



THE 22 MAGAZINE

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J.J. CROMER

AN INTERVIEW WITH JJ CROMER:

THE 22 MAGAZINE: First off, I had no idea you were named after Audubon. Does his work appeal to you?

J.J. CROMER: Audubon's work was always around in my home growing up. My mother is a long-time bird watcher. We always did yearly Audubon bird counts. (Both she and my father were science teachers in secondary schools.) On our coffee table we had big books of Audubon reproductions. We also had a stuffed Roseate Spoonbill in the living room, which I would studiously compare to Audubon's image. Who knows how much arsenic I inhaled examining that spoonbill. As a kid I would copy and trace his drawings all the time. I loved the natural world. I also loved cartoons and monsters, so more times than not I was mashing up Charles Schulz, or famous monsters of film, with Audubon. There's no direct influence these days, though I am a fan of Walton Ford. Occasionally I do cut up Audubon reproductions for collage elements. I've glued down quite a few Passenger Pigeons.

THE 22: You are a librarian by training, correct?

JJC: Yes. I've been a children's librarian, as well as a reference librarian. I've worked in public and academic libraries.

THE 22: How would you describe the mood of your paintings?

JJC: I think the mood of my artwork is more playful than not. When I work as a librarian I have to provide clear information, unambiguous answers. Patrons generally don't want the Oracle of Delphi sitting behind the reference desk. As an artist I'd much rather communicate playfully, with a laugh, through questions and ambiguity and confusion.

THE 22: You mention that you feel your work is intuitive and you like it best when your mind is elsewhere while drawing? Is it in some ways a meditative state for you?

JJC: I've got my go-to media and stacks of paper, but I definitely favor mistakes over technical skill, improvisation over routine. I listen to music or audiobooks while I draw. I've been listening to a lot of crime fiction recently: Henning Mankell, Benjamin Black, Ruth Rendell, Ian Rankin, Tana French are current favorites. I find stories are good at keeping the resident mental faultfinder occupied. Solving a murder is generally more important than looking over my shoulder and condemning my art efforts. So as I draw I'm doing both: I'm worried about Kurt Wallander's health and the case, as well as laughing and mucking about in my psyche. It is strangely meditative. Time zooms by, and pieces stack up.

THE 22: Which pieces use your childhood stamp collection for collage material?

JJC: Most. Recently I've been buying stamps too, big topical collections: one hundred airplanes, two hundred cats, one thousand boats...

THE 22: Your "Asterik Men" are based on Piltdown or Nebraska man, a major paleontological hoax. Tell me a little about what this story meant to you and how it inspired your work.

JJC: Ever since I was a kid, I've been a big fan of all things Fortean, sideshow, conspiratorial, spooky. Regarding Asterisk Man I guess I liked the idea of this fleshy stick figure factoring into human evolution somehow. As you can see I didn't get the science gene from my parents. In my next life though I'd like to be a scientist. A cryptozoologist! On a side note: the Piltdown Man memorial stone in East Essex looks like an Asterisk Man enshrouded. Or a penis enshrouded, one or the other. I did hear that an Asterisk tooth was recently discovered under a rock in Yunnan province.

THE 22: What do numbers represent if anything in your work?

JJC: Numbers are strong, confident characters who occasionally crash the party. I don't understand them. I just think they're attractive and I'm happy to have them around. During the last couple years, every time I use numbers and phrases in my work it's always with my father in mind. I started using them shortly after he moved into a retirement home. He quit teaching for a couple years to be a sign painter (this was in the 1980s). He took manila folders and drew out alphabets and numbers and punctuation marks, and made stencils. He was very precise, creating all kinds of fonts, styles, sizes. When it was time for the retirement home he was going to throw it all away. I took it home instead. My wife and I try to visit him once or twice a month. She's extraordinarily generous and positive towards him, and he usually reciprocates. My relationship with him is difficult. The stencils make it a little less difficult. Regarding the phrases, one thing my father and I both shared, at least when I was a child, was a love of neologisms and related nonsense. He was skilled at interjecting quick, barely observable nonsense into conversations. It was quick enough to always momentarily bewilder whoever was listening. He also did a lot of amateur clowning. As a child I often accompanied him. He painted me up, put a wig and funny clothes on me, and I either carried around this one-man-band contraption or I rode around on my Big Wheel honking a horn. In my memory, he was often this trickster character. I guess I hope my art, particularly the ones with my father in mind, has a little of that same trickster attitude.

THE 22: Do you think it's possible for artists to over think their work? How much "thinking" versus "feeling" goes into your pieces?

JJC: Feeling is probably more important to me. As an artist I think I'm creating this giant shaggy dog story. I'm moving as quickly as I can from piece to piece, not worrying at all about end punctuation. I do often look back at old drawings to find loose threads, dropped ideas, but each piece always springs from the one just before. I also cut up a lot of old drawings to reconfigure into new work. Otherwise I need to keep moving forward, to keep making marks. All in all it's really just about the pleasure of drawing, chasing that shaggy dog. And I like watching work pile up around me. Art making is personally meaningful, and it's a lot of fun. I'm very happy when someone else likes what I'm doing. I appreciate all the opportunities to show my work, and I've met a lot of wonderful people through my work, but I'm not driven to think about what might please an audience. Drawing for me is creating a world, mapping it, and losing myself in it, all at the same time. Maybe I'll look back one of these days and see some clearly defined oeuvre. Or a big mess, I don't know. I do know I can't imagine not drawing. It's vital; it helps me move through the world. Regarding other artists: I defer to the critics.

THE 22: What's are your tool or tools of trade? Ink? Paint?

JJC: I work mostly with ink, colored pencils, acrylics, and collage on paper.

THE 22: You're highly connected to nature and live in a rural area correct? How does this influence you or your art?

JJC: Yes, we are happily deep in the boonies! My wife Mary is an environmental attorney focusing on coal mining issues. She works for a small nonprofit called Appalachian Citizens' Law Center, based in Whitesburg, Kentucky. They serve individuals and groups adversely affected by the industry. She often works collaboratively with other nonprofits like Sierra Club and Waterkeeper Alliance. We live on a small farm in central Appalachia, in Pound, Virginia. We try to raise as much food as we can; every year we grow more and more. Central Appalachia is one of the most biologically diverse places on the planet. I've been told we have more varieties of trees on our farm than are native to the entire United Kingdom. Up on a ridge near our farm though we can look one way and it's beautiful and lush and we can look the other way and it's completely mined and homogeneously scrubby. (Reclamation usually means minimal contouring and then covering the mined land with some monoculture like autumn olive, which is non-native and highly invasive.) Our farm didn't have water for fifteen years. It had to be trucked in weekly, bottled water for drinking, a cistern for all other uses. Mining had sunk the wells. Occasionally our house shakes from blasting at a mountaintop removal mine a mile or so away. The economy around here is predominately resource extraction (timber and coal). Environmental concerns related to these practices are inextricable from social justice concerns. "Friends of Coal" stickers are everywhere, on businesses and cars and trucks. It's a very poor area, and coal isn't doing very well. It's nearly depleted and what's left is hard to get to, often requiring the removal of mountaintops to get to very thin layers (filling valleys and poisoning water in the process). A recent report indicates very high rates of cancer near such mining sites. These issues are definitely important to us. I admire a lot of propagandistic art. Sue Coe is amazing. But I can't do it. I can't create art that overtly addresses political, social, and economic issues. I've tried and failed. Central Appalachia definitely needs a Sue Coe. I think I've got a good, solid liberal worldview. I believe this is reflected in my work, but it's rarely the focus. It's more a pervading spirit. My drive as an artist is more onerous than propagandistic, more "psychonaut" than activist.

THE 22: How do you like raising bees?

JJC: It's a lot of fun. Mary and I are new beekeepers. We have four hives, all of them currently healthy and happy. Knock on wood. Our bee mentor, by the way, is Frank Taylor. He's an actor, longtime beekeeper, and all-round nice guy. He's been in a lot of movies and television shows, probably most notably as the outsider artist in *Junebug*. Currently he's working on a television show for the Sundance Channel called *Rectify*. Frank just helped us extract some honey, our first batch. Three gallons or so. It's very exciting.

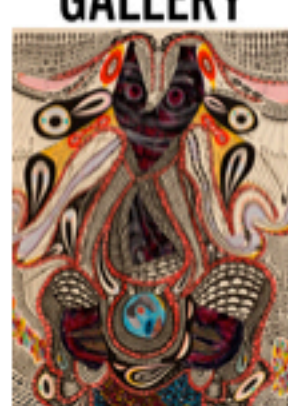
THE 22: How do you feel when people call your work "folk" or "outsider" art?

JJC: Generally positive, but they're not labels I apply to myself. I don't have formal art training, so "self-taught" is probably the best fit. Otherwise, I don't think about it that much. Having said that, I do love the work of many artists who are also identified (at least by the market they usually show up in) as "folk" or "outsider" or "self-taught." Mose Tolliver, Howard Finster, Malcolm McKesson, Nellie Mae Rowe, Albert Loudon, Charlie Lucas, Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Christine Sefolsha, Minnie Evans, Domenico Zindato, Mary Smith, the list could go on and on. Incredible.

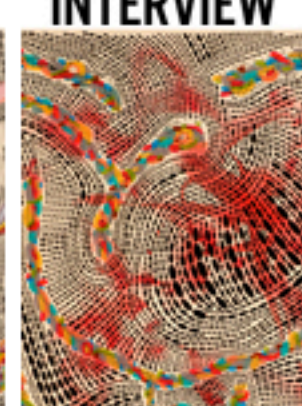
THE 22: If you could only draw one thing for the rest of your life what would it be?

JJC: Probably one of my Asterisk. I reckon there are countless ways to draw it: short and tattooed; gangly with a fat head; thick thighed; monochromatic; multi-colored; and so on. As well as countless ways to group them. I guess it's a little like a writer just wanting to write the letter "A" over and over again, each time a little different. Is that a strange drive? I don't know, but I could do it. An Asterisk alone could keep me happily occupied for years.

GALLERY



INTERVIEW



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