

BRUTFORCE



The Assemblage of a House of Dolls

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Most people don't associate found materials with doll creation, but that is partially what makes Art Moura's creations so intriguing. These collections of fabric and found materials- colorful rags, cloths, and other detritus are woven, dreaded, tied, and stuffed into each other to create each finished work. But while the building blocks that make up Moura's pieces never disappear into the composition, each piece is still strikingly whole. This is a result of Moura's starting point for each of his pieces: they need to have a soul.

"To me, it has to appear to be alive." We're standing in Moura's new exhibit at The Good Luck Gallery, an outsider gallery on Chung King Road, a rare Los Angeles pedestrian street that is home to a number of other galleries and shops. Moura explains that, though he doesn't believe his pieces to truly have souls, he imagines them vividly and personifies them. Each of them has what he describes as a rascally, slightly wounded personality.

But even more striking than each piece's individuality is the way they fit together, more of a community than a collection. Moura creates his dolls because the world in its natural state, plain and unembellished, is uncomfortable to him. He covers his workplace with them, as well as his home, letting them fully take over a space. Even in the gallery space, the rascals hang not only on the walls, but also descend from the ceiling. In addition to the dolls, a collection of Moura's older pieces are concentrated in one corner, covering every inch of floor and wall space, as if to suggest that the dolls covering the rest of the space sprung from the corner of earlier sensibilities.



Art Moura exhibition window view. Image courtesy of the Good Luck Gallery.

While the dolls are pieces Moura has created in the past couple years, the corner contains works that range back over the past decade. The mediums and materials are extremely diverse, but the through line for each of them is Moura and his relationship to each piece. Sculpture or doll or painting or repurposed coffee cup, if you look closely, you can decipher a face and a body in nearly every piece.

Moura's pieces also have agency in that he prefers not to name them anymore. Names never seem to fit perfectly. He checks himself like this often, thinking about each word, often while stroking or tugging at his long salt-and-pepper beard. He's openly self-conscious of the risk of parading as something he's not. It changes his art, and, like a bare wall or an empty room, when something isn't characteristically Moura, it can be uncomfortable.



Art Moura at the Good Luck Gallery. Photo courtesy of Eric Minh Swenson.

“There was a time in the 80s where [my art] got me into knowing people that were artists and were more intellectual. This couple was talking about Kafka and I said, ‘Who’s Kafka?’” The woman laughed and pointed at Moura, shouting, “You’re ignorant!” It may have been meant in jest, but it affected Moura.

Moura recalls the experience, describing a pain in his heart. Determined not to be dubbed ignorant again, he began reading Freud and Foucault and whatever else he could find. But there was something disingenuous about the efforts. “Once I had kids, a lot of the books were half read or not read at all, so I gave them all away.” He points out a yellow sculpture in the corner. It’s a simple yellow papier-mâché piece, but like all of his pieces, it connotes sentience. He refers to it as a witch.

This is where Moura’s genius lies, conveying simple but vibrant three-dimensional ideas. The “witch” represents a return to that form for him. It was one of the first pieces he made after throwing away all of the Freud and Foucault and spending more time with his children. His contacts in the art world were certainly knowledgeable about things that he wasn’t, but he realized after the fact that it was somewhat of a pseudo-intellectualism. Knowing for the sake of knowing rather than knowing for the sake of understanding. Having kids freed Moura by taking up more of his time. With less free time for creation, he could only focus on the creative practices he felt an urge to do. He simply didn’t have time to be something that he wasn’t.

This wasn’t the first time Moura realized that life is too short for things you don’t care about. Moura had been passively interested in art since grade school. He was admittedly bad at sports and felt like an outsider at school, so his natural aptitude for art made him feel special. Like anyone, he enjoyed getting attention for something he was good at.



Ghost Todem by Art Moura. Image courtesy of James Jones.

But it wasn't until almost two decades later when he was twenty-six that Moura found a turning point in his dedication to art. He had grown tired of his various warehouse jobs and decided to get a two-year degree in electronics. He was drawing occasionally during his time in school, but found that he barely had any free time while pursuing the degree.

After completing the degree, Moura finished his first day of his new job and was surprised to find that he wasn't entirely drained from the day. He had free time once again, so he immediately sat down and painted an apple. He so enjoyed that experience that he told himself, "I'm never going to do anything I don't want to do again."

Every day, Moura came home and drew. "I've been pretty disciplined. I tried to sketch from pictures. I felt I needed to get a certain amount of ability to draw before I did anything else." After some time sketching images based on pictures and musicians like Peter Tosh and members of The Clash, the desire to do things his way took over again. "One day, I just started drawing the way I wanted to. It came out kind of like German Expressionism. So I did that for a while."



Exhibition view. Image courtesy of the Good Luck Gallery.

Six years into his life working as an electrician and painting in his off-time, Moura began making trips to Spain. Why? He laughs. “Well, mainly because I didn’t want to work.” He would save up for a six-month trip, head off to Spain until the money ran out, and repeat the process.

Spain may have been an escape, but he also used it as an opportunity to keep drawing, and to expand his horizons. “I kept on visiting Guernica because I was obsessed with Picasso’s horses.” He was struck by Picasso’s preliminary sketches for the mural, especially the horses’ teeth. “I wanted to get that graphic thing down. I wanted to learn how to do that.” Did he ever master that? He shrugs and smiles. “Not quite.”

Moura’s transition from drawing to sculpting and mixed media came in the form of, quite appropriately, heads. “I’d make these heads out of clay, put gauze on them, pull them out, and then paint the gauze.” From there, he began making the heads out of cement, and filled his barbecue pit, creating what he described as a flower bed.

While experimenting with this form, he got his hands on the spring 2002 edition of [Raw Vision](#) that featured the work of Ferdinand Cheval, the outsider artist postman who spent decades picking up stones on his mail route to build the Palais idéal, a castle-like structure. Moura was struck by the work as he found it to be similar to his own creative efforts. “I thought, ‘Wow, it’s strange. It seems like similar stuff.’ Seeing that kind of freed me up.”



Art Moura's car parked outside the exhibition. Image courtesy of the Good Luck Gallery.

Outside the gallery, Moura has parked one of his most experimental pieces, his art car. The Volvo 740 station wagon is a piece that began when a friend of his brought over a can of paint and told him, "It's about time you painted your car."

Of course, painting it wouldn't be sufficiently Moura, so he covered it with doll heads, busts, and entire mannequins. The body of the car itself is painted black and yellow and covered in paintings and drawings- some on paper adhered to the car and some applied directly to the car's body.

He points out characters that he refers to as walkers, named after the zombies on the AMC television show, *The Walking Dead*, as well as his take on birds. "I might be wrong, but especially these birds are like the graphic cartoonish stuff that's been popular for a while."



Art Moura with his car. Image courtesy of the Good Luck Gallery.

This is why he has trouble identifying as self-taught. “It’s hard to keep pure unless you’re stuck in a cell maybe.” While he didn’t go to art school, Moura did take drawing classes and art history classes in junior college. On top of that, he’s weary of all of the self-described Outsider artists popping up on Etsy. “The guy that started this whole Art Brut [movement] used to go to insane asylums. I don’t want to pretend I’m anything like that to get attention.”

But even eschewing the Outsider title, Moura admits, “I don’t want to make it bigger than it is, but I do have social anxiety, and the art helps that. It helps me be comfortable in my house and it helps me meet people. It’s a way to make my life rich.”

The Good Luck Gallery has extended the exhibition of Art Moura’s work through February 20, 2016.