

Art &amp; Design

## Painter Canyon Castator on Drunk Tattoo Artistry & Living the Brooklyn Stereotype

June 21, 2013 10:49 am By Allyson Shiffman

I am intimately familiar with the work of Brooklyn-based artist Canyon Castator. This is because I have two of his etchings tattooed on my skin for eternity. One is a gnarly looking stick n' poke, however, the other is a more accurate reflection of Canyon's prowess as an artist; a loosely sketched skull that receives several compliments every time I wear short sleeves. Canyon's tattoos, simple and romantic line drawings he whips up in mere moments on an iPad, are a stark contrast against his meticulously executed oil paintings. Unexpectedly framed portraits of friends, family and colleagues, Canyon's paintings reflect both a strong point of view and sheer artistic capability.

Hallmarked by wine and tattoos, visits to Canyon's cavernous Brooklyn studio are a delight. Recently I had the pleasure of witnessing him brand another artist, Carly Mark – an experience she recorded using Photobooth for her online video series entitled "Body Talk." I documented the session on my iPhone (that's three Apple product mentions in one post. I'll look for my check in the mail). But first, I chatted with Canyon about his natural inclination towards art, his process and the worst tattoo the world has ever seen.



### At what point did you know you wanted to pursue art as a career?

Originally I had no desire whatsoever to be a broke artist, but that changed. My dad is a sculptor and he's been a professional artist since I was born. It can be pretty bleak and not very profitable but it just got to a point where I had been exposed to a certain kind of thinking my entire life and it made sense. I would draw something and my dad would come and give me a quick critique and I'd draw it again. I was constantly either in his studio working for him or drawing and that eventually got to a point where it was beyond something I was passionate about it was just a part of me.

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# BULLETT

### **You're textbook nature vs. nurture.**

I really don't think I had any say in it... it just happened.

### **Describe your method.**

I work with a photographer and that photographer changes. In that way, I create a distance from what the photos look like. I direct, I play with the lighting and I get a little bit of their eye in there as well. I like that and that kind of separation from the content. It helps so that it's not so singular. So the photography is very important but at the same time it's just a tool.

### **How do you choose subjects?**

I work with people who are close to me on some level, whether it's a good friend or someone I work with on a different project or a girlfriend. I try to make non-personal paintings of people who are very dear to me. I always go back to this idea of pulling an image off a website and dragging it onto your desktop. You have nothing to do with this image aside from the fact that you like it. So you drag it onto your desktop and it becomes part of your things and you have a connection to this image. I'm reversing that process. I'm taking something that's very close to me and creating distance.



### **And how did you get into giving tattoos?**

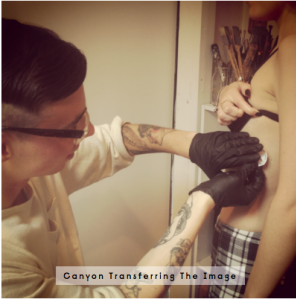
I started tattooing when I was 17 or 18. I lived in this apartment with five other dudes. I had a friend who was selling a machine so we all just pitched in \$15 and bought it. None of us knew how to use it so we basically had this foreign object that leaves very permanent marks. Because I drew and painted I was the person who gave them; I was assigned that role. I have terrible leg tattoos from those roommates and they have awful practice tattoos from me. It was such a nice environment to experiment with something that none of us knew anything about. I have friends who run a shop in Boulder and they'd come over for our tattoo parties and be like, "wait, don't do that." Even now I'll go and get tattooed and be like, "I've been doing that wrong this entire time."

### **As someone who has been tattooed by you, that's terrifying.**

It all depends on how serious you take it, but you build friendships that way. We got drunk that night. You'll remember that. If you went into a shop and got it done by a professional they would have done a better job but it seems so lifeless.

### **Tell me a disastrous tattoo story from the trial and error phase.**

I had this neighbor that had a large Worf cutout in his window, from *Star Trek*, and one of my neighbors had been wasted there the night before and stole it. So we're staring at this thing and it



comes to someone that we should get the *Star Trek* insignia.

### Oh god.

So we're all psyched. We get through one *Star Trek* insignia and the machine starts acting up and I have no idea what is going on. When we finished the first tattoo it looked horrendous. We got three done and the machine broke. For the next two or three weeks we would be at a bar and take our shirts off and press down our insignias and talk through them. A month or two later I had to get it covered up.

### And now you've defined a real tattoo aesthetic that's a lot looser than your painted works. Why is that?

With the tattoos I give myself more room to experiment with lines. There's a hierarchy to paintings with a rich history and I respect that history very much. In tattooing, there's this one aesthetic that rules over all tattooing. Everyone goes back to those original flash sheets and that original Sailor Jerry art and images from the Navy and the Air Force and that's at the top and everyone riffs on that. I try to find lines that are less often pursued – just giving it more air to breathe. Those images that have been done over and over are very tight and very precise. There is a history behind them but I am not a tattoo artist. I am not a part of that conversation. Some of those classic tattoos are just the artist showing off.

### Do you watch *Best Ink*?

It's the ultimate dick-measuring contest.

### This loft is so beautiful. Do you ever feel a sense of irony living here, in Brooklyn, and being an artist?

I'm fulfilling a stereotype.

### I mean, there's a lot of exposed brick in here.

The idea of that is nice. I don't know how I wound up in this space and if I feel blank I just have to step outside.

### If you weren't an artist what would you be pursuing professionally?

Shit, no one's ever asked me this. When I first moved here I worked at The River Café and I wore a white tux, black pants, polished shoes and had my fingernails checked when I went into work. I had to learn all these things about wine. Honestly, it's the most money I've ever made but it got to a point where I couldn't be there. I was being pushed away from what feels natural. So it wouldn't be service industry.

### I didn't ask what it wouldn't be.

Well, every summer I worked on my grandparent's cattle ranch.

### They were raising cattle for slaughter?

They didn't have a slaughterhouse, but yeah. It was all free-range open fields. The best meat you could have. I loved it. If I didn't have something that I felt so inclined to do, I would have inherited my grandfather's ranch.

