Dalton, Trinie, *Aaron Curry: Tune Yer Head*, "'I Draw, And It Turns Into Something': A Conversation Between Aaron Curry & Trinie Dalton," Miami Beach: The Bass Museum of Art, 2019, pp. 24-29

"I DRAW, AND IT TURNS INTO SOMETHING"

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN AARON CURRY & TRINIE DALTON

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AARON CURRY & TRINIE DALTON

AARON: These paintings are getting close; I'm going to leave them pretty loose. I've been nerding out on the drips . . .

TRINIE: Your collages do this too: hyper-detailed against broad strokes for dynamic scale.

AARON: At first, it was play. For example, these strokes look like images of strokes rather than brush-made ones. The push and pull is so opaque it gives a trompe l'oeil effect. I wanted a thirties Disney Studios look. I'm trying to depict space as surface play. When some parts are immediately up front, it offers depth.

TRINIE: Both painting and music grapple with the issue of time. Speeding up and slowing down time, like simultaneity. One looks long and hard at some parts in these paintings, but gets quick gestalt in other parts.

AARON: I work quickly, then slow it down. I'll get something up fast, then sit with it. And I'll usually make a move on a lot of things all at once.

TRINIE: For cohesion? Or so they won't be precious?

AARON: I have to be working on multiple things. I need to be able to fuck them up. So I can move on. In this one, two other images got painted over. If I get stuck, I put things away or destroy them.

TRINIE: It's all about the shred, or claw marks. Collage is the perfect solution, right? Recycling?

AARON: Collage is freeing. That's one good thing about making paintings, sculptures, collages, and music. If I'm struggling with one, I can make something else.

TRINIE: The sculptures are planned for production, right?

AARON: They start out as doodles. Then I can picture how they'll look in space. From there I'll cut out the forms in wood or cardboard so I can move them around and see how they function in space, then prime, paint, or silkscreen.

TRINIE: How did you come up with the assemblage system?

AARON: It was easy. What can I get at the hardware store? I learned to build things from building skateboard ramps. So I knew plywood. And then looking at David Smith, Calder, Noguchi, old toys, they all use flat planes. I was never interested in carving or working in clay.

TRINIE: Are they painted as autonomous pieces or conceived overall?

AARON: I've done both. What happens if I don't plan the composition, randomly create each one, then push them together? Sometimes that works really well, sometimes not. I keep it open. I end up imposing rules on myself without wanting to, and it takes someone else to suggest otherwise. Like, why didn't I think to put that at an angle?

TRINIE: It's satisfying to find methodologies then subvert them each time, but it's hard to think differently for each project. Human brains seek cohesion, right? You have to work hard to break a sequence and to keep risk factors high.

AARON: I got burned-out on the wood sculptures a while back. I was working too fast and didn't have time to sit with them; I thought I was done. So I started dealing with metal, it was a different way of working with gravity. The metal works start as wood or cardboard maquettes, then they're fabricated out of aluminum.

TRINIE: Is *Little Bang* [pp. 18–19] the first time you're working with neon?

AARON: Yeah, and I resisted it because it felt gimmicky. I even told my sculpture class to make a sculpture that you can't plug in. And I said, "I don't want sound coming out of anything. Make something in space that does something on its own." So it's kind of funny that here I am plugging something in.

TRINIE: Is it hard to make something with fluorescent colors that doesn't feel gimmicky?

AARON: Yes, but I've always liked fluorescent colors. *Little Bang* uses a magenta-hot pink. I'd wanted to make lights for a while so I had all these drawings, for neon or other kinds of bulbs, like constellations. Finally, I'm doing one, and I'm excited.

TRINIE: Would you say black-and-pink is your signature color combo?

AARON: Yeah, I guess so. But not on purpose, it's just something I keep going back to. People know the language. One sculpture in this Bass exhibition's so big and the other so small, it's going to be like a black hole. Energy is really compressed in one piece, and the other holds more out in space, like "Hey, I'm here."

TRINIE: Do you have a deep interest in space?

AARON: Yes, but I haven't studied it. The last Kordansky solo show borrowed space concepts. It's often a framework. At that point, California was in a serious drought, and the fires continue to get worse every year. I've always been into sci-fi and space, but I wanted to make this show that's really me dealing with Earth and our place on Earth, and its place in outer space. When people look into outer space and realize we're small, it leads to enlightenment. And sculpture deals with space implicitly, from micro to macro. For the big sculpture, *STARFUKER* [pp. 40–41], I was thinking about folding space, wondering, "If space folds, does that mean it has to be flat?" I was going to try to do a weighty

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Richard Serra thing, though the tilt in his pieces might feel threatening. I wanted mine to have similar presence without the threat. More like dancing.

TRINIE: In your shape systems, some look really dangerous. Hooks, sharp edges, like you could impale yourself on your sculptures.

AARON: A bit of an S&M thing going on!

TRINIE: I don't know if I buy the comparison of your work to modernism. Of course it can be seen as a sort of tribute, but don't those shapes just derive naturally from the hand, like archetypes?

AARON: I'm interested in modernist sculpture's relationship to depicted space, but a lot of these forms come from the human or animal figure or body. Bones and body parts abstracted. *Creator Creator* [p. 31] was a different thing. It was shown with *STARFUKER*, a large flat black piece. When they serviced the Hubble telescope lens, they captured images of star nurseries. That got me thinking about ideas of god: what's a creator of a creator? Something that's creating things that creates things. Worshipping a star. Then, it's just an interesting form. It has movement but defies gravity. Talk about tension, one part floats and it's not supposed to; we had to weigh one side down to make that happen. It creates a weird mind trick where you feel like that's not supposed to exist. Physically, it's like walking under a bridge, but that action breaks down the way you perceive it because instead of reading it as an image, you are now in that space. Almost like channel changing. And, it's simple. It's not pretty; it's ugly. It's like a star tree. With *Little Bang*, I wanted the trellis-like grid to look like it exists in the world somewhere, but not exactly. The eye I got from Michelangelo's *David*, a 3-D version, I've used it a few different times. I changed the pupil to hatch marks, so it's counting time. It's about time and space.

TRINIE: Back to sci-fi and horror, I'm teaching a class based on Mike Kelley's essay "Playing with Dead Things."

AARON: *The Uncanny* collection is one of my favorite pieces of his. He was part of why I moved here [to Los Angeles]. When I was a student at Art Center, Diana Thater invited me to drive Peter Saul around since Mike was bringing him as a visiting artist. Peter was a favorite too, so I was like, "YES, dream come true." I met Peter and Mike for dinner, just sat, listened, observed. As a student, I learned then that there was no certain way to think. You can exist in all these different ways.

TRINIE: Did you see Kelley's *Kandors*? In the other room were these black foamy pieces, the last works he made before he passed. It felt so grim and terrifying. Sardonic, yet sincere. Like he'd finally succeeded in bringing to life what was happening in his mind. It was really upsetting because of its rawness. Instead of commenting on art through critique or outside sources, it was just pure form.

AARON: That was one unfortunate thing I felt being a student of his, and that generation. There is so much . . . not irony, but . . . cynicism. Everything tiptoed around art criticism, leaving little room for play, self-expression, and imagination. When I think about music, I wonder if it can come from a pure place.

TRINIE: Is it even possible anymore?

AARON: Yes, with art too. Can you get to a point where it's not set up, or where everything isn't explained away?

TRINIE: Yes. Good collage is proof. If you're making a collage with recognizable source materials, but in a way that is signature to you, it transforms into something highly original. That's the basis of critical thinking as well, transforming familiar information. Nothing is original and things are endlessly recycled, but also everything is original. It's a paradox.

AARON: I agree. Like, when my work gets compared to modernism. I embrace my influences and wear them as a badge, but at a certain point it's the mix that makes the individual, a ball of confusion.

TRINIE: Good ideas come from conglomeration. The modernist clean slate fantasy that you can't borrow from anything needs to disappear. Why pretend nothing existed before 150 years ago?

AARON: Art is still taught through Duchamp. I mean, I like Duchamp, but it doesn't have to be Duchamp versus Picasso. In people's minds Duchamp created this idea that it has to be new and that art can be anything . . . That dogma started the whole painting is dead thing.

TRINIE: I'm so glad that's gone.

AARON: Yeah, it's so far gone. I don't keep up with the trends. When I started making figurative sculptures, people weren't making figurative sculptures. But I didn't start because of that.

TRINIE: Your mentors and the artists you collect have famously ignored trends. I don't think the term "outsider" is helpful, but they've definitely stubbornly adhered to their own eclectic styles on the fringes of academic conversation. Does that inspire you?

AARON: I'm surprised those terms still have sway. Like kitsch: is there still a high and low? Someone described my work as kitsch, and at the time I was glad, but it still gets written about as if it's a bad thing.

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Some critics and writers have an elitist view of image making. I thought that was over; it's so snobby and lazy. No artist comes over and goes, "That's really kitschy." And with all the Instagram and computer crap people look at nowadays, what is kitsch? It has penetrated everything. If I could own a Philip Guston I would, or a Rauschenberg . . . trying to think of some "high art" out there [laughs]. I have a Picabia drawing . . . I'm not drawn to something because I'm a rebel, I'm just drawn to it. I think a lot about the Chicago Imagists in comparison to what was happening in New York in the sixties, like Pop Art. They made new images using kitsch or Pop as the language. New York Pop was easier for people to deal with. By simply removing themselves from the artwork, it appeared that artists were saying something critical about society. It doesn't have to stop there. I'm a fan of Warhol, but what could he have made if he had created the images? John Wesley made his own images. Artists like him are a lot more interesting because they have more layers.

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AARON: So, this checkerboard silkscreen is going to be one of the patterns. It was made using a stencil: painting it, then turning it over and using it as a stamp. I took that, scanned it, and made a silkscreen. I want it to be like Photoshop's gray grid when you discard a layer, but handmade and fractured. When you enter one room it's red hot, "Hey, come over this way," inviting people to enter. One room is more immersive; one room is more spacious.

TRINIE: Is this the first time you're entering in color but then submerging in black and white?

AARON: I've never done carpet. But I did the black and white one other time, in London. I had two colorful sculptures in the park, then black and white in the gallery. I was working with the idea of grisaille, and color compared to black and white; in talks, I relate it to an altarpiece or *The Wizard of Oz*: color as heaven or the dream. For example, a lot of conceptual artists used black and white because color would have confused their work—it was just about ideas. That's interesting in relation to drawing. That drawing is the idea and color the experience, the thing you can't explain. I wanted things to disappear and to make people question how things are functioning.

TRINIE: Ironically, color can flatten.

AARON: Yeah, for example I really liked using fluorescent colors on these outdoor sculptures because even though they stick out they appear flat. It creates a vibrating silhouette.

TRINIE: When did you get into fluorescent paint? There's something pre-computer in there.

AARON: Oh, skating and BMX. I didn't grow up around art, I knew only of Dalí and Picasso; album covers and skateboard graphics. Pushead did designs for Zorlac Skateboards, skulls and dark material, and I liked their fluorescent pink backgrounds as contrasting signifiers, like, "Pink is for girls"; I liked those girl colors. That felt edgy at the time. I stopped using those colors for a while, got into Rauschenberg, but returned to it, drawn to the artificiality. Peter Saul gave me an entry, as I mentioned before, like "Hey, you can use these in a different way." And Saul's modeling of fluorescent colors, the way he dry-brushes them looks like a Photoshop brush. Light comes in, like on a computer screen. Back to Kelley, at Art Center, he told me once that Ed Paschke was the only painter who could make a painting look like a television. He'd put white and black down, then fluorescent, so that it created this effect that looked like light shining through a screen. This taught me what represented television color. People are making things that are coming from the screen—like drop shadow—but what does light off the screen look like?

TRINIE: So the exhibition relates to channel surfing?

AARON: A lot of my visual information came from television as a child. In my household, TV was on all the time, even during dinner. I couldn't fall asleep unless it was on. I started thinking about tuning things, or how when there's a partial channel, it's abstracted: monochrome, broken up. With the differentiation of each room, I was picturing clunky channel changers—clunk, clunk. Not fixed. Tuned in sometimes but reconfigured.

TRINIE: There's a sonic component to tuning. Music and sculpture both move energy as sonic material.

AARON: Music and sculpture might share compositional tactics, but the way you take them in varies. They penetrate your body differently. Music can be physical, like when a guitarist turns up the volume, but not as physical as art. When you're creating music there's a set of chords or a structure: parameters, right? Or, there's a hook or sweet spot. I think about that with art.

TRINIE: Do you still borrow from punk aesthetics?

AARON: It's in there, not so much in the references as in the work's makeup. Music is a large part of my practice. I have music on all the time. In the morning, I just burn incense, but then as the sun comes up I turn on music. Music can bring emotion: you can cry. You don't usually cry in front of artworks. I mean, I love art, but I don't weep. I often need to sit down to take

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it in. Somehow music taps into memory, though. Not that I want art to do that.

TRINIE: Creating work that's appealing and invites all different people and age groups.

AARON: For my exhibition of outdoor sculptures at Lincoln Center, we installed at night, and the next morning, at 6:00 or 7:00 a.m., kids walked up and [gesture of awe] grabbed the works and went *WHAAAA?* It was like, *What should we do?* I saw them go right for "color" and "form." That was really great. Back to that guttural. No irony, no cynicism, just primal.

TRINIE: Primal, that's a generous translation of the caveman motif in the collages. Back to the primal. I was reading an essay by T. J. Clark about why *Guernica* is so enduring. He claims it's because of the paradox of death: reconfiguring the epitomes of death in aesthetics versus death being a constant, timeless unifier. In this, he sets up a dichotomy between monstrosity and tragedy, alleging that works that continuously trigger tragedy are more enduring. Monstrosity, as an aesthetic, is a way into that.

AARON: I've seen *Guernica* twice. I'm a Picasso fan, and I knew it would be great, though it was so much better than I expected. I don't know that I got into the subject matter as much as how it was painted. Picasso's visual language is very much stuff that we still look at. It's cartoony: outlines in black. The power of the strokes and the scale, it kills you instantly. You are in relationship to it—it's sculptural.

TRINIE: Your artworks don't convey tragedy, necessarily, but they are made from parts constructed to convey a whole, like *Guernica*. Does an artwork need to have parts as well as a whole? In contemporary art, quite a bit of individual work only gains power through context. How about Richard Hawkins? He uses sexual and dirty imagery sometimes, but also does the reverse: takes blank or innocent imagery and transforms it into something abject.

AARON: Absolutely. I love that about him. It's personal desire too. He's been such an important figure; he helped me figure out who I am and how to deal with being an artist. I love how his work is so personal, but also giving. It allows you to enter it.

TRINIE: Specific and personal, but open. The collaging mind. This exhibition has that. Carpeting, tying rooms together with color and pattern.

AARON: Zoomed out it's four rooms, but when you're in it, it's like *The Twilight Zone*, sucking you in. Back to grisaille, black and white as concrete. Let's get rid of experience. When you open the box up, it's all color. The awe moment, god, the thing you can't explain—color—pure experience. My drawings camouflage the forms. The question becomes: are drawings the idea of the thing? They abstract physicality.

TRINIE: Like the cosmos, plugging the human body back into the universe. Obliteration can remind us that our bodies are material, and in that, one with the universe. It's a connecting agent.

AARON: I think about connecting a lot. When you become grounded.

TRINIE: Maybe that's why you work with metals. Metal is so terrestrial.

AARON: That's why I titled my Lincoln Center piece *Melt to Earth*. One, after my wife Jennifer had an organ transplant, how am I representing the body; and two, when I make a sculpture out of metal, does it become permanent? No, it's only permanent in our lifetime. In a couple of thousand years it will disintegrate.

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TRINIE: Are you creating artwork that you want to look at?

AARON: Yes, everything I make is something that I want to see. Even if it's just slightly different from something I've done before, I'm trying to make something that excites me.

TRINIE: Are you having fun when you're working?

AARON: Yeah. Totally. Well, not always. If I'm struggling I'll get really bummed out; that's when I'll go play music or work on painting. If it were always easy, I don't know that it would be fun. People who run marathons train for marathons. So when I make a successful painting or sculpture, I get really happy. It's like winning a marathon.

TRINIE: Playfulness can't be underestimated. Do you look at mandalas? Flat, planar diagrams of 3-D maps of consciousness. They can be made in sand, or as big, flat, circular paintings with a boundary that represents the universe or mind.

AARON: I haven't. But going to Southeast Asia lately has been great. The Indian temples in Singapore have these carved, colored sculptures all over the façades.

TRINIE: Sacred art from those parts of the world captures the cyclical nature of time. Not like linear time, not like the Stations of the Cross.

AARON: John the Baptist goes to jail, then gets his head cut off; that's like a cartoon.

TRINIE: Mixing pop culture references is about expressing time's movement, right?

AARON: I'm a huge Rauschenberg fan. I used to put bus posters on my pedestals, treating pop culture as a base. When Rauschenberg first used images of JFK,

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or astronauts, it was probably so current and fresh. Now it's old, the look and references are old. What am I investing into my images? Twenty years from now, they're not going to have that punch. Can I get that by creating my own imagery? You can use pop images but you have to take control of them and make them your own. I use them in collages but those aren't as heavy as the rest of my work.

TRINIE: But some Pop Art still looks contemporary.

AARON: A lot of those are just good paintings. Images are so saturated now that there's something elegant about Pop Art. I'm happy when people engage with art at all, but it is weird in museums when people don't even look at art, but just take pictures with their phones. There's no looking. I take my students to museums, sit in front of art, and they have to decide what they think. In Chicago, my teacher said, "If you want to paint like Rubens, go stare at a Rubens painting." Looking allows for the creation of ideas and imagination. I draw, and it turns into something.