

# EACH MODERN

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## Antone Könst Interview

By Sean Gaffney, Mar, 2020

*Sean Gaffney : The title of your latest exhibition, and your first in Asia, is called “Casual Magic” What does casual magic mean to you? What is the unifying thread that connects this collection of works?*

**Antone Könst :** I love titling shows. As you may have noticed the titles of my pieces are very descriptive. Essentially, casual magic and all this work is about a kind of experience with light, and a kind of disorientation, or reorientation. With all my work, it's depicting a moment in suspension, but really without any kind of resolution. My desire is not to set up a mini narrative that will successfully resolve when you think about it, but rather something that stays permanently suspended that could be enjoyed in that suspension. You can see that with the juggling balls, or the sun or the moon, always on the precipice of setting or rising. With the flowers, the kind of play between being really emotive and extremely formal and aesthetic. With the landscapes without the moon or the sun, there is also this ambivalence about the time. There's this very clear lack of definition. All these things coalesce and describe what I find to be magical moments in a really sincere way, despite the humor. But I'm just an overly sincere person.

The funny thing about all that is, the work is really playful, most of the time I'm in my studio is spent experimenting, finding things, trying to recreate that same magic through process. you get this kind of interplay between the offhand and the aloof. At the same time, it's pointing to something magical. It's a descriptive title. Two modes of suspension.

*S : When did you start painting/making art, and how did you decide that would be the path for you?*

**A :** A lot of my family members are artists, going back a long time. Very few have been professional. The naturalist and painter John James Audubon (1785 - 1851) is my great great great grandfather. I grew up with many of his prints, original painting and sketches around the house. That really filtered into my work, that kind of presentation of something very direct, given to you right there. My great grandmother had some mental health issues, but spent a lot of her late life making amazing prints and water colors. She developed an incredible body of work, which only family members have seen, but it's remarkable. It's a view of the world from someone seeing the world from a very different place.

The community I grew up in was full of artists as well. They make art and do crafts. Actually, I thought I was going to be a musician, though I always made prints and paintings. I just didn't know you could make art as a career. When I was in college, I thought painting was so regressive, and the dumbest thing you could do. I was really convinced by my professors that it was this antiquated thing, but I did it all through college, but kind of in secret. I always thought of myself not as a painter, but as a broader artist. I was just embarrassed, until maybe four years ago. I saw myself as kind of an artist who made sculpture and I secretly made paintings. So, I just kind of recently embraced in the last 4 or 5 years admitted I care about painting.

*S : Tell me about your creative process. How do you begin a work?*

**A :** I don't start making a work until I know a rough image. It's usually the title of the work. A Juggler. A Monkey. A Goat. That's as far as I know. And usually the thing I start with is one I'm very compelled by on a personal level. Like with the Juggler, it started with when I shared a studio with the painter and sculptor Nicole Eisenman. I juggle a lot.

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She off handedly mentioned “I’m juggling so much” and it just touched me because she’s a close friend and I thought “I’m going to make a painting of Nicole juggling.” I made a year’s worth of drawings, and they’ve all sucked. So over time, they became a motif. I find one thing, a juggler, a saxophone player, an animal. Then I have that motif, and I just riff on it. I try it every way I can. I play with a lot of different materials. And I always feel like I spend a 1/3 of the year making oil painting, 1/3 making slabs, 1/3 making sculpture and I think, “this is the only thing I’m ever going to do!” and I use these motifs across all those things. To me those motifs are like an armature, I already know they’re meaningful. The rest is finding out more about it. Finding its edges. Taking a cliché and getting beyond it.

**S : You’ve mentioned in the past that you pull from archival sources. Tell me more about this process.**

**A :** Once I’ve found that image, I do tons of research on that trope. It’s really not an image but a trope. New York Public Library they have an incredible image data base. Also, the Met, and all the other museums we have here, also pop culture references, and google searches. And I use them all as broad reference scope. Like pigeons. Pigeons are a new trope I stumbled upon last year, and I’m working a large public art sculpture right now. I’ve been doing a lot of pigeon research right. It’s like a semiotic approach to language. Like you have someone. You know their name. And you get to know them really well. But how can you say you have this name? You’re like this whole person?!

**S : One of the tropes I’ve seen in your work brings to mind the “Three Wise Monkeys,” : hear no evil, speak no evil, see no evil, which is from a Japanese pictorial maxim. Do you ever pull from Asian works, Asian aesthetics?**

**A :** Yes, absolutely. The one I depict most is “Mizaru” (See no evil). That was one of the first times I identified that very outwardly. But, all of my favorite painters, starting with Audubon, specifically that group of French artists who were looking towards Japanese and Chinese imagery, those are the ones I fell in love with first and are still obsessed with, specifically Matisse. That whole idea of Orientalism is something I have a complicated relationship with. On one hand it’s something I’ve studied and post-colonial theory is something very important. and You can’t deny that kind of oppressive histories that comes through that kind of fetishization. But at the same time, if you look at all your favorite western art work after the 1700s, of even earlier, there’s no denying the verticality of the image, which comes from Chinese and Japanese landscapes, and the idea of the grotesque. My favorite things to see in museums are the very grotesque Chinese sculptures, and those ceramic glazed Chinese horses with flared nostrils in tan and orange colors. I like this incorporation into real fine art that was appreciated on a spiritual and aesthetic level and an intellectual level in Asia of animals that had a meaningful and mystical quality to them beyond Stubbs’ horse (George Stubbs 1724- 1806).

When I look at Chinese images of animals, throughout history they’re usually tied to the lunar calendar and mythology, they’re not tied class, in the way they are in Western art, it’s more about mythology. In Western culture it’s like there’s a horse, and the horse represents the wealth of the owner. or there’s dogs, and the dogs represents the poverty of the owner of the dog. Instead I’ve always been drawn to that kind of merging of this philosophical aspect and the kind of humorous aspect and the grotesque and also more quotidian aspect of general cultural mythology that people can recognize. And I just love that.

**S : Many of the works remind me of Aesop’s Fables, Rudyard Kipling’s “Just So Stories,” Chaucer, even Emerson’s metaphor of the Transparent Eyeball, are there any direct literary sources you draw from?**

**A :** I love those kinds of stories. The imagery is powerful to me. I love Aesop’s Fables in a way, but just for the singular images it conjures. I’m not really a narrative kind of guy when it comes to that kind of thing. I love reading fiction. What

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I like about fiction is it's broader than the image. Those stories, and the kind of literary aspect of mythology has never really interested me as much as I've really wanted it to. Where it does kind of pop up is in the source images that I find, usually a lot of them if they're not cigarette trading cards, they're illustration from that kind of things or naturalistic illustrations. I kind of bristle at the idea of illustration, so it doesn't get in there for me.

*S : This exhibition features a variety of works and in a variety of mediums. We have glyphic tablets, a grouping of figures and animals as well as some smaller sculptural works. Can you describe the evolution and development of your work across these mediums and styles?*

**A :** When I was at Yale, I started realizing I could make my paintings as much of an object as I wanted to, despite what everyone was telling me, "pick one, sculpture or painting." I had this idea to cast all my paintings in a mold in plaster, I'd imbed things, and make the paintings into the plaster like a fresco. I was also making these photo fresco transfers. I'd print a photo on acetate and cast the painting on to the acetate. I was imbedding a lot of things. But I really didn't want to make paintings that came out of the wall. I hate that. Where the painting becomes 3D in a really cheesy way. I thought I wanted to cast these things, they'd be serialized, and therefore they could have that range I want. Some are really abstract; some are really formal. Some are direct in their symbolism; some are really crafted over; some are really fast. Casting them would be a way to connect them. It really freed me up and I was excited about that.

After Yale I kept going with that. I had this 9-month fellowship in Paris and I was totally isolated for the first few months. I felt another freedom to make direct paintings very freely. I was working with photography and glyphic slabs and started to incorporate real oil painting. After I got back to New York I started teaching. And I was telling me students to buy a 10 pack of canvases and I thought, "I'm going to make 10 paintings. I'm going to work on them really hard, I'm not going to show them to anyone, they're just for me." It's something I love to do. And I was just going to continue to make these. And I made these 10 paintings. I just was so excited and happy, and I did end up having a show of those paintings despite what I said because I was so excited about them. And that's when I realized I didn't have to make them separate things, I could make painting, sculpture and slabs all alongside each other. It was just this kind of recognition. All this work is mine and if I put it out in the world it'll all make sense. I'm saying the same thing with every painting I make, but not quite saying in right. The evolution was hand in hand.

Sculpture is something I've always done without that kind of embarrassment about painting, it's just so real, there's not that kind of baggage with sculpture, you just form the material. That's always felt natural to me. For painting, it wasn't something I felt happy about right away. Sculpture always felt freer. When I was in Paris, I saw Picasso's sculpture, and not to compare myself to Picasso, but it made me realize when you can treat part of your practice as a total free-zone, it's going to be really positive. and that's how I treat my sculpture, as a total free-zone.

*S : "Casual Magic" features a new genre of painting, the landscape. What motivated you to paint these?*

**A :** A lot of my paintings of figures don't have background with a lot of definition. Maybe an orb, a sun or moon, or a sliver of background, like a horizon line, but that's new to me. So, I haven't always been comfortable with the idea of having a specific place where a figure is located, because it takes it out of the symbolic realm. But I've always been really engaged with landscapes. The first paintings I made as a young person were landscapes, because the town I'm from is a traditional landscape town for a lot of American impressionists. That's kind of how I learned how to paint. And so recently I learned that landscape can have its own figure ground relationship.

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What it really came out of was seeing Monet's water lily paintings, despite how cheesy they are, they're my favorite paintings in the world. If you see them in Paris, you're looking at the brush strokes, presumably your looking at water lilies. But there are huge chunks of the painting, like a 1/4 of the painting that's just a tree trunk. It's just a vertical line going up through it. I think that's a really powerful part of the painting that's looked past. And when it finally dawned on me, I thought "Oh that's how I can make a landscape." And I just did exactly that. The Assateague one (Moon Rise, on Assateague Island, 2019) is the first one, and there are two others that are landscapes in the show. But they start to open up from there. That was my starting point, just something that was taking up so much space that you really weren't supposed to be looking at really excited me.

*S : That's my first reaction to seeing the Moon Rise, on Assateague Island painting. The trees seem personified to me. The lovers carving on the left one, after seeing that I realized that this was the topic of the painting.*

**A :** I'm really glad you noticed that about the painting. The tenderness of the tree trunks. I really didn't have high hopes for this painting. This was just going to be another personal painting. But now I really love it. I went camping with my wife and my daughter when our daughter was like 8 weeks old for a few days on Assateague Island, which is an island off of Maryland with wild horses. I thought I would go there and make paintings of horses. But there was this moonrise. And there are no trees on Assateague but I put them there. It's a portrait of my wife and I. so much of me wants to keep this painting, but I also want to show it to the world.

*S : Joy seems to be recurring elements found across many of your works, like in Offering, 2020; what role does love or joy play in your practice?*

**A :** So much of my work is really about fear, in the semiotic sense, but also the very real sense. A lot of my fear comes from a general confusion. But that's what I'm also trying to figure out throughout my work, trying to find a certain clarity. With the joy, most people would describe me as a joyful person, and I think that joy in the work and my outward expression comes from the joy of the relief of that fear. Just like Matisse talks about love. I mean, love is the thing. There's nothing else. The idea of making art that shies away from beauty and love just because it's not cool is crazy to me. I'm fine with embracing it at the cost of the possibility of something being too nice.