

MIFRUDOSE



\$7.95 US \$8.95 CAN





JOHN CASEY

by Liz Ohanesian

John Casey has a knack for capturing human quirks. He says he's "hyper-perceptive" of behavior—the sort of person who can watch people while letting stories about these anonymous figures unfold in his head. He wonders where they're from and where they're heading. He makes up answers—the results, he adds, probably aren't accurate. However, all that people-watching has impacted his work.

Casey draws, paints, and sculpts surreal humans. His characters might come with a beard-full of eyeballs or gardens blooming from their faces, but their humanity is ever present. It's in the way their hands tense up and their shoulders slumps and their chins drop. These are the things that Casey notices in people—hands, shoulders, heads—that give his characters life. "It's not how they are at rest," he says by phone from Oakland. "It's how they would be in motion or how they would be in a moment."

Casey's creature-people are, more often than not, an amalgamation of friends and strangers. They're informed by early influences, like cartoons and monster movies. When he was a child, Casey had dreams that he befriended the famed monsters of the silver screen. He recalls feeling sympathy for characters like Frankenstein's monster or Godzilla. "They're scary as all get-up, but they're also kind of sad," he says. That points to the part of humanity that is imbued in Casey's work. "It's very much the human condition to be part monster, part struggling," he says.

Raised in Massachusetts' North Shore area, Casey attended Massachusetts College of Art and began his career in

Boston. He thought he would spend his life in that part of the country, but, seventeen years ago, he moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. With that came a change in his approach to art-making.

According to Casey, the Boston art scene he knew was "hierarchical" and getting into the gallery world was quite hard. Conversely, in the Bay Area, he found more opportunities to make a name for himself as well as opportunities to connect with others in the art scene. "It didn't feel so competitive," he says. "It felt much more supportive."

Consequently, Casey was able to let his style develop freely. "I was schooled in Boston, I have some pretty traditional values and stuff, but, at the same time, coming to a place where anything goes—literally it's the wild, wild west in terms of art and culture—I was almost like a kid in a candy store," he says. "I was absolutely thrilled to be here and at times a little overwhelmed."

"Every rule can be broken here and every rule can be challenged here," he adds. "That's really helped me get

ABOVE:
John Casey with his hand-painted pillow sculptures.
Photo by Ransom and Mitchell.

OPPOSITE:
"Green Tears", graphite on paper





"EVERY RULE CAN BE BROKEN HERE AND EVERY RULE CAN BE CHALLENGED HERE...THAT'S REALLY HELPED ME GET BACK TO THAT PLAY STATE THAT I WAS LOOKING FOR IN MY CREATIVE PROCESS."

back to that play state that I was looking for in my creative process."

Casey describes his early work as "strange and figurative and very aggressive, but not necessarily with a sense of humor." Over the years, it has evolved and while there is often an unsettling element to his pieces, the characters come to fictional life with a sense of charm. It took the move to the West Coast for him to be able juxtapose the darkness and light in his pieces.

It's also in the Bay Area where Casey developed "open-ended narrative" in his works. His pieces tell stories, but the details are often left to the minds of the observers. Just as Casey enjoys making up tales of the people he watches, so too can the viewer do that in one of his shows. *Take Okay, Not Okay*, a 2015 solo exhibition Casey put together for Galerie Polaris in Paris as an example. The collection of drawings was created without a cohesive story, but Casey felt that, after they were displayed, he could discover a narrative connecting the works.

Sometimes, when people ask, he will give them a tale behind the works. He'll share a story, but with the caveat that it might change the following week. Sometimes, too, he'll start with a story inside one piece, but drag other works into it.

When Casey has the opportunity, part of his art will manifest in the way he places the items inside a gallery.

ABOVE (Left-Right):
Hand-painted pillow, Pillow sculpture installation in converted hotel room at the stARTup Art Fair in San Francisco.

"I'm very much into considering how the whole thing works together," he says. "If I bring twenty pieces into a show, I take five out. I would rather have fifteen pieces that communicate with each other and relate to each other. Less is more in my book."

About two years ago, Casey began painting again after a long break from the discipline. "When I was painting, I really cut loose. I really tried to find a crazy play space where I could make a big mess and see what sort of sprung out of it," he says.

In that time, his paintings have come to take on the traits of his drawings and vice versa. In his drawings, color sometimes pops from flowers, tongues, and odd, vaguely creepy details, such as a lollipop that's shaped like a hand. Similarly, his paintings have gone on to resemble drawings with fine line work and shadowy shades of black. For a time, he experimented with ink in his paintings, but that proved to be too much of a mess. Now, he uses Golden acrylic black paint.

Less frequently, Casey sculpts pieces. For him, sculpture is a way to work out ideas that he would like to see in three dimensions. Like his paintings, his approach to sculpture has also evolved. "I used to do this very defined, realistic sculptures where they were the characters and the poses, I wanted them to be somewhat anatomically correct," he says. "Now, I want a much more simplified sculpt and I really tried to simplify and dumb down the sculpting and

OPPOSITE:
"Pink", graphite on paper







"I REALLY TRIED TO SIMPLIFY AND DUMB DOWN THE SCULPTING AND LET THE DRAWING ON THE SCULPTURE AND THE PAINTING ON THE SCULPTURE TELL MOST OF THE STORY..."

let the drawing on the sculpture and the painting on the sculpture tell most of the story and be the most interesting part of that."

He has also let pop culture seep into his work. Often, this is on the t-shirts of his characters, blasting music and film references like *Minor Threat* or *Camp Crystal Lake* from *Friday the 13th*. "It's like watching a movie and seeing some coffee cup that you recognize or a beer label or some fast food restaurant sign in the background," he says. "I would rather have it come in like that than put it on display as a direct thing." He finds inspiration in his peers. Lately, Casey has taken to turning his art into pillows. This began with the stARTup Art Fair in San Francisco, where artists set up shop inside hotel rooms.

There was a king sized bed in the middle of the room and Casey wasn't sure how he should use it. After some thought, he decided not to hide the bed, but to create a character that made sense there. Inspired by the pillow pieces of fellow Bay Area artist Tara Tucker, he conceived of the Cuddle Monster. Casey's wife handled the sewing duties to help create a large creature from canvas. Casey used house paint as the base and Golden acrylic paint on top of that. It was meant to be an interactive prop, but Cuddle Monster and the accompanying pillow heads were a

hit. Since then, Casey has hired a seamstress to help make more.

For Casey, art is both the inspiration and the final product. For him, having art in the home and the studio helps keep the creativity flowing. He describes his personal collection as eclectic—there are a lot of drawings and monsters in it, but he also has an interest in abstract and conceptual works—and he'll switch out pieces when the mood fits. He believes this is as important as getting out into the world and seeing what's in museums and galleries in order to contextualize one's own work. "The one thing that art school did for me—one big thing—is that it helped me understand context and how important that is in understanding your own work," he says.

This ties to Casey's general attitude about art as well. He talks about the show in Paris, noting the differences between art collectors in Europe and the U.S. "I think people in Europe or much more inclined to buy what they enjoy and they don't worry about things like the investment and whatnot," he says. For Casey, the point of having art is in the way that it enriches your day-to-day life, as opposed to a possible financial gain in the future. He says, "The value has little to do with money." ✦

OPPOSITE: "Top Notch", graphite on paper

ABOVE: John Casey and his pillow sculptures.

Photo by Ransom and Mitchell.