forth thrill me. Art is a complex and powerful phenomenon. The way politics, philosophy and religion have changed the world, I believe art can also make a huge difference. Today contemporary art has become very composite and taxing. There is a lot of competition in art (though not amongst artists). It's pretty tough to bring in a distinctive language in art. To bring something new in the world of contemporary art has become very challenging," he says.

While painting, Otero is mostly concerned with issues within himself. "I read a lot; I spend most of my time in the studio; I am well-aware of my surroundings and happenings across the world. I get inspired from news reports, stories, books and people. The complexes of paintings and the constant questioning of art

motivate me all the more. The continuous tension between me and art keeps me on the edge," he quips.

The artist had a very humble childhood. "My family didn't really follow art much. I started drawing when I was six years old. My first drawing was a Hello Kitty. A girl from the neighbourhood taught me how to draw that one. The process of imitating her drawing and creating my own fascinated me. And thus my journey into the world of art commenced and followed a plethora of sketches of Superman, Mickey Mouse and others," he laughs.

When Otero decided to pursue art in Chicago, his parents were not supportive of his decision. "My father was not talking to me for a very long time. However, today they are extremely happy and proud of me," gushes the artist.

Otero's works find their resting place in museums across USA and Netherlands and also in large public collections. ●