

Jon Lee Hart
Of Moons, Mirrors and Mermen:
An Interview with Ryan Obermeyer

Ryan Obermeyer is unique to say the least, and upon first meeting him, you get the feeling he must have been a handful as a child. Conversations with him are like an Olsen poem; they begin innocently and are then



diverted to his thoughts on Jupiter. The conversation then shifts to some story he overheard last year before progressing to an event that may take place one week from tomorrow...and like Olson, the shifts and sides do not feel scattered. He has a knack for guessing strangers' zodiac signs, and his humor is infectiously x-rated but delivered with such innocence as not to offend. His spirit is overwhelming and reverberates in his art. Images that to some may appear dark in nature are equally beautiful and hyper-real. While the subjects of some of his paintings may be abstract, the delivery is anything but. His paintings are stunningly photo-realistic, even if the subject is not of this world. His digital photographs are equally impressive and are more like Frankenstein's monster than Mona Lisa. These images are an amalgam of hundreds, sometimes thousands, of separate photographs spliced together and digitally painted into one composition. Professionally, his clients include Green Peace, the rock band Rasputina, and the Grammy-nominated recording artist Imogen Heap.

This conversation took place at The Grapevine Bar in Dallas, TX (thank you, Gail) in late May 2009 with a few follow-up questions posed via email.

Jon Lee Hart: You grew up in the small town of Allen, TX. What was your childhood like? What were you like when you were young?

Ryan Obermeyer: My childhood was great. I have two loving parents—that's rare, and I knew I wanted to be an artist at a very young age. I always had paper and pencils and some movie or video game cover that I was sketching. My dad worked during the

day and was always coming home with Xeroxes of pictures I asked him to enlarge at the office. When I was a child, my mom babysat other kids out of the house so she could stay home with me. I was probably thought of as being creative, precocious, and gay. I wanted an umbrella so I could jump off the swing set and fly like Mary Poppins. I also wore the Christmas tree skirt and sang Dolly Parton songs to an audience of fellow 5-year-olds. I loved spiders and Bernadette Peters. I was odd but I always made people laugh, so I guess it was ok. My childhood was a constant game of pretend, and I lived in a really fun and creative home.

JLH: As a young artist you spent a few years in New York City. Can you describe this experience? What did you learn and how did that affect your art?

RO: I moved to New York when I was 18. It was definitely a drastic culture shock coming from a small suburb in Texas. It was a very difficult time for me. New York has a very intense current of energy—negative and positive. It was good for getting perspective on life in terms of my future, religious upbringing, family dynamics, my sexuality, my art. It was definitely important for the development of my career. It was a lot of firsts. I'd describe it as a catharsis—painful but necessary.

JLH: You bring up an interesting point. Artists (including musicians, actors and especially poets) seem to have this stereotype of being angst-ridden and brooding. It's even been said that to be truly successful as an artist you must suffer. Do you believe this is true?

RO: I don't think it is necessary to go through pain to create. Some art is very dark and some is very positive. I'm not sure if either is good or bad—art is subjective and is appreciated by an audience that can relate to or understand the work. I'm sure a lot of people can relate to hurting so it may lend itself to making very accessible art. I can only say for myself that suffering tends to immobilize me. I've been through some very low periods of my life that weren't very creative. Most of the time I feel pretty excited and positive when I'm creating because I'm looking forward to seeing the finished product—bringing my imagination to life.

JLH: How do you get to that point of excitement? What makes you feel most inspired?

RO: Well, there is an arc. When I approach a piece, I have to find some point of entry, a way to be inspired about it. Then I start working on it and initially I feel anxious and nervous that I won't be able to make it work until I get to a point where it starts coming together. It starts taking shape and I get really thrilled. I get inspiration from many sources. Anything really, a pair of dentures could inspire an entire piece. I'm often representing something like an album. I usually look to find inspiration from the lyrics or music, but it can be coupled with something completely different.

JLH: You, like Grandma Moses and Greer Lankton who came before you, are a successful folk artist. Do you think lacking "formal" training is the cause for your "do-it-yourself" nature? Also, which of your three disciplines (photography, painting, and digital photography/painting) took the most time to learn?

RO: Well I don't think I've ever been described as a folk artist—perhaps by definition I am. I think self-taught is more accurate. Folk art is traditionally not created by professionals, nor influenced by classic art movements. I think the nature of my work comes from my lack of interest in schooling and particular opportunities and events that were presented to me when I was starting college. I just moved away and started working. I can't really identify a benchmark moment when I learned these skills, so it's hard to figure which took the most time. I'm still learning. I guess digital painting in computer programs had more of a learning curve due to the technical aspect. Painting is something you can do with your fingers. Everything has been an overlapping progression: drawing to painting, painting to photography, photography to digital photography and painting digitally...

JLH: I agree with you that art is subjective but still feel that visual artists have to have something "extra." What do you think this "extra" is? Is it just technical proficiency? Hand/eye coordination? Or is it the ability to interpret something, anything, visually in a way to create some connection with your audience?

RO: I'm sure there are varying degrees of all of these elements coupled with interest in the medium and a lot of practice. I suppose you may be born with an inherent talent or "eye" for composition and creativity just as some people may be born with a predilection for athletic activities. I do wonder how much of it is interest, which translates to practice. I have been drawing and creating since I was a child. If I had just decided to start at this point in my life, I might really suck. I guess you may be born with some kind of

resourceful wherewithal that you can apply to your interest. I was definitely always creative. I knew very early on that I would be an artist or a monkey trainer/shark studier. Unfortunately, the latter might have proved more lucrative than working with cheap record labels.

JLH: Speaking of cheap record labels, you have designed album covers for musicians Imogen Heap, Rasputina, and Milosh, among others. Can you describe this experience? Are you limited to your clients' artistic vision or are you given artistic freedom?

RO: It's usually great to work with musicians. I'm a huge music collector and love to represent music in a visual way. I've been very lucky to work with artists who give me a lot of freedom. Sometimes I'm given a suggestion, a song lyric, an abstract idea- but they are artists and respect the nature of the creative process and my work. They usually give me complete freedom.

JLH: You also designed the book jackets for authors Caitlín R. Kiernan and Catherine Fisher. I imagine this process must be different from designing covers to albums. As the artist, how involved are you in this process?

RO: Doing book jackets is different. My approach isn't much different, but there's usually more involvement from the publisher, which affects the project. They're coming from an advertising standpoint. Typically, an album cover can be more abstract in its representation. I try to get into the writing. It takes more time and concentration (and reading). Ultimately, I try to create works that stand alone, away from the context of the writing. This is where the struggle with the publishers comes in...

JLH: Which artists do you feel most influenced you and your work?

RO: I'd say that the musicians I've worked with have influenced me as an artist and a person more than anyone. I've toured extensively with most of my music clients who generally become my close friends. My first love influenced me quite a bit—he exposed me to a lot of life, art, film, food, emotions. I get inspiration from everywhere: clothes, film, illustrators, music, nature. I can't really pick one artist. As a child, I was in the art section of the library once. I pulled out a book. It was Salvador Dalí. That was certainly a good jumping-off point.

JLH: Digital art is still in its infancy, and many traditionalists question its value compared to other forms of visual art. You are adept at both, what are your thoughts?

RO: I've seen a lot of "organic" art that is pretty vapid. I've also seen a lot of digital art that I connect with on a deep level. Relying on technology to create your art is lazy. I use technology to further my art. I also employ a lot of sculpting, painting, and sketching in my digital work. I'll upload images of these pieces I create by hand and then I "paint" extensively in Photoshop and do a lot of things by hand and bring it all together in one composite image. I think any medium has as much soul as the artist. I do try to bring a lot of organic elements to an otherwise completely digital medium.

JLH: Someone new to your art will find that marine life is a recurring theme in many of your paintings. What's the deal?

RO: I'm not sure. I think it had to do with *Jaws*. I am fascinated by the masculine and feminine of the ocean. A friend of mine describes me as a merman. Once, while on tour in Nashville, a woman—an intuitive—came up to me and said I had a strong creative energy and needed to work around the full moon. She also said I needed to live near the ocean because my rising sign was Pisces. I looked up my chart and she was right. Maybe this is the reason? My sign is Aquarius—the man who flies around bringing the ocean to everyone. Maybe that's why?

JLH: So, do you work around the full moon?

RO: I don't make a conscious effort to, no. However, when I finish a project I get some friends together to go out and celebrate. I love seeing the city skyline approaching with a finished project behind me. I open the sunroof and many times I look up and happen to see a full moon.

JLH: I imagine that your professional work takes up a lot of your time. Do you still find time to paint for yourself?

RO: Well, when I create for a client I usually try to create works that stand alone as art and not just commercial works. Sometimes this is a point of contention (particularly for publishers) like I was saying before. I am about to begin work on an exhibition for myself, so I'll be creating a lot of work just for me. I'm a little scared. I hope I

haven't forgotten how to create without a client in mind. It may be a joint show with a friend. I had the idea of the two of us creating with the same theme in mind and showing the works together. We'll see...

JLH: Can you disclose this theme or the name of your fellow artist?

RO: Not yet. It isn't set in stone.

JLH: That reminds me. Didn't you have something in the works with the *Faerie Tale Theatre* series? I also remember you telling me about a possible children's book in the works as well. Is this correct?

RO: I was a big fan of the series as a kid. Shelley Duvall produced the television series for Showtime. They presented the classic fairy tales with modern day actors in the style of the classic illustrators. It taught me a lot about art and really inspired me. I was trying to organize an event in Austin for the release of the series on DVD. I envisioned fans coming dressed up like the characters and some of the actors presenting their favorite clips. I contacted many actors and people involved with the series. Shelley Duvall lives about an hour from me. Everyone was interested except Shelley for several personal reasons. I am supposed to meet with her and her mother soon to talk about some other projects. We'll see what happens. I'd still really like to make the *Faerie Tale Theatre* thing happen.

The book I'm working on is in the most preliminary of stages. I'm archiving characters, plot events/devices, setting, and imagery. Since I've been mostly concerned with visuals up until now, I'm creating what I want to see in the illustrations for the most part and then creating a storyline around them. I can tell you it will be very icy. I've been drawn to this watery and icy place in my mind for a long time and it will finally be realized.

JLH: You seem to be an artist who is very sensitive to place. How has Austin affected your art?

RO: Austin is the best place for me. It has great people, lots of nature, opportunity. I think I am more affected by people and I love how friendly everyone is there. It's also very progressive which is strange for Texas.

JLH: During last year's presidential race you created some pro-Obama images, and your paintings "Crucifixion" and "The Waiting Room" have political undertones. Can you tell me about these two images?

RO: Well they were both created when I had just moved to New York. "Waiting Room" is really about me and my ex. We lived in a small space like the lobsters in the piece. The lobsters are red, implying that they're already cooked.

"Crucifixion" is simply religious iconography in a new context. I was just trying to challenge people to look at things from a new perspective. People generally have trouble separating themselves from their belief systems. I usually find meaning in my pieces in retrospect... I don't usually hide inside jokes in my work. I let people connect on a visceral level and project any meaning they find onto it. I think art is like the bible, it's a mirror. It probably says more about the audience than the artist.