

IDIOT SAVANT



Dave Regan &
Ishmael Johnson

For those of you who may be wondering what this is all about, you're not alone. We are, in fact, equally as lost on the true nature of this proposed column. When Crash asked if I would be interested in writing for the magazine, my fear was not only that I'm simply not that interesting, but I may also lack the wherewithal and pseudo-social skills that one seems to need to possess in these types of affairs, so I did what any red-blooded American would; recruit a cohort with promises of money and power. And, women. And maybe a horse...but not a big horse, because that's ridiculous.

You horse-offering son of a bitch, dragging me into this shit like I'm in ANY WAY prepared to string together cogent sentences! I haven't written something into a Word document since I left college like six years ago; the very idea of trying to get my puny mind to barf up something meaningful IN PRINT reminds me a lot of that time I got too drunk and spent all night begging people to call me in the morning and assure me that I hadn't made an ass out of myself. Ugh, once more into the breach with us, I suppose.

I've known Ishmael for nearly the duration of my time here in Colorado, rolling quickly past the three-year mark, and in that time, we've developed a pretty amazing friendship based on mutual respect, mutual cynicism, cycling, and an absolute obsession with tattooing that has led to some of the best times in my life, for certain. We realized pretty early on that a lot of what we were making was harmonious, and as a lot of you know, the kind of reciprocity that criticism from someone whose ideas run in the same veins as yours is precious. It sparks quite a fire under your ass; somehow you always find yourself in healthy competition. Whether it be kicking puppies or boxing the elderly, cat memes or cage-fighting in Myanmar (oh sorry, Burma, if you're gonna be like that), it is a constant struggle to out-clever one another, to see who you can crack up who first, and it has all led to working together, drawing, painting, traveling, and bribing the occasional senator (seriously Udall, I'm looking in your direction).

Yeah, I suppose if you want to call cleaning each other's cold vomit out of the back seat of rental cars "the best times of ones life", I agree. About the average interaction we have is where I open the pictures of excellent tattoos that you've sent me and then spend twenty minutes breathing into a paper bag and wondering why I'm so bad at my job. Oh, and then when you notice the one hideous, glaring anatomical error I made in my linework and I go promptly cut off my thumbs. All that "acme of friendship" and "goddamned good times" stuff is just padding between the blows. About the only thing "constructive" about our relationship will be when I decide I'm too shit a tattooer to work anymore, refer all my clients to you, and get a job doing construction.

It was my thought that the two of us could make some kind of shitty Voltron to discuss with you whatever it is we will be discussing. Okay, maybe it's like a complete Voltron, but you already lost all the damn missiles and the sword snapped, one of the lion-head fists is in your brother's room somewhere, WHATEVER. It's not that godawful car Voltron, and that's what really matters.

I think I was busy picking my nose when that episode aired. As long as I don't end up looking like GoLion, I'm in.

But I digress. We are going to be discussing a number of matters actually relevant to tattooing, and probably a few that are not. This is also something in which feedback is welcomed. We hope to provide something moderately entertaining, but we would also like to be able to educate as well. In order to properly prepare for a few articles in the future, more time is needed than we have in this go. There are plans, in no particular order, to talk about the history of tattooing in Colorado, anatomy and it's usefulness in all of our day to days, traveling, food, the importance of creative outlets outside of tattooing, and particularly why we didn't start the fire. It was always burning.

ON THE IMPORTANCE OF OBSERVATION

Like a lot of us, in all the years I have been making art (which by now is most of them), I always drew what I saw in my mind. It was and is easy to sit and create endlessly, to stream consciousness into a pen and onto paper, through a brush, through a needle. The only poison to the imagination is the self-doubt and the self-loathing every one of us experiences. A certain amount of it is healthy, but when you exceed that prescribed amount, things lock up completely. It is artistic paralysis, to make up a term. Maybe not everyone goes to that extreme, but we all waver in and out, and some days you just can't get it out. I have found myself in this predicament over time, and was never very aware of how to negotiate it. It always would just come back, but I would usually shift my attention to playing music, watching movies, reading, anything that would stimulate different parts of my brain to get me through my slump.

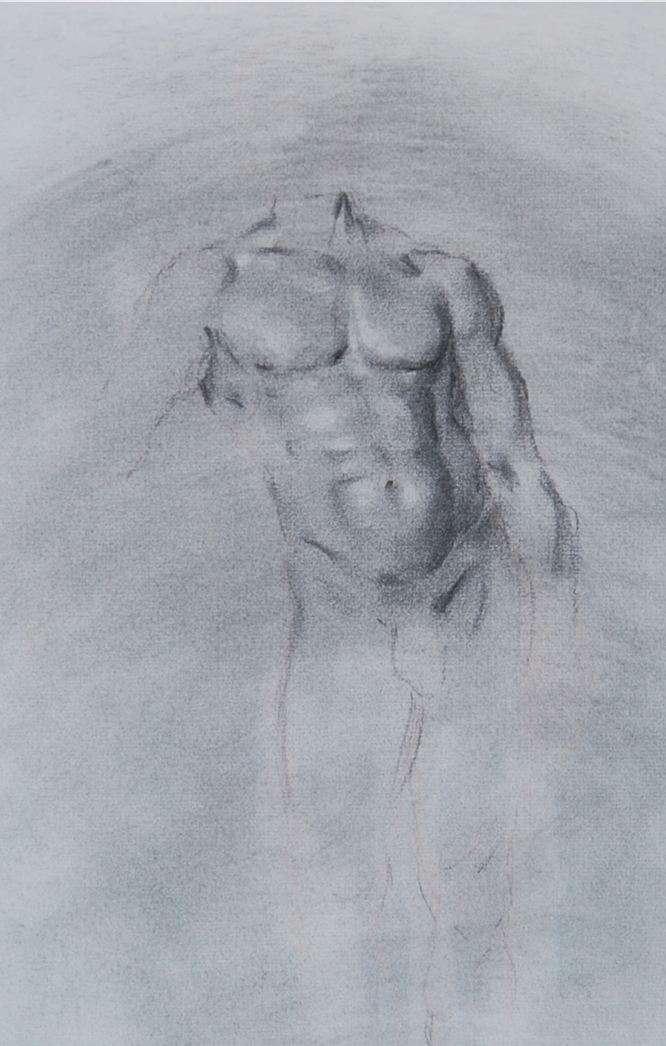
I have always been of the opinion that these spirals of know-nothing "compass-lessness" are part and parcel of illustrative arts and of them who practice it, especially when coupled with the pressure and constant peer-scrutiny of tattooing. I suppose that I am lashed to them and will just suffer wider and wider circles of pointless depression until I collapse, like Rothko, into my easy chair and into death, in the face of all that I cannot seem to wrangle. You're suggesting that there is another way???

Years back, as stress in my life grew, as the slumps went on longer and longer, I no longer felt the motivation to create beyond drawing tattoos, drawing for work. I'd always sketch, but nothing more prolific came. I felt that my growth artistically was stunted, and I wasn't entirely sure why. I felt that maybe there was a missed opportunity in not having attended college, if only to have a place to go and be forced to work. I looked into it, and ultimately decided that the scholastic path wasn't the right call because it would take too much time away from tattooing. And so I continued to look. When I finally found what made sense, I arrived at a small, atelier-styled program which was only one day a week, was affordable, was small, all while managing to be suited to my schedule.

No! Dave! Why? All my college offered my was a 5 year bachelor of arts that cost 35k and still fills me with the urge to abandon the drafting table for "The Horse's Mouth" or some such drivel. Wait now, maybe this is why I'm so bad at my job. Go on...

Initially, classes were very basic and rudimentary, covering fundamentals such as perspective, dynamics of light, form, composition, and most importantly, working from observation. I very much liked my environment, namely because my teacher didn't teach quite so much as provide the necessary information for one to arrive at one's own conclusions, and also act as a question answering machine when necessary.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, and then she taught you to fight one footed while balanced on a sake keg and then you avenged your brother's death at the hands of the Fu-Yin-Ko Gang.





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I have always had an obsession with the human form, sparked initially by comic book compulsions, ancient issues of Easyriders, and the kind of role playing game art that ensures your popularity in academia. I had mentioned to my teacher when I started painting that I would like to focus on portrait and figure, and didn't know what direction in which to move. I was already fond of old-master style painting, in the vein of Caravaggio and Van Eyck, Rubens, Velasquez, Bernini, Bosch, etc. and becoming aware of modern masters such as Freud, Saville, Bacon, Szukalski, Nerdrum, et al. I have felt strongly drawn to Alla Prima (of the first) painting, because of its strengths; the power to accurately render light on a form, quickly and confidently, to convey a sense of urgency. Typically, it's a heavy look, the brush carries enough paint that there is no need to blend. It's like building a puzzle! I have always obsessed over perfection in design and composition (virtually guaranteeing it won't be achieved) and wanted to 'loosen up', for lack of a better term, and for some reason thought it seemed a good place to start.

Alla Prima painting, for those who haven't witnessed it, is an amazing thing to watch in the hands of a master. For me this happens particularly when the figure is involved. When you are just getting started, it can be frustrating until your eyes develop a bit... You define value (the light property), chroma (the intensity property), and hue (the color property) as it applies to shapes on a form through brush strokes.

Ah, all while pushing yourself farther and farther from the tattooing that most of us find to be a blinding yoke, for better or worse. Maybe your departures are becoming more and more your approaches. I think I am beginning to see the light around this bend.

This was my revelation. All these years I had been drawing things as I had seen them in my head. If you were to draw a portrait, you drew eyes, a nose, a mouth, ears, and so on. You, in your mind, knew what an eye looked like. You knew a mouth, you knew a nose. But when the portrait was complete, it was off. It was off because it was too focused on what you knew.

Wait—what just happened? Dave, what the fuck planet did we just fly off to? Ambigutron? Faces are made of mouths and noses, duh! Any dummy knows that. How would I draw a face with no mouth? Are you trying to lead us all into some horrifying, eugenic future where we all sport smooth, featureless faces?

The first lesson in this was breaking everything down into monolithic shadows (think propaganda art). Basically, you start everything with two colors, a light and dark, and these are used to define light and shadow in regards to how they fall on the face. When you observe the interplay between these two elements, you can create an image that looks exactly like the subject being painted, with almost no details at all. Once this is completed, you start to look at smaller shapes and paint them. You abandon the idea that there is a nose, and instead look at the shadow the nose creates and paint that. The shadows under the eye, the reflected light around the side of the face, those little glimmers of light that highlight the cheeks... and when

it's all said and done you're left with a fairly accurate translation of who you're looking at. But you have given up the idea of defining structures as you know them in your mind.

Then, when the opportunity presented itself to begin drawing the figure, I applied this same theory, but on a larger scale. I draw primarily with carbothello or charcoal, and I find this to be the easiest medium to manipulate in describing how light affects a form. When the lighting is good, you have anchors you can rely on in shadows, enough so that you can create forms quickly. And the best part? The more you observe, the faster and tighter everything becomes. There is science behind this as well!

200 colors and thousands of shades therein. You are able to develop not only the rods and cones of the eye, but your ability to distinguish minute shifts in color and light is increased through repetition. There are 3 different types of cones in your eye that produce different photochemicals that produce different responses to light based on the wavelength of the light! They pick up red, green, and blue based on how each cone type fires when it receives light.

My eye seems much too small to contain either of those things.

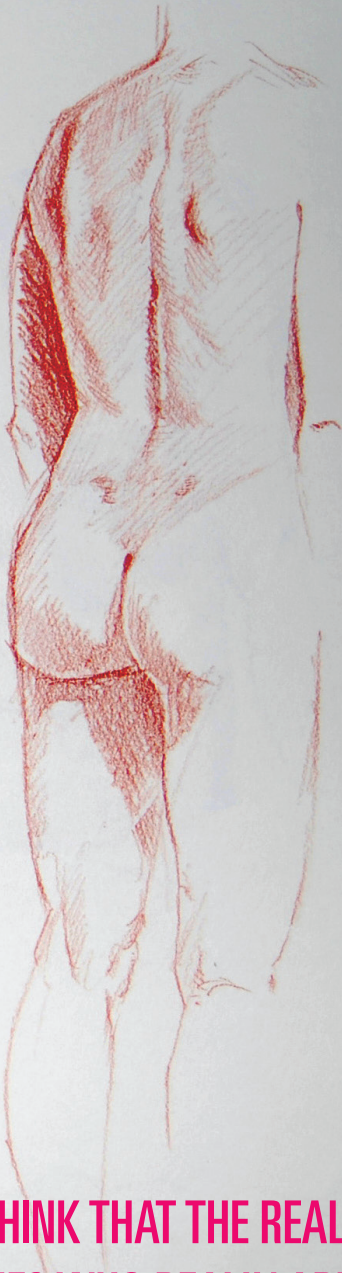
It's funny, I have noticed through drawing and painting from life, I look at everything analytically now. How colors are formed, how shapes define spaces, it's a blast to trip out on! I feel focused, and it doesn't matter at all if I can't come up with something to draw or to paint; life is always there, ready to be drawn from.

It's interesting, here, that you've ended up in a position where you're freeing yourself from the common hyperbole of a working tattooer by utterly abandoning the content that you're depicting. I think we can all get a bit spoiled by the endless ream of clients offering up fiats of illustration (good or bad) for us to accomplish. Especially after TV has required that every tattoo needs be chock-full of meaning and content, I think that my brain is sometimes at a loss to conjure ANYTHING without the initial prompt of "Can you make me a battleship barfing forget-me-nots with my kids' names?" You've sort of zenned yourself into the position of being able to appreciate things regardless of WHAT they are, as long as there is light falling on them.

And in stoking that part of the artistic fire, it has completely affected how much more I paint at home, the subject matter of my pieces, my tattooing, the music that I make. Well, everything really. I can't sing the virtues of it enough! It challenges you, it removes you from clients, it removes you from your life. You get to lose yourself completely in looking at something and recreating it.



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Ah! Loss of self! Yes! (crawls up on top of high-horse) FUCKING GODDAMN IT FOR A MINUTE. CAN WE ALL STOP MAKING TATTOOS ABOUT OURSELVES? I get on Facebook and it's like a million tattooers are just all too impressed with that they're pumping out, just really happy with their STYLE. I get this creeping feeling that 85% of tattooing is being done while the tattooers are thinking "man, oh, man when Grime sees this one he's gonna flip! And offer ME a job!" I think that the really good tattooers, the iconic ones who really are unmistakable and TRUE are working to the piece and the client, and it really shows. The best tattooing comes from a place where IT is the main goal, not the riches or fame it might bring its creator. You think Gerhard Richter picks up a squeegee and thinks "Oh shit wait until the Centre Pompidou gets a load of THIS"?

To conclude, this is just an opinion. I think it is something that is very beneficial to all of us. It's not tattoo-style work; you can't copy someone else's observation and understand it. You can certainly gain something from drawing another artist's piece. But drawing from life is the meat of it. It takes a small amount of discipline, but it will only see to benefit you in the long run. If the love of visual media is what draws us all to tattooing, why not draw from life? It's going to improve your tattooing too! You want to make better roses? Look at one. A better skull? Look at one. Reference books are amazing, but once you understand how something is built, you can break those rules and make it your own. And there you have it.

Yep, sounds about like it. I mean, I pretty much wait until you send me photos and then trace what I need from them and get back to the couch, but I suppose if that's what's happening on your end, I can't argue with it.

Love it? Hate it? Ideas? Want to know what we're wearing?

Contact Us

Dave Regan: dreg@hotmail.com, IG @dutchraven

Ishmael Johnson: ishjohnsontattoo@gmail.com, IG@ishmaeljohnson

