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Jim Lopez Interviews
Artist,
Aaron Olshan
(Part One)

Jim: Do you ever think about giving up on Art?

Aaron: Oh, man, you know, it's like this, when you've lived it as long as I have you always entertain thoughts, oh yeah, "Wouldn't it have been nice if I had taken the route, the more travelled path of being a straight ahead guy, a regular guy," but it didn't work out that way. My whole drive, my whole life has been to somehow make this happen. That's the only thing that ever drove me to the actual limit of not being, you know, a functioning member of the main stream. I gave it all up to have a studio, to keep persevering. Art burns so deep inside I can't give it up. I understood early on that Art is a profession that can kill and often does. I've seen a lot of people fall by the wayside. That's just what comes with it. You don't choose Art, Art chooses you. If I could have done something different, believe me I would have done something different. You'd have to be a freakin' nut job to get into being a visual artist in this world. The Art World is money, writing grants, playing the game and there's so much to it, and basically artists just want to go to their studio and work.

If I could only have a life like that I'd pretty good, considering all the stress I have to deal with. In my ideal life I would work all the time. I have endless amounts of ideas and projects: multi-media, photography and film and print making. If I could be the artist that I want to be that would be something. I hope one day not to be a slave. That's my goal in life. I want to be free. If I



could ever achieve the true possibilities of being free. God knows what's going to happen, but as long as I'm a slave...

Jim: Do you feel like a slave?

Aaron: My best friend, the artist Andres Serrano, he was a slave once, but then he became rich and famous and it freed him to be what he has to be. We're like brothers, we've been friends forever. He was a struggling artist, you know, and then he happened to get a break. Piss Christ, you know. That's what every artist dreams of. I just want to be free (laughs). I want to be able to get up and endlessly work, to not have a teaching job and deal with a bunch of shit to keep this going.

Jim: Isn't the struggle part of the art? Can you really be an artist without that struggle?

Aaron: Yeah, you can, bro, strangely enough. Without that struggle you're freed to concentrate on what you have to do. The whole romantic myth of the struggling artist...that's all bullshit, bro.

Jim: You think so?

Aaron: Absolutely. That's romanticism. I grew up with a father who believed in that myth and sometimes lived it, because he had to be a fuck-up sometimes. I'm not going to play that, because I realized that the only way to be an artist the way I want to be is to be a dynamic visionary, who has ultimate power over what he wants to do. For me to do that I have to be at the top of my game and struggling and being anything other than being on top will not work. I always fight anyone who gets into the idea of the struggling, romantic artist, because so many of us are caught up in that. But once you've lived it for a long time you soon get over that bullshit. I rejected that from my father early on, who was playing it out, and I saw many artists die and be stupid and a lot of shit.

I will agree that many artists have issues, asocial personalities that don't work well in systems. The reason that artists become artist is because they want to create their own world, no one else's world will do and that's the pain. Sometimes we kick that anger out on ourselves, drinking heavily, doing drugs or just being the general fuck-up, or being anti-social, like myself. I happen to have an asocial type of personality, and I understand that I struggle everyday with that.

My best times are when I am creating my own world because I see it come alive. I have my own vision. It's not just play for me. It doesn't just get me laid. I look to create a new language. You have to put in endless hours, and you have to start out with a modicum of talent. It's a subtle thing.

Jim: Wouldn't you say that your art has been influenced by your struggle? The struggling artist does not mean being a drunk or a drug addict or a fuck-up or pursuing some romantic notion of mimicking a Rimbaud or Bukowski.

Aaron: Has struggle helped me? I don't know, I don't want to romanticize it. I'm not going to say if it's helped me or not. I'm a bit more realistic about it. Is there a struggle, has there been a struggle? Yes, but I look at it as a hindrance that I need to work through and get down to what I really need to do, and do what I do best. Has struggle helped me? No, I can't say. Once I say the struggle has helped me immediately my art lends itself to the image of the romantic struggling artist. And here again, I would love to say to you, "I'm one of the richest, most famous artists in the world." It's at that level that I can do everything that I want to do. I want to do it legitimately, not like Julian Schnabel or these artists who higher media people to put their name out there constantly. I want to pursue my career legitimately, which is based solely on the quality of my work and not some PR campaign. My personality is irrelevant. I don't care about that. I want people to come to my shows and say, "Finally, an artist who has really honed his craft." Because, in the final analysis that's the only thing that interests me. Money and fame are only there, as I perceive, only exist to make me work harder, to just be an artist.

I don't want to have kids, I wasn't cut out for them. I'm like many of my fellow artists, none of us have children, it's incredible. None of us have kids, because artists just want to do what the hell they want to do, and that's enough. That's the life I want. I just want to do what I want to do.

Every time I go to the studio, you know, I've been doing it for so many decades...as they say, this is the age when artists do their best work, when they hit their fifties something happens. I still have the energy. My mind still works good. I have that artistic, dynamic power right now. I saw it when my father was his in his fifties, his work was magnificent: powerful and disturbing and angry and would really knock people out. People went crazy over my father's stuff, and then as he got older there was an energy change, and he went through another