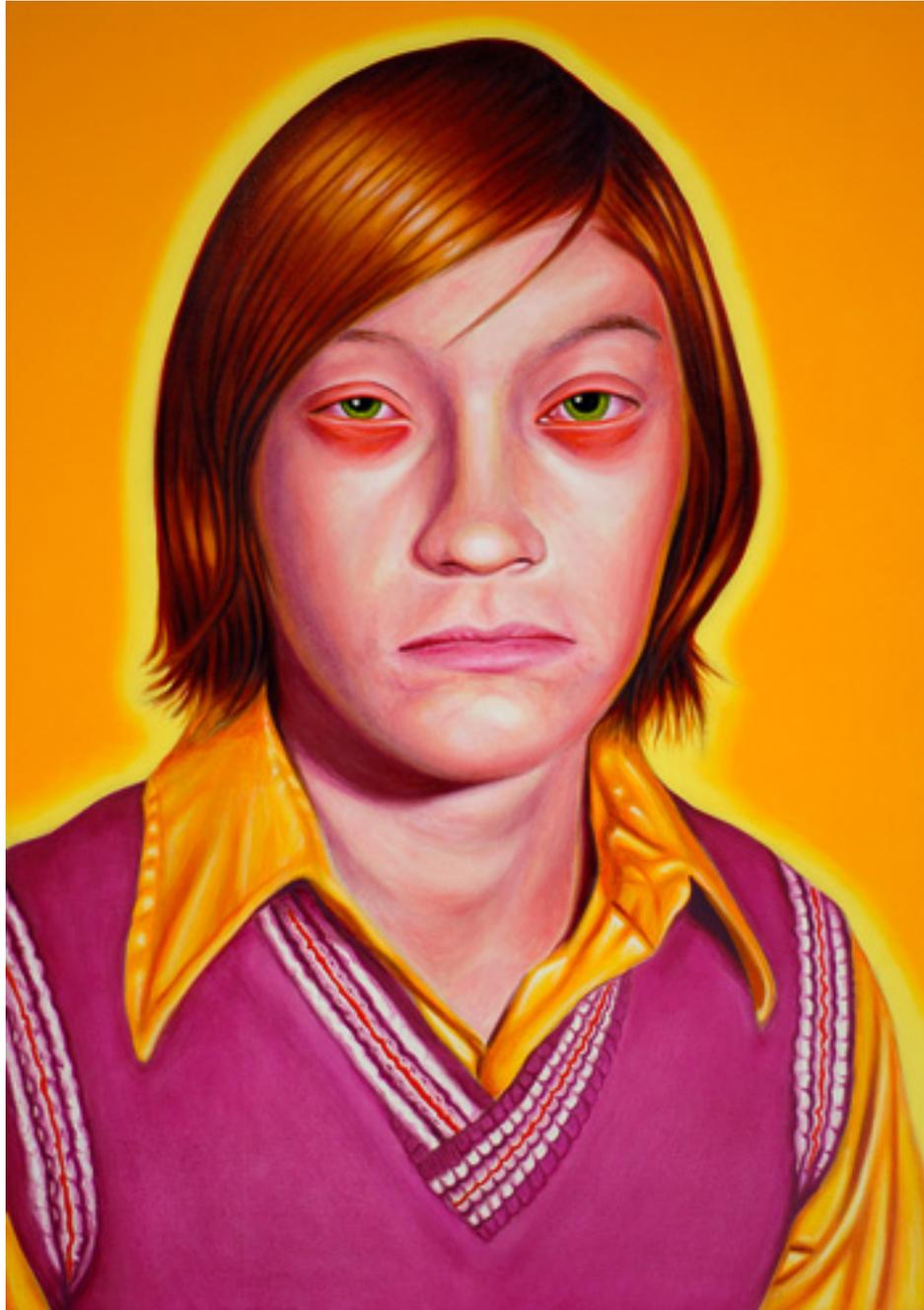## The Highlights - Interview with Matt Borruso

Excerpts from this interview first appeared in Issue V of Beautiful/Decay.

COLLEEN ASPER: Where do the photos that serve as reference for the portraits come from?

Matt Borruso, *Orange*, 2008 oil on canvas over panel, 52×36 in. Courtesy of Steven Wolf Fine Arts.

MATT BORRUSO: Finding the photos that I use is one of the most important parts of my process. The search for books and photos and the development of my book collection and image archive are sort of the foundation for what I do.

My biggest source is the flea market. I've been an avid flea market scavenger since I was a kid growing up in San Francisco. I collect books and ephemera and still love to dig around in piles of paper-comic books, old magazines, advertisements, film stills, 35mm slides, and medical books. The main thing I use these days is a lot of ordinary school portraiture-the kind of photo you would have taken for a yearbook. I try and find as many images of the same person as I can-it's especially good if you can find pictures of people as they age. I also like to get whole photo albums if I can. These help you piece together a narrative about the lives of the people in them. There is definitely a kind of tragedy built into the photos and photo albums you find at the flea market. These priceless family memories have ended up in the garbage, and I feel that some of this sadness gets translated into the paintings. At the same time I also feel that I am giving new life to these images, bringing them back for a second chance, recycling and repurposing.

Once I have the images I usually deconstruct them pretty thoroughly and use elements from many to create a new portrait. My paintings are almost never single individuals-they are cobbled together like Frankenstein's monster from many human parts. At the same time I mash together multiple time periods and styles for an ambiguous historical moment or maybe an imagined future.

 CA: Science fiction often creates an ambiguous historical moment-setting its narrative in the forgotten past as well as the imagined future. How do you understand your work in relationship to sci-fi?

Matt Borruso, *Purple Suede Lederhosen*, 2006, oil on canvas over panel, 52×36 in. Courtesy of the artist.

MB: I think it creeps in and out of the work visually, but maintains a constant presence in regards to my thought process. I like that sci-fi has traditionally been a devalued genre that passed under the radar of good taste and serious criticism, and while no one was looking managed to explore all kinds of bizarre scenarios. I am especially partial to post-apocalyptic films like Planet of the Apes or Omega Man and dystopian sci-fi films that take place in a "near future," like Clockwork Orange, which now looks so '70s glam. I also really like sci-fi

that projects a future that wears out quickly, and this is a big theme in the work of Philip K. Dick. The elusive time frame, the alternate universe, and the entropy that sets in on objects, these are all inspirational sources. For instance, the 1964 New York World's Fair site once represented a gleaming optimistic future but now lies in ruins, like part of an ancient civilization. Like I said, I think about this in terms of the dormant potential of found photos and consequently the paintings. These people showed so much promise, and then what happened to them? I'm intrigued by the possibility that things could go either way.

CA: Science fiction is hardly a devalued genre any longer. Do you think its mainstream acceptance has limited its ability to explore those bizarre scenarios?

MB: Well yes and no...and I guess plenty of people would argue with the idea of its acceptance. Anyway, I think that someone like William Gibson manages to take a contemporary world and shift it slightly to show possible outcomes. And his books are great for locating subcultures and exposing them to a larger audience. The book Pattern Recognition comes to mind. But on the other side I think that traditional sci-fi no longer seems to exist-the rocket ships and the optimism. I think that sometimes now it is a genre that we look to for nostalgic reasons. Often it is the future of our childhoods, and these "bizarre scenarios" either provide some sort of comfort or they're treated with a heavy irony. It seems to me like fifty years ago you could ask someone what the future would look like, and they would suggest something like robots and space age modernism. Twenty-five years ago it might have suggested the post apocalyptic landscape of Mad Max or The Road Warrior. Now it seems like the future looks like the present-like a collapsing of historical ideas of the future.

CA: Pattern Recognition is the first William Gibson book that takes place in the recent past, published in 2003 and set in 2002, though I think that escapes a lot of people who read the book, because Pattern Recognition is so in keeping with all of Gibson's imaginary futures. I'm also thinking of movies like Minority Report that present a future that feels like an extension of the present rather than a radical departure from it. Why do you think the future is often imagined as looking like the present? Are we too apathetic or complacent as a culture to imagine alternatives?

MB: There are so many possible answers to this question. I guess an imagination of the future requires a certain grasp of the present, and our present reality has become so stratified. It encompasses both the high tech "lifestyles" of an optimistic sci-fi vision and the dystopian decay of Blade Runner at the same time. Maybe while we attempt to navigate this slippery present moment we are less focused on the future. Meanwhile many of the prophesies of a writer like George Orwell have come to pass. For example, we actively participate in an

erosion of privacy through social networks like MySpace and Facebook.

CA: I just interviewed Judith Donath, an MIT professor who has researched social network sites like MySpace and Facebook. We talked about possible repercussions of that voluntary erosion of privacy that includes the government using information gathered from such sites to detain you from flying or a potential employer having access to that information while making hiring decisions. Which certainly sounds Orwellian to me. Judith also talked a lot about the design of such sites. One of the clearest considerations in the design of your paintings is the palette. How do you choose the colors you use?

Matt Borruso, *Magic*, 2008, graphite, 17×13 in. Courtesy of Steven Wolf Fine Arts.

MB: I take a lot of cues from fast food signage, corporate logos, and graphic and interior design. I am especially interested in advertising and how specific colors and combinations are meant to engage and affect you on a psychological/subconscious level. I also choose a lot of garish complementary colors that clash with each other and combinations that have the potential to cause discomfort or anxiety. The color theory of Josef Albers has been a huge influence on my work, as well as psychedelic poster artists like Victor Moscoso, who studied under Albers and sort of subverted his methods. I also like to study the palettes of specific films-especially the Technicolor Italian horror films from directors like Dario Argento or Mario Bava.

CA: Some of the people you depict hover around believability, but most are so distorted they function as caricature. I imagine there is a balance you play with, juggling which expressions will elicit sympathy, what you can manipulate for comic effect, or how severe a distortion has to become to read as grotesque. Can you describe that process?

MB: I guess I want a certain ambiguity and confusion. I paint these abstracted figures with a specific kind of realism or hyperrealism to destabilize the viewer. Sometimes I just want to get beyond the surface and into the psychological space of the painting. I usually start with a very bland image and tweak it out through exaggeration and rearrangement of the features, color, etc. Often the images that I use really lead the way, and the manipulation is done in finding just the right elements. But I also never try to evoke sympathy or comedy per se. Though these portraits may be categorized as grotesque, I want people to be able to see themselves in them. That's kind of my interest in the grotesque-that it is fantastic, baroque, but that it is a part of ourselves that we deny or don't want to look at. If anything I hope there will be a feeling of empathy in the viewer-that they recognize themselves in these portraits.

CA: The grotesque is a part of ourselves we deny, but that has always found an outlet in low art forms like cartoons and horror films. Your work clearly borrows from these forms, and the age of the people you depict is also the age that these genres are marketed to and consequently also depict. From the Garbage Pail Kids to The Exorcist, the grotesque is something we are both more willing to see enacted on children and adolescents, and for children and adolescents. How does your work address the transitional space before adulthood and the pop cultural forms that represent it?

Matt Borruso, *Magenta*, 2007, oil on canvas over panel, 52×36 in. Courtesy of the artist.

MB: I don't know that what I do addresses current youth culture or the "pop cultural forms" that represent it. I grew up on Mad magazine, Basil Wolverton, psychedelic posters, underground comics, punk rock-it's all from a specific period, the period of my childhood. Today's cartoons and horror films are something new and different-a good example might be the heavy ultra-violence of video games-and I am really interested in a lot of this stuff as a current phenomenon. But I don't detect the deep cynicism found then in so many things like Wacky Packages or Mad. I think I grew up in a more paranoid world where the Cold War

still existed and people looked at something like advertising as the total enemy. So I think that often when I use children in these images I sort of depict myself-these are kind of me, at a stage when I was kind of a nerd, and I am incorporating some of the visual language of my own childhood. Now that I have the luxury of hindsight I can depict my nerds reveling in the glory of their weirdness rather than hiding it. I think punk rock was a real turning point for this-making a physical statement with clothes or music that was really "fuck you" ugly and defiant-taking a flaw and making it an asset.

Beyond that I guess I have always been interested in semi-human forms. A lot of my painting has been centered around apes, yeti, cavemen. Later it was masks and androids, replicants, characters from Philip K. Dick's works, simulations, artificial intelligence-not quite human or disguised humans. I consistently return to these themes in my work and my research. So children are obviously human, but I think many people see them as unformed and definitely not adult. All of these beings have a potential to "become," and they also occupy an oppositional space in which "we" humans, or adults, define ourselves against them. We are human because we are not apes; we are adult because we are not children. For me the grotesque is used in the same way: we are sophisticated, intelligent, and we have good taste because we are not hairy, vomiting, blood-spattered monsters from a horror movie. Traditionally examining what we are not is a way to define what we are. I am interested in how often we are so much more like what we have convinced ourselves we are not.

CA: The idea of the not-quite-human, or something with the potential to "become," makes me think about the anthropologist Victor Turner's studies of rites of passage-instances in which members of a given society exist in-between states, not a part of the social group they are emerging from and not yet incorporated into another group. He describes this as being a liminal state. I think punk rock owes its staying power to the way it really revels in liminality-the promise of getting to stay in a state outside of adulthood, of not fully assimilating to dominant culture. Do you think there are other parallels between your background in music and your current work?

MB: I guess I have always been interested in oppositions. The liminality that you describe can allow for a freedom in anything that you do, but it can also become a prison. I think what happens is that any culture-whether it is the dominant culture or a subculture-tends to generate hierarchies and rules. Punk rock set out to break the rules, but soon developed into a standardized genre-or a bunch of smaller little groups with rules. It soon became less interesting. You have to figure out how to constantly question what it is you are doing, and I think it's easy to forget that it's all about breaking the rules. I guess my current work is still about going against expectations, even my own-playing against type. I would have never

have thought I would be doing some of the things I am doing now.