

Jim Lopez & Artist Aaron Olshan

Discuss Garbology

Jim: Do you ever think about giving up on Art?

Aaron: Oh, man, you know, it's like this, when you've lived it as long as I have you always entertain thoughts, oh yeah, "Wouldn't it have been nice if I had taken the route, the more travelled path of being a straight ahead guy, a regular guy," but it didn't work out that way. My whole drive, my whole life has been to somehow make this happen. That's the only thing that ever drove me to the actual limit of not being, you know, a functioning member of the main stream. I gave it all up to have a studio, to keep persevering. Art burns so deep inside I can't give it up. I understood early on that Art is a profession that can kill and often does. I've seen a lot of people fall by the wayside. That's just what comes with it. You don't choose Art, Art chooses you. If I could have done something different, believe me I would have done something different. You'd have to be a freakin' nut-job to get into being a visual artist in this world. The Art World is money, writing grants, playing the game and there's so much to it, and basically artists just want to go to their studio and work.

If I could only have a life like that I'd pretty good, considering all the stress I have to deal with. In my ideal life I would work all the time. I have endless amounts of ideas and projects: multi-media, photography and film and print making. If I could be the artist that I want to be that would be something. I hope one day not to be a slave. That's my goal in life. I want to be free. If I could ever achieve the true possibilities of being free. God knows what's going to happen, but as long as I'm a slave...

Jim: Do you feel like a slave?

Aaron: My best friend, the artist Andres Serrano, he was a slave once, but then he became rich and famous and it freed him to be what he has to be. We're like brothers, we've been friends forever. He was a struggling artist, you know, and then he happened to get a break. *Piss Christ*, you know. That's what every artist dreams of. I just want to be free (laughs). I want to be able to get up and endlessly work, to not have a teaching job and deal with a bunch of shit to keep this going.

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Jim: Isn't the struggle part of the art? Can you really be an artist without that struggle?

Aaron: Yeah, you can, bro, strangely enough. Without that struggle you're freed to concentrate on what you have to do. The whole romantic myth of the struggling artist...that's all bullshit, bro.



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Jim: You think so?

Aaron: Absolutely. That's romanticism. I grew up with a father who believed in that myth and sometimes lived it, because he had to be a fuck-up sometimes. I'm not going to play that, because I realized that the only way to be an artist the way I want to be is to be a dynamic visionary, who has ultimate power over what he wants to do. For me to do that I have to be at the top of my game and struggling and being anything other than being on top will not work. I always fight anyone who gets into the idea of the struggling, romantic artist, because so many of us are caught up in that. But once you've lived it for a long time you soon get over that bullshit. I rejected that from my father early on, who was playing it out, and I saw many artists die and be stupid and a lot of shit.

I will agree that many artists have issues, asocial personalities that don't work well in systems. The reason that artists become artist is because they want to create their own world, no one else's world will do and that's the pain. Sometimes we kick that anger out on ourselves, drinking heavily, doing drugs or just being the general fuck-up, or being anti-social, like myself. I happen to have an asocial type of personality, and I understand that I struggle everyday with that. My best times are when I am creating my own world because I see it come alive. I have my own vision. It's not just play for me. It doesn't just get me laid. I look to create a new language. You have to put in endless hours, and you have to start out with a modicum of talent. It's a subtle thing.

Jim: Wouldn't you say that your art has been influenced by your struggle? The struggling artist does not mean being a drunk or a drug addict or a fuck-up or pursuing some romantic notion of mimicking a Rimbaud or Bukowski.

Aaron: Has struggle helped me? I don't know, I don't want to romanticize it. I'm not going to say if it's helped me or not. I'm a bit more realistic about it. Is there a struggle, has there been a struggle? Yes, but I look at it as a hindrance that I need to work through and get down to what I really need to do, and do what I do best. Has struggle helped me? No, I can't say. Once I say the struggle has helped me immediately my art lends itself to the image of the romantic struggling artist. And here again, I would love to say to you, "I'm one of the richest, most famous artists in the world." It's at that level that I can do everything that I want to do. I want to do it legitimately, not like Julian Schnabel or these artists who higher media people to put their name out there constantly. I want to pursue my career legitimately, which is based solely on the quality of my work and not some PR campaign. My

personality is irrelevant. I don't care about that. I want people to come to my shows and say, "Finally, an artist who has really honed his craft." Because, in the final analysis that's the only thing that interests me. Money and fame are only there, as I perceive, only exist to make me work harder, to just be an artist.

I don't want to have kids, I wasn't cut out for them. I'm like many of my fellow artists, none of us have children, it's incredible. None of us have kids, because artists just want to do what the hell they want to do, and that's enough. That's the life I want. I just want to do what I want to do.

Every time I go to the studio, you know, I've been doing it for so many decades...as they say, this is the age when artists do their best work, when they hit their fifties something happens. I still have the energy. My mind still works good. I have that artistic, dynamic power right now. I saw it when my father was his in his fifties, his work was magnificent: powerful and disturbing and angry and would really knock people out. People went crazy over my father's stuff, and then as he got older there was an energy change, and he went through another phase. And now he's eighty-eight years old, and he does very nice paintings: landscapes and still-lives and scenery, and he's very good at that stuff. But now that I'm in my fifties I'm earning-up. I just want to work. Everything has to be taken to the final limit, and I love those eighteen hour days in the studio when I can have them.

Jim: You don't think that your struggle and your father's struggle have influenced your work?

Aaron: Oh, yeah, it's influenced me plenty.

Jim: Without struggle, it's not a matter of romanticizing, it's a matter of understanding life, as struggle, no one escapes it. Everyone struggles to some degree.

Aaron: Yeah, but wouldn't it be lovely if we could be free from that?

Jim: I don't know.

Aaron: I would like to wake up in the morning and feel like the world is mine, you know, I wish I could feel that. To be free of all the bullshit.

Jim: Do you wish you could be an artist that was in the king's court?

Aaron: Yeah. If the Medicci were still here, I'd say Lorenzo, "Please, give me a break. (laughs) Please, give me a break. Let me do what I do, and

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don't bother me. Let me run my show and it will be a good investment.”

Jim: Don't you think the artist in the king's court is the other side of the coin of the romantic, struggling artist?

Aaron: No. The king's court now is when you're in the big galleries and the collections and museums. That's the king's court and that's a whole world that few ever enter. Those are good career moves that will help you along. But then, again, here it is again, it's such a desperate situation in the Art World. One can be easily corrupted. There's a lot of possibilities for corruption in the Art World. To stay pure to your-self is very hard.



Jim: I think that was what Tennessee Williams was trying to get at when he wrote that unless one is morally prepared for success that one will fall prey to corruption when success is achieved.

Aaron: That's easily said enough but you can't know until you're there. I mean, everyone has needs and desires and we're driven by our unconscious needs to be fulfilled in whichever or whatever way they want to be fulfilled.

Money and power can do things to us and I'm equally human, and I know it can do things to me. But I just feel, and I'm so driven, I can only do what I do. I don't think I would be corrupted in my work. It's an overwhelming drive in me. I don't think my work would get corrupted. Other parts of me might get corrupted but not that particular part. I know what I want to do, and what I do, that nothing can sway that. Power and money would not change that for me.

On the other hand, to be an artist is to be a loner, to be free to roam and to search, to create your own world, to be free of all belief systems, to clear your head and be open to any possibilities, you know. That's it. Every time I walk into something that has a system attached to it I always say to myself, "Oh No. There's got to be a cog somewhere in this." Then when I come home to my studio I create what I want to create. Like when I created Angels, Aliens and Archetypes I thought to myself, "What I'm after is to do something that no else has ever done, which is to create another world and to create something that no one has ever seen, to create a language that no one has ever seen."

I have no interest in photographing everything in the world. It's all been done by better people than me. I don't need to photograph another barn in Province Town or another landscape in the Mid West. It's been done and done and done. I don't want to go to Niagara Falls, and I don't want to go to Paris and photograph the Eiffel Tower. I don't care about any of that. The only thing that I care about is my own inner world. Every photograph that you see of mine is my inner world. I can only photograph my internal world. It's the only thing that interests me in all my work.

Jim: Would you say that you're inner world is influenced by struggle and desire for freedom?

Aaron: Yeah. It may be influenced, but it is irrelevant because it just comes out in the work itself. There's a language to it. I'm more focused in on what I want at that time and how to make it happen. When you achieve your highest level of language you have no influences. You're away from everything and strictly focused on what has to be done, how it has to be created, how this object works with that line and that shadow and that form and that composition. Those are the things I am interested in. I don't care about my struggles. So what? Asking if that has helped me or is it going to make me a better artist? No. It's nothing to focus on. Just get down to the work, that's all I think about, "What do I have to do? How does this have to be? And if it's not right, you know, than I have to go back and make it right." Work, work, work, work until the language is honed and refined. Let the art historians, if they're inclined, deal with my life as it is connected to my

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work. That's how it should be done. But I only have time for the work.

I've read many stories about Picasso and how he got to be what he is, but really, you know, and he's been romanticized so much, but really it came down to the fact that he had it. He really had the touch to be a great artist. And when he hit that canvas or the sculpture or whatever he did he had the touch. He was so focused on the work, yeah. And his art overwhelmed his personality and the character. When you get in front of a great Picasso, you go, like wow, that's really something. That guy really had it going on. And I want to model myself after all the artists that are less concerned with their character and all the other things that come with being an artist and focus in on why such and such an artist created that language and why is that language important? It's got to come down to that in the end.



Jim: I suspect that every artist, whether he or she's a writer, a painter, a photographer or musician wants their work to be catalogued, housed somewhere else other than their own place. A struggling artist ends up being responsible for housing all of his or her work. When they die, the concern is where will my work end up, who will house it or remember it?

Aaron: That's it. It's the same issue that every artists deals with. You hit it

on the nose. You hit it on the nose. Because, you know, you have to put it out there, and I think that sometimes when a vision is dynamic enough it must get shown one way or another. So that people can connect to it, so it can move. With photographs, I know that they connect immediately, and I get endless reactions from them, and I know they also raise reactions, either good or bad or disturbing or produce anxiety. And it's all equal, in my opinion, it's all good stuff.

Jim: Art needs not to be just shown but it needs to be housed and catalogued by someone other than the artist.

Aaron: Absolutely, absolutely. It has to be collected. That's the ideal situation. That's a whole other story. That's the whole other side of the Art World. That's a whole other article in-and-of-itself. What it is to be on the political side, because it's a game. It's a big game. There's so much trash out there, so much ridiculousness, it makes me laugh.

Jim: At this time in history, in an economic recession, who's housing, who's buying the art? Who's willing to take a chance to spend money on art?

Aaron: Nobody right now. Everyone is shell shocked. The New York Art World is falling apart. I can't believe it. I was out the other day and everyone was telling me, "I'm not going to make it too much longer, you know, I can't sell anything for even a reasonable price."

Jim: Don't you think that the artists who will make it are the ones that find freedom in just doing the work regardless of their social or financial status?

Aaron: Yeah...

Jim: So isn't that struggle?

Aaron: Art is always going to get done. Periods are going to change. Things will get bad. The Art World will be in the dumps, and then it will get better, and it will revive and everyone will open up again and the next generation of artists will show. Art is not going to go away. Unfortunately, it's going to be suppressed until things get better. And artists are not just concerned about selling, they're concerned with just surviving, you know, and being able to do it. They want to survive. How can you keep this going? Artists during the WPA, those artists were lucky enough to get jobs, because Roosevelt created the WPA. That was a good thing. I don't think that's going to happen today. In 1932-3 the country was a complete mess and any

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artist working was lucky. I don't know, I see the economic reports each day and what jobs are being lost, we live in scary times. I just hope that I can keep everything going. That's what I need to do.

Jim: Do you think that the real struggle is to find freedom in the midst of fear, not necessarily financial and reputational success, but actually the ability to plow ahead regardless of circumstances, whether favorable or oppressing? Isn't that the real struggling artist, the one that continues to do his or her work regardless of their station? Isn't that the real struggling artist, not this romantic drunken, drug addict, down-and-out living on the street, whatever, but the artist who struggles and still finds freedom, in the sense that they disregard or turn their back on the world of success and believe that their work is good?

Aaron: If you're a true artists that goes without saying.

Jim: That's the real struggling artist, not this romantic notion of getting fucked-up or being fucked-up, not this image of struggle. Charles Bukowski struggled and drank hard, but his drinking enhanced his art. He worked constantly...

Aaron: Bukowski's type of asocial personality was a borderline personality disorder. It worked for him. One time I was talking to Alan Ginsberg and he was telling me that he did this talk with Bukowski at a college and the guy didn't bathe. And he came up to the stage stinking like hell and there goes my point. You know, it's going too far...

Jim: What, because he smelled?

Aaron: ...that level of dysfunction can't help one to be an artist. I know all the stories about Bukowski and he's certainly not my model for wanting to be an artist. I respect him as an artist, some of his stuff is so funny, but otherwise, come on, give me a break with all the drinking and being a fuck-up.

Jim: A lot of people misunderstand Bukowski, thinking he was just a dirty, old, drunken man, a myth. But Bukowski was the philosopher of the ugly, of ugliness. He was an unattractive man who elucidated the world of ugliness, for that he was remarkable. A lot of people try to mimic his myth...

Aaron: They do, that's what I'm talking about...

Jim: and that's an error. When Bukowski was drinking and down-and-out

he was writing. A lot of these artists who have a romantic notion of the struggling artist aren't actually writing or painting or engaged in their craft. They're just partying and hanging out. They're not doing the work. Bukowski worked. He had the discipline. Being unbathed was an aspect of his character which showed a world that was ugly...

Aaron: That he did, that he did.

Jim: He wrote and talked about a world that was ugly and that was his art. That was his genius. I grew up in Los Angeles and lot of people wanted to be like Bukowski, but all they did was drink hard and party and look filthy, but they didn't have the discipline. It's up to each artist to determine their own level of participation. The struggle that I was referring to is an internal struggle, the struggle with oneself to get out of bed and to create even when you're not being validated with a paycheck or recognition



Aaron: Right, that is true. And I agree with you and that is exactly what turns artists away from their work, not being validated. I agree with you, but there is another sort of artist. The driven and strong. You're so fuckin' driven that you have no choice, even lack of validation doesn't stop you. Be-

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cause you can't help yourself to do anything but create.

Jim: Couldn't we call that freedom?

Aaron: Here again, I don't know what that means. Why is that freedom? I just know that I'm driven. I know what I have to do. I don't want to think of it as freedom. I think of it as this is what I am set to do in my life. It is what I do well. This is what has to get done and I go to my studio, and I do it. And when I do get some validation or something good comes from it, it always feels good.

I'm working on so many projects and have so many things going that I'm just focused on that, work, work. I'm going to spend the rest of my life just developing myself as an artist.

Jim: There were some tones in your Angeles, Aliens and Archetypes that are reminiscent of Joel Peter Witkin.

Aaron: Yeah, I mean, I love Joel Peter Witkin. I think he's a genius, he's true genius. Everyone equates my stuff with Joel Peter Witkin, but we're very different.

Jim: Absolutely. The composition is different.

Aaron: The only thing that is similar is the madness. Everyone sees all the craziness and insanity and how it's all made up. And mine is the same way. We're like first cousins, but we're very different. We deal with different things but we have that element of madness and craziness and that visionary singular thing that goes on, so, yeah, he was one of the artists for me that said to me, "Dig deep into yourself."

Jim: What do you think about photographers like Sebastiao Salgado, who photographs the poor throughout the world?

Aaron: I think he's great. I think he's great. I think sometimes he's a photographer and sometimes he's an artist. He'll go both places. I think he's great. He's one of my favorites.

Jim: What distinguishes one from being a photographer from being an artist?

Aaron: A photographer generates things that have been done. They may be done well and at a professional level, even if it's really good quality. I go to photography galleries all the time, and once in awhile I walk into a gallery,

and I see a real artist. And the photos really sing. They have a transformative element in them that makes it bigger than the photography. Any idiot can snap a shutter. That does not mean anything to me.

Jim: Would you say that the photographer who is able to capture a moment where the subject transcends his or herself or itself is an artist, that that is the dividing line, the distinction between being a photographer and an artist? I met with Larry Armstrong, the director of photography at the Los Angeles Times, and he suggested sitting at the bus stop and watching people get off the bus as they forget themselves and attempt to capture that moment, to develop the ability to anticipate the transcendent moment before it happens. That's a different kind of photography from creating your own world and capturing something that already exists in the world.

Aaron: If you can capture the world in its transcendence that's incredible, but I don't want to tackle that. Some do it really well, but it's still photography. It's not really art, it's not transformative. There are just a handful of people with a camera who are transformative, who I call artists, and I greet them as artist not photographers.

I met Joel Peter Witkin at an opening of his retrospective at the Guggenheim and he just knocked me out, just blew me away. It was the most amazing show, wow. (Laughs) He kicked ass, and I felt like I had just seen something. (Laughs) He was scratching people's faces out with a razorblade, messing up the negative, painting stuff into it, talk about transformative. With this guy there's no limitations. I walked out and it all became clear to me. It all made sense to me, where I said to myself, "Aaron, stop photographing things in the world," you know. There's nothing left to do, nothing. It's all about who you are. What do you have inside? What is your language? That's it and I had to come up with mine. That's it, creating a new world. Angels, Aliens and Archetypes comes from a deep, dark space in me that is driven down in me, creating it, it just started to come out.

I mean it's literally the building blocks of who I am. I'm seeing a side of myself for the first time as its coming. I have this idea, I'm building up the studio, creating the sets for the series, and while I'm doing it, you know, there's no particular...there's just a general outline of a plan. And I'm moving this part and that element. And I'm seeing how this looks there and that looks there. And the shoot is ready to go. That's how it is. Every shot that you look at is created for that particular shot and even though they work together, each image sits on its own. They work as individuals and as a series.

Jim: Where do you gather the artifacts for your photographs, particularly

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for Angels, Aliens and Archetypes?

Aaron: I found that stuff anywhere I could, in the garbage, on the street, warehouses, garage sales. I dragged so much shit on the subway.

Jim: Do you think that if you were a wealthy artist that you would have gathered artifacts out of the garbage can?



Aaron: Absolutely. I got my Ph.D. in garbology (laughing). I'm a true garbologist of the highest level. I mean, I could really write my book on garbology. I could even teach a course, because I have an eye for useful garbage. Every friend is asking me, "How did you spot that?" And I tell them, "I saw it from down the block, it's mine." (Laughs) "I saw that down the block from the corner of my eye." (Laughs) People will tell you, my friends will tell you, the guys a grand master, the guy knows his garbage. And I do, you know. I'll pick stuff off the street, stuff that's ridiculous. I picked up a hundred-and-fifty film reels because I knew one day that I would use them for something. Then one day I was looking at some pv wire cable lying around my studio, and I see the film reels and something within my unconscious mind arises, so I put the reels and the wire together. Then I see a box in the corner full of tank shells that I found that were emptied of gunpowder, they were big tank shells from World War II. So I shoved the tank shells into the holes of the film reels, and as I'm doing this it starts to look like an Indian headdress and that's how the bullet shots came together. As I was creating the series of Angels, Aliens and Archetypes things are unfolding to me. There were many, many moments like that where things just happened.

When I was shooting with the automatic trigger I was also playing with exposures and double exposures, and I was trying new things. I was playing and learning. I learned a lot along the way. There are a number of subsets from Aliens, Angels and Archetypes. Sometimes the images got very spacey, very primal, comical, sometimes they're a little more anxiety producing. I especially love the New Executive series, the guys in a suit and his head is covered with wire, carrying a briefcase in some sort of cave.

I never did so much work in the darkroom. I learned so much. I started to print them large on black and white paper. But when I was at the photography store I was looking at color paper and decided to print my black and white negatives on color paper. This gave the images a hype-sense of the surreal, something that the black and white paper did not lend itself to. This was a good move. I also used selenium toning.

Jim: What's your hermeneutical process in the darkroom?

Aaron: I can't even begin to tell you. All I know is that I spend a lot of hours in the darkroom. I was engaged in a lot of technical things, relearning to use a color enlarger, burning and dodging, adding color, printing different sizes, putting a color mask over the black and white negative and seeing what reveals itself to me. It's really a process. I spent more hours in the darkroom than I want to talk about. When you're in the darkroom you really are digging it out, a little more of this, a little more of that. If I was to do the whole thing over again I would take the negatives over to my friend who

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works at a photo lab and have him print them really big.

Jim: The darkroom is another artistic endeavor.

Aaron: It's a big language. Technically there are guys out there who blow me away.

Jim: You mentioned the surreal, how has surrealism influenced you?

Aaron: Surrealism has influenced me in this sense: I love art that is other-worldly. I love artists like Hans Bellmer and the Belgian Surrealist, Otto Dix, anything that's mad, you know, Max Ernst, I think was a true genius, one of the greatest artist ever. The madness of their work has influenced me.

All these guys are part of me. I studied them all so intensively that they are all a part of me. I understand what they do, and I'm interested in what they do. I love how they handle their art. They painted their asses off and there was a tremendous freedom in their work. They were all true individuals. They may have been a group, and I'm not saying that they didn't use each other, but they certainly proved to be greater individuals then they were as the group, as Surrealists. I mean each one of them has their own definitive language. That's impressive, you know, that's really something. That's a high-powered group of guys that really, you know, who really did something. You could put any one of them up on a wall next to each other and you will have two definitive artists who are clearly their own, distinctively. That's what I love about them. They were so powerful and then you have all the offshoots of Surrealism, with many countries that had their own version of it.

Even when Francis Bacon applied for the 1939 Surrealist Exhibition, curated by Breton, Francis Bacon being one of the greatest artists who ever lived, Breton turned him down saying to Bacon, "Your work is insufficiently surreal." Yeah, so Breton did not accept that surrealist element in Francis Bacon's work. But I think it's definitely there, yeah. Like...

Jim: I think that Breton was correct in excluding Bacon from the 1938 International Exhibition of Surrealist. Bacon was not with the rest of them as they came together. The Surrealists were birthed collectively, as a group, as demonstrated in the poster with all their portraits surrounding the nude female painted by Rene Magritte, the woman I call the Ontic-Sophia., as they were engaged in different sorts of occult techniques, then when they went away, as individuals, to create their own work, the work was influenced by their coming together, having collectively come together. If Bacon was not there how could he be in the 1938 Exhibition, at a time when Surrealism was

just beginning to establish itself.

Aaron: I think you're on to something but with any group of artists that's true. I mean, you can say that about the Impressionists...

Jim: The Surrealist intended to create a new spirit of art...

Aaron: (Speaking of the Impressionists) they created something that fed off each other and then they went on to create what they did. You can just about say that's true with any group.

Jim: I think you can say that to a certain degree about every other art movement or group but more specifically you can say that about the Surrealists. They came out of the trenches of World War I, really digging into the death and destruction of the nation building that had taken place in the 1880's. There was this big push to create nations in the latter part of the 1800's and then all-of-a-sudden the lines were destroyed and they were left to reconstruct the nations of the world, to draw new lines, borders. The Surrealist's ability, or luck, to survive World War I, with all its ruin, and still come together and intentionally create a movement that was trying to unlock the subconscious was special. A lot of groups of artists will come together and sit around a table at the café or bar and have drinks, smoke cigarettes and talk together and there will arise great fruitions but the Surrealist did something more than that, something infinitely more than that. They actually practiced, or experimented together. A Surrealist's myth is that René Crevel actually committed suicide in hopes of returning to the group and report what was on the other side, to talk with the dead and subconscious realm. There was great faith that did not exist in any other group, that I am aware of, in the world beyond. This is a mythic notion and that shrouds Surrealism as Crevel most likely killed himself because of the fracture that occurred between him and Breton as well as the effect that Crevel's father's suicide had of him; nevertheless it demonstrates the level of commitment to the world beyond that the Surrealists had over any other artistic group or movement. Few artists today have the kind of courage that Camus discussed in his December 1957 lecture titled "Create Dangerously," because art today is much more individualistic.

Aaron: Yeah, Yeah.

Jim: It's very difficult to understand. When Andre Breton went and excommunicated each individual of the Surrealist's group and then himself and then killed Surrealism, a sort of suicide, the idea is that Surrealism began

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with those members collectively and it ended with them collectively; nevertheless the spirit of Surrealism continued and continues. It exists because they created together and were willing to come together and experiment. I don't know if any other movement was as influential as the Surrealist.

Aaron: They were willing to come together and I agree with you, but you know, here again artists do that with each other. I mean, it just happens.

Jim: Has there been another movement that has demonstrated such commitment and belief? I mean, capitalism has fragmented every facet of society, leaving everyone as individuals without a collective. The Surrealists were communist until the Communist Party attempted to obliterate individual will.

We still today find elements of the Surrealistic style in art and it's prevalent in your Angels, Aliens, Archetypes.

Aaron: Art does not occur within a vacuum. Artists see what other artists are doing and are influenced by it or are influenced by the world around them.

Jim: I think you're touching on my earlier point that if you were raised wealthy would you have actually ever become a garbologist?

Aaron: Absolutely I would have...

Jim: You would have...



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Aaron: ...it's my nature. I would have still been going through garbage, because I have found so many treasures. I mean, the first treasure I found in the garbage hooked me. I found those tubes in the garbage. I said, "My god, I found my uniform."

Jim: But if you had been born rich you might have been rummaging through estate sales instead of the garbage?

Aaron: Yeah, I would have gone anywhere to get what I need. If it was the garbage I would have gone there. If it was estate sales I would have gone there. But it's all throw away stuff, hand-me-downs or unwanted, discarded stuff and that's what I have an eye for. Whatever it took or takes, whether I was rich, poor or middle class I look for the discarded throwaway stuff of life. I'm walking down the street, and I see something I need, and I'm going to take it. That's just my nature as an artist. I've taken and found tons of stuff on the street that no one in their right mind would be willing to carry home on the subway. I did it (Laughs) and I use the stuff too. I've saved myself thousands of dollars over the years with all the stuff I've found.

Jim: I've driven across the United States a number of times, and when I did so in my pickup truck I would collect decomposed pieces of wood and iron, and toss them in the back of the truck, let the rain and sun work on them, yank the rusty nails out. When I got ready to make a picture frame I'd grab something out of the back of my truck and watched it come together. I suspect that I would still have that nature had I not been born poor, but I can't say with certainty. I'm not as confident as you are to say that my struggle and poverty has not influenced me in the way that I look for things or in the way that I create.

Aaron: I feel more certain of it because I just know. I'm walking down the street and see something and say, "Hey, what's that?" you know, (laughing). This has been going on forever with me, since my earliest memories. I loved finding treasure, and I still do. 85% of the garbage I find get's used, that's a lot of stuff. I'm still doing the same thing, finding stuff on the street, taking it home building stuff with it. I built a painting rack out of materials I found on the street, a beautiful rack.

Jim: If you were wealthy, don't you think that you would have gone to a store and bought one. I don't mean to belabor the point. I'm not entirely convinced that you are not a struggling artist, and I'm also trying to get at all the mayhem in your Angels, Aliens and Archetypes that I'd like to discover where it comes from, especially since you have this privileged sort of cha-

racter in the new executive who lives in this mayhem.

Aaron: I struggle, I just don't romanticize it. And absolutely, if I had been wealthy I would have gone to the store and bought a painting rack, but you know, the thing is, that I had moved into my new studio and I was collecting this wood...I had the wood already and it was fantastic. I ripped apart my old painting rack and incorporated that one into the new one and a friend of mine, who is a carpenter, came over and we built it together. And the rack came out absolutely fantastic. And I said, "Wow, it's great, when you can take stuff off the street and do something with it like we did."

Jim: You're like an ecological worker. Do you think that the rack is more beautiful than something that you could have bought? Is the rack a part of your art as well?

Aaron: No, no.

Jim: How do you differentiate the two?

Aaron: The rack is just a tool. A rack is not my art, it's a painting rack. It's just a goddamn unit to store my paintings. It's not my art. It's just something that I need that is efficient and done well. That's it. I don't want to make it more than it is. The only thing I want to talk about is my art, that's the work. That's the final end. What am I trying to achieve? And that is where the focus should be.

Jim: How does the architecture of your studio affect your work?

Aaron: The architecture does affect my work. It takes a lot to make my art happen and when I go into my studio I need a place that pleases me. My studio is a damn good studio, but it's not my ultimate studio. But what I have I make it work, like most artists, you know. You can't have what you want, so what you have you make work for you and I do. I have so many projects going in the studio that it's packed down with paintings and drawings and everything all over the place. I can't afford an assistant but I need one.

Jim: If I'm listening correctly, at this stage in your life, in your fifties, you've grown tired of the struggle, and you would like to have a little more prosperity in your life, so that you can free your mind.

Aaron: Right. I would like to have it at an extreme degree. Like I say, I

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always use the term slave and I always think, “I hope one day not to be a slave.” The few friends of mine who have broken the chains of slavery, wake up in the morning and the world is theirs, and they do whatever they want to do, and they’re secure. Like I mentioned my buddy, Andres Serrano, he achieved that accidentally, becoming famous around the world. But he certainly did not expect it, and all he ever thought that he was going to be was a struggling artist. You know, that was it. He said, “I’m doomed to that. I did not know,” as he told me one night at Denny’s, “I did not know that Piss Christ was going to do something around the world. I did not know that Al D’Amato was going to rip it up in front of the Senate.” And when D’Amato did that on the news that put Andres all over the world (pause) overnight. And you know, it couldn’t have been better. What happened to him is what every artist dreams of...

Jim: What do you think about Serrano’s Piss Christ?

Aaron: Ah, I love it. It’s true genius.

Jim: What’s genius about it?



Aaron: Aesthetically it's gorgeous, it's a real beauty. Andres didn't think it was going to mean anything. He called it Piss Christ because he wanted to explain to people what it was made of. He didn't want to get too artsy, that's the way he is. I asked him, "How come you didn't call it Christ in Yellow?" And he said, "Well that didn't really explain what it was, so I thought calling it Piss Christ gave a better explanation of it."

And then, what happened happened. There aren't too many artists who have created a cultural icon. There's a lot of good work that artists do, but very few artists get to create a cultural icon and Andres did. It was bigger than he was. He didn't know that he was going to do it. He didn't have an idea that he was going to do it. And that's the great thing about Art, sometimes it's bigger than you are.

Jim: Would you say, that he got lucky?

Aaron: He'd be the first one to tell you that he got lucky. He says to me to this day, "I'm not a better artist than you. In fact, I can't do what you do. I got lucky. I took a photograph that went all over the world, but I didn't know that that was going to happen. I was lucky. I put it in that group show, somebody wrote something about it, the Christian community went into an uproar, it all went to hell." His life was being threatened with bombs. He was on the news every night. He loved every minute of it. He was absolutely nowhere and nothing one night and the next night he was on the news and then it just went nuts, it went worldwide big.

Jim: There's a sensational element to Art isn't there?

Aaron: Yes there is and fortunately Andres work has enough depth to it that it can handle the sensationalism. The depth of Piss Christ is greater than the sensationalism. Even today, you know, the piece holds up and a lot of Andres work holds up. He's a damn good artist. He's done a lot of good work. It's not just Piss Christ, but as he always says to me, "Piss Christ is the piece that built this house." It's the piece that made him and when he dies it's the piece that no one will ever forget. And that's big, man. Not too many artists can say that, yeah.

Jim: What was the effort that went into it? You take a crucifix, a bowl, piss in it, and snap a few shots.

Aaron: You submerge the crucifix in a bowl or jar of urine, light it just right, take several photographs of it, picked out the best photo, make a print and that was that, you know. That was it and then Piss Christ caused a

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world-wide storm. I love when Art can do that. I love it. It's big. It's big. I do some damn good work myself, but I never created a cultural icon. I hope to do so someday. Is Guernica a cultural icon? It's a great, great painting, I admit it. Everybody admits it, but is it a cultural icon? I don't know, maybe it is.

Jim: I'm not quite certain that Serrano's Piss Christ is truly an icon. What he seemed to me to do was take an icon that existed already and manipulated it. Creating an icon, in my mind, necessitates some ethereal element that has never been seen before.....

Aaron: Christ floating in urine has not been seen before. It's transformative. It's multi-layered, so much has been written about it. So yes, even an icon that has existed before but becomes transformed and is redefined...that's what he did. He took an image, attached some words to it and that combination created something that was bigger than he was. That's really something, when an artist can do that. I don't want to go too much on about it. All of us dream about creating something that's going to get a reaction. And that's good because it keeps the conversation going. I may be sure that Piss Christ is an icon and you may not be, but that is the genius of the piece, everybody knows about it. It keeps the lively discussion going about the nature of Art.

Jim: True, but an icon has more power than popularity. One could say that Al D'Amato played just as big a role in creating the icon as Serrano did. But that's another point. Do you feel slighted a little bit, when you think about all the effort that you put into your work? I mean, Angels, Aliens and Archetypes is a monster work.

Aaron: Yeah, I feel slighted a little, but look at the whole history of Art. This is the way that it is. Sometimes it comes to us sooner. Sometimes it comes to us later, you know. As an old teacher of mine said, "If you're lucky enough to stay alive, maybe something good will happen," you know, and that's all. My teacher Louise Bourgeois, the great sculptor, she's in her nineties now. When I was in college she wasn't famous at all, you know, and then when she got in her seventies she got big and got all that was coming to her. That's the funny thing, you have to just keep it going. You have to try. You have to find a way. You can't give up, you know. I'm too driven to give up anyway. I know what I do.

Jim: Nancy Burson and her work Craniofacial is in some ways reminiscent of yours and Joel Peter Witkin? What did you think of that work?

Aaron: I liked it. I didn't think it was particularly dazzling, as being a brilliantly skilled photographer, but I thought the premise was good and the work was good, yeah, it was good.

Jim: In her Craniofacial there is a sad, grotesque, romantically beautiful feel to the actual subjects in the work and I feel the same way when I look at your work. The subjects that you and Witkin have created and the true life subjects in Craniofacial that Burson has captured are to some extent reminiscent of each other?

Aaron: Uhh, maybe,...

Jim: I'm thinking in the sense of how people with deformed faces are kept very much out of the world. If you give birth to a baby described as a Mongoloid, who will be ridiculed and rejected, the doctors often convince the parents to leave them in some ward, locked away in a hospital. These deformed people are almost the subconscious of society. What I see in your work is the unlocking of the madness or the grotesque deep within the subconscious. Where Burson showed the corporeal nature of the subconscious that is locked away from society, you and Witkin have created your subconscious or your subconscious has created you and your work. She was much more conscious in her work in Craniofacial, whereas, you were more spontaneous, but there is a similar element of ugliness and beauty.

Aaron: Exactly the point. It's always about unlocking elements of the subconscious. That's exactly what I'm interested in.

Jim: You're work has a Mongoloid nature, like in your War Lord, that guy's not looking too well.

Aaron: I am the subject in all of the shots in Angels, Aliens and Archetypes.

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