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Inclusive Family: Elliott Hundley Interviewed by Osman Can Yerebakan

Collages as characters.

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Elliott Hundley, *Bishop*, 2021, oil stick, encaustic, paper, plastic, pins, photographs, fabric, foam and linen on panel, 76.5 x 78.5 x 4.25 inches. Courtesy of Kasmin.

Elliott Hundley's Los Angeles studio receives occasional visits from the local skunks. They approach the artist while he smokes in his alley, or they hang out with the stray cats. But that's okay because skunks are Hundley's favorite animals. The skunk Halloween costume that his mother made for the eight-year-old Hundley is currently sitting at his studio, a former sewing factory in Chinatown. The childhood keepsake, however, is hardly the only piece of memorabilia around. Piles of magazines, books, photographs, and other stuff are the artist's primary source for his large-scale collages which he finishes with painterly gestures.

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Countless cutouts that Hundley has collected over the last twenty-five years, along with photographs he took of family and friends at his studio, now live across ten collages and a sculpture in his current solo exhibition, *Balcony*, at Kasmin in New York City. There are photographs of his first boyfriend from the late 1990s, for example, as well as scraps from stuff people drop off at his studio because they know he'll use them.

The exhibition's title refers to Jean Genet's 1956 play, which is the central theme for the work, so much so that each collage is named after a character, such as Madam, Queen, or Bishop. The play—which takes place in a brothel while a revolution occurs outside in a nameless city—is typical of Genet with sex and power intertwined as both bodily and political entities. For Hundley, sex throughout the play is an auxiliary metaphor that hides the larger bartering of power. "It's rather about identity and desire and relational power, less about the physical," he told me.

—Osman Can Yerebakan

Osman Can Yerebakan

Jean Genet's text leaves the city outside undisclosed, but did you imagine a specific city while making the works?

Elliott Hundley

In fact, yes, New Orleans. The mural I will show at *Prospect.5* was inspired by Mardi Gras and the idea of parade floats resembling balconies. New Orleans also has a history of brothels and balconies. I've been there only twice, so the city is in many ways still a fantasy for me. At one point, I had considered making collages after Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*. Cy Twombly had also done paintings about that play. After reading it, however, it didn't feel like the best match, but it led to my series about Antonin Artaud's *There Is No More Firmament*.

OCY

Let's talk about the photographs of your family and friends in the collages and the definition of family for you as a queer person.

EH

Family is definitely an inclusive term for me as a gay man, but my biological family members, like my brother and mother, are in the photographs as well. They span a broader community of my people in Los Angeles. They are familiar with my practice at this point, so they come to my studio, and I first tell them a little bit about the inspiration, because they mostly haven't read the text.

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Elliott Hundley, *Sinner*, 2021, oil stick, encaustic, paper, plastic, pins, photographs, fabric, foam and linen on panel, 76.5 x 78.5 x 4 inches. Courtesy of Kasmin.

OCY

I always find collaging to be a queer act: collecting, saving, and even hiding cutouts from different worlds to create different versions for yourself. The make-do aspect has always been a part of queer art.

EH

After some personality test, I learned that I am a reconciler, which I realized is what I also do in art. Salvaging, mending, resuscitating all relate to collage and world building. I don't think it's the only way to make art, but this is a template that I use. Painting is a stage, and I am delivering something. I am a repressed performer who doesn't want to use his body in front of people, but I have a latent desire to do so.

OCY

Then how about studio versus stage, the first one meaning isolation and having no audience while the latter is for a crowd? Studio means process and stage is the final work.

EH

The difference between the two is time. If I could do my work in front of people, I would gladly do so, but it's against the work's nature. I need time to perform and deliver an idea.

OCY

Do you see collaging as a performance due to its physical aspect?

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EH

Not in general, but in my case, yes. The works are as large as my hands can reach when I stand in the middle. They're inscribed with my activities. Even before making them, there are steps of going through the scraps and sorting them into trays. The collaging process is up close: I don't step away. I work on many collages at the same time, so I walk around the studio. They form themselves organically in small vignettes. I cut out stuff all the time, then label and file them. Every day, I go through the piles and pick pieces based on a content or, in this show, the character. For the character of General, for example, I put a lot of porcelain imagery to reflect breaking and vulnerability, power but also fragility, like a bull in a china shop.



Detail of Elliott Hundley, *Sinner*, 2021, oil stick, encaustic, paper, plastic, pins, photographs, fabric, foam and linen on panel, 76.5 x 78.5 x 4 inches. Courtesy of Kasmin.

OCY

What about the play's sexual power which reflects a bureaucratic authority with characters such as Police, General, and Thief? Genet attributes them the ability to both cause and control chaos. Do you consider your collages chaotic?

EH

I was initially confused by the play, which made it appealing to use as a source. It felt labyrinthine, like the illusions inside a house of mirrors. That effect is something I always strive for in my work: the viewer can get lost or disoriented in it.

OCY

Genet seems self-destructive to me, always choosing the painful path. I might be over-interpreting, but your strategy to use pins reads as an allusion to this pain.

EH

The work, and therefore the pins, are about memorializing, holding onto a memory or solidifying it. A pin

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to me captures not a sudden blow but rather a nagging, annoying, insidious violence that is undermining. I should note that I am not nihilistic, and my work is definitely not either.

OCY

When viewed from a few steps away, each work is a memory map that points to different moments in time through your filtering of them.

EH

The process is diaristic, all about memory. Altogether, they might as well be a scrap book. The two small works on both sides of the entrance are titled by the day I made them. They bookend the larger collages.

OCY

Those two might be viewers watching the larger works which each reflect a character with the chandelier hanging center stage.

EH

Definitely.

OCY

What is your strategy for collecting images that turn into cutouts?

EH

I've been collecting stuff in a passive way. Last night, I found a painting on the street while walking to my hotel. I eventually gave it to another person on the street, but I would have otherwise kept it to make art. The process is more about sensibility than activity.



Installation view of *Elliott Hundley: Balcony*, Kasmin. Photo by Christopher Stach. Courtesy of Kasmin.

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OCY

The chandelier sculpture conveys the idea that the exhibition is a stage, something operatic which is not foreign to Genet. Both *The Balcony* and *The Maids* have been turned into operas, and that's not surprising because his characters act operatic in the sense that they refuse to submit to logic and make erratic decisions within the reality of their circumstances which are oftentimes dire.

EH

In his description of the set, the chandelier is the only thing that remains stable for the entire play. For me, it's a bell jar that holds the entire narrative while it's entirely fake. A chandelier is like the talisman or reminder to ground yourself in the fantasy, a frame within artificiality; reality is outside of it. The play's exterior scenes still have the chandelier.

OCY

There is also something queer about a chandelier. A seemingly utilitarian object that defies that role and chooses to be excessively flamboyant. It goes against the pressure of (re)productivity.

EH

Chandeliers are places for projection in both senses; they are interplays of light. They are not just objects that dissolve light but rather are transportive. They're symbols of fragility in a contractual society. My chandelier in the show has layers of materials. The base is an armature from a Burning Man float I found in a dumpster. It was perhaps made to look like a dystopian vessel. I took it, bent it, and added neon. The neon parts in this sculpture are from a collaboration with a glass bender who came to my studio. I wanted them to look like drawings. If you look closer, you see that the light is moving within the tube, which gives an electric or snaking effect.

OCY

There's a symphonic element to the collages as if they could create music. Do you listen to music while you work at your studio?

EH

I like the idea of them having the potential to make sound. I listen to 1980s Italian summer hits. Do you know Giuni Russo's "Un'estate al mare"?

Elliott Hundley: *Balcony is on view at Kasmin in New York City until October 23; Hundley's work can also be seen in Prospect.5: Yesterday we said tomorrow in New Orleans until January 23.*

Osman Can Yerebakan is a curator and art writer based in New York. His writing has appeared in T: The New York Times Style Magazine, Paris Review, The Guardian, Artforum, Artnet, Brooklyn Rail, BOMB, Observer, New York Magazine, Wallpaper, Village Voice, and elsewhere.*