

## Rostarr: The Man in the Maze

Rostarr (Romon Kimin Yang) is a scribbler, constantly filling his studio shelves with small sketchbooks — some elongated rectangles, some square. “I love to draw,” explains the artist simply. The pages and pages are filled with studies: on gestures, such as a man with folded arms, a cubist-inspired bust, or a rendering of an uneven toothy grin. But most of the images are faces — faces made of striped maze-like lines. Sometimes many lines intersect probingly it seems, spawning from an investigation into the essence of what must remain to allow a recognizable impression of a face. These sketchbooks are hidden, tucked away in his studio on shelves in the perfect stacks of a self-described obsessive-compulsive personality.

It is this same compulsiveness that allows for the perfect line work of Rostarr’s large-scale paintings, all painted freehand, emulating the clean lines and colored patternings of a computer. It is this same drive for perfection and design influence that forces his work to delve further into what might be assumed on first glance. As in the existential Ray and Charles Eames film “Powers of Ten,” in which the filmmakers investigate the relative size of things in the universe by multiplying and then scaling down its size ten times every few seconds, he seeks to magnify what would otherwise be a small portion of a larger image into giant strokes and into freehand renderings of digital graphic-like pixels. The artist describes this idea behind his work: “When you’re looking at my work, its like putting a microscope to something that seems simple, but then, there’s so much complexity. What may seem flat and black from far away, is a universe of things up close.”

Similarly the artist’s inspiration emanates from a range of design and art influences including Escher’s detailed prints to Dali’s *Lincoln in Dalivision*, images of galaxies in space, to the old-school multicolor Macintosh and Oskar Schlemmer 1922 Bauhaus logos. With his interest in the ideas behind the creation of logos and icons and the importance of viewing them at different scales, in his works such as *Starry Night, After Van Gogh* (2005), Rostarr expands the strokes used to replicate the effects of a single moving cloud from van Gogh’s famed artwork into a large maze-like painting. The artist searches for the image only found when, like in an Antonioni film, it is blown up to massive scale, revealing the imaginary that lies beneath the obvious — the face in the clouds, the silhouette in the Rorschach ink blot, the figure within the figure.

Rostarr was born in Taegu, South Korea in 1971. His father, a published poet and philosopher, moved the artist and his brother to Washington D.C. when Rostarr was just two. The young artist found himself emulating his older brother, who excelled at copying characters from the comic books and cartoons they’d watch on TV as latchkey kids in the ’70s and ’80s. Yet he was torn about figurative drawing, and fell more inclined towards abstract design. In 1989, he moved to New York City to study graphic design and printmaking with a concentration in type and logo design at the School of Visual Arts. It was at SVA that his mentor Frank Young pushed him to go beyond the computer in graphic design and to work on painting, illustration, and silk screening techniques. His final portfolio was completely created through lithography and silk screening. “The hand

was being removed a lot during the time I was going to school,” observed Rostarr about the over reliance of computer-created design at the time.

Design influences did remain with the artist beyond his schooling. In 1996, Rostarr created his iconic logo that he calls “The Seed.” With this personal icon that resembles a cross between whipped cream topping and a mound of cartoon excrement, the artist references the idea of spreading inspiration and also the process of letting go in the spirit of reckless abandon. The artist explained, “At the time, I felt it was refreshing to represent myself as a symbol rather than writing my name.”

His works from 1996-1999 and even today also utilize his earlier acquired skills in the silk screening process of layering colors one at a time and working with negative space. However, feeling that something was missing from 2-D design, Rostarr sought to inject a sense of movement onto the flatness of the page. By mixing custom paints from the basic CMYK shades in combination with a more fluid movement of strokes and shapes, the artist created a technique to foster an illusion of movement on the canvas by layering fields of colors in twisting amorphous cloud-like forms. Finding a meditative escape through the patience necessary in his technique, his works retained the clean perfect edge to his paintings. This idea of combining the perfection of his graphic-like shapes and the potentiality of movement created in his paintings formed the idea behind his book *Graphysics* (2001), and is present in works such as *Gemini I* (2000), as well as his later *Blues Fingers* (2003). In *Gemini I*, a layer of fluorescent orange paint jumps out like a moving cloud floating on top of yellow and grey layers. In *Blues Fingers*, blue elongated shapes move in skips and whirls across the raw cream canvas, accented by a layer of white, giving depth to its flatness.

Already interested in Asian and Arabic calligraphic techniques early on for their visual form and impact, Rostarr often mimicked the feeling of thick and thin variations by painting with hard edged acrylic brushes that he had acquired in Tokyo. He was traveling to Japan nearly eight times a year for exhibitions. In 2000, while working on a project with Agnes b. in Paris, the artist purchased numerous calligraphy pens from a secret specialty shop. Now harboring in his arsenal what he calls “the oldest design tool,” he was able to produce smaller scaled paper works that also worked with the thick and thin lines he had created with paint brushes on larger scale. The eventual use of sumi ink, automatic calligraphy pens, and fluted bamboo sticks and brushes offered him a range of tools that were able to impart a controlled line, yet still allowed for a handmade antiquated look. Works such as *Siamese Antichrist* and *Make-Out Session* (2005) are created with these tools on the heavy handmade papers preferred by the artist. The lines, nearly touching, approximate an illusion of carved sculptural facets similar to the breakdown of shapes in cubist fashion. They also capture the viewer into an intricate maze and visual play of patterns and parallel lines that reveal alternately faces or abstract bodies wrestling on the floor.

The controlled lines and smooth-edged shapes of Rostarr’s *Graphysics* came to a pause, however on September 11, 2001. As he was at his residence in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, that morning, he witnessed the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center crumble to the

ground. In the days and months ahead, friends and artists moved away and for the artist, the inescapable feeling of emotion was captured in a single color: black. Instead, he emerged with the large-scale black on white acrylic on wood *Colonics Study* (2002). Replacing clean lines, the work incorporated smoky meandering brushstrokes, drips, and splattered elements. For the artist, letting go of control into more chaotic brush strokes substituted as therapy, and also allowed him to bring the emotion he required to the formal quality of the work. “Something inside, wouldn’t let me paint normally, or the way I had been painting before. I just felt it wasn’t expressive enough anymore, especially with what was going on in the world.”

This dramatic shift and the influence of the trauma of 9/11 continues to evidence itself within the artist’s work. While not one to boast better politics, his paintings *Twin Falls*, *American Kamikaze*, *Freedom Man’s Last Stand* and *Resident Alien* (2003) speak to 9/11 and its aftermath in war. The abstract expressionist pieces each exhibit the colors black, red, and blue, calling out as a color code for America, smoke, and the black of oil. His broad black brushstrokes and splutters were extended from the canvas to the gallery walls, spilling onto the floor, when the pieces were installed for the politically charged group exhibition titled “A Better Tomorrow” in 2004 in Williamsburg, NY.

Earlier in 1999, Rostarr began collaborative and video work with the accomplished New York-Tokyo-based artist collective The Barnstormers. The artists came together as a mix of emerging and established artists who would travel on annual pilgrimages to the rural tobacco fields in Cameron, North Carolina, to paint murals on old tobacco curing barns. Other artists that were part of the group include the founder David Ellis, Jeff “Doze” Green, and Jose Parlá, each with whom Rostarr has since collaborated on many art projects. As one of the core artists in the group, he worked on stop-motion DVD projects that the collective created of artists painting in collaboration and in serial, buffing each other’s works out immediately after being painted on a barn wall or studio floor. For the artist, the collaborations grew from first just trying to paint together, filling designated space, to actually learning to communicate to create an intricate piece. The collaborative process and ephemeral quality of the projects also enabled the control-obsessed artist to let go from the preciousness of the work as object.

In 2008, Rostarr traveled to far Western China in an art project titled “The New Grand Tour” orchestrated by Suitman with sponsorship from Diesel Asia, he and a group of artists from NYC were able to visit Shangri-La and Tibet and a monastery in Kunming where Buddhist monks were creating Thang-ka paintings with age-old techniques that they sought to preserve. On that journey he created several series of works that were exhibited at 798 art district, Beijing, including the calligraphy-inspired *Tibet Dream & Alive Series* and *Two Ways to Play the Game*, made of line patterns revealing faces and totemic shapes; his large-scale *Bian Pao* work, filled with short and broad strokes of black ink on white canvas that imitate the chaotic light display of fireworks; and his *Wise Owl In Full Bloom* series of marker on linen inspired by the Thang-ka tradition.

The *Wise Owl In Full Bloom* drawings illustrate the artist’s mastery in technique, style, and medium. Using the thick and thin expanse of black and red markers, Rostarr

freehands intricate patternings and lines stacked together to create images of hauntingly regal busts looking straight on to the viewer. The interwoven red and black ink lines create a knitting effect. The linen captures the ink like an ancient scroll, imparting its antiquing quality to the colors, fading them somewhat, lending an element of agelessness to the works. Sewn frames further a folk art aspect to the works and complete each piece as an interesting play on modern tools, freehand calligraphic patterning, and traditional form.

The artist's 2008 series of skulls titled *Phrenology*, are also painted with a handmade antiqued feel with sumi ink on heavy Indian elephant paper. Similar to previous works such as *Headmaster I* and *Headmaster II* (2005), the works investigate the lines of the face and head with the calligraphic patterning for which Rostarr's sumi-ink works are known. However, these drawings explore an extreme simplicity in line. Some of the skulls in this nine-painting series look as if they could be drawn with two or three strokes. The inked lines that shape these flat glyphic skull profiles skip and reveal some of the paper underneath, emphasizing the handmade folk art materiality of the pieces. Created less as a meditation on death, the skulls are meant to represent the differences in personality and the individuality of the human psyche. Also in the celebratory nature of the Day of the Dead, calling attention to traditional ceremony and an older culture. The drawings give off an air of agelessness common to hieroglyphics and similar relics.

With a wide range of mediums and techniques, Rostarr's works play to each end of the spectrum from wildly chaotic with ink and paint splutters thrown at full arm speed to the canvas, to collaborative improvisations, to the carefully painted precision of his calligraphic patterning. His new video work has begun to visit his range of medium and philosophy. Recently in 2008, Rostarr created the remarkable video installation *Kill The Ego* based on the audio collage by *Soundwalk's* Stephan Crasneanski and Dug Winningham. Crasneanski created a soundscape of New York City through editing audio pieces that he had captured over the span the past twelve years.

Among the patchwork of samples that fill the soundtrack are the screeching of subway trains, a man reading, a voice preaching philosophies from the street, the creaking of the World Trade Center towers as they once oscillated in the wind, and the chirps and static-riddled voices on the walkie-talkies of the rescue workers during 9/11. To this audio palette, Rostarr has produced an 40-minute visual *chef d'oeuvre*. Cutting from hyper-stylized black-and-white footage of the artist drawing freehand with ink, fluorescent marker, and paint directly from the tube; to cuts of improvised drips and innovative breakdance paintings he calls the *Vitruvian brush* series; to the artist as renegade — throwing paint in long violent curves on a wall in Williamsburg, NY, to the sounds of an S&M session. The development of his range of stylings exhibited in this piece have taken over a decade to produce and continue to shift and expand through his personal evolution and discovery of new mediums and inspirations. The video is an elegy to a city, the aftermath of 9/11, and over a decade of life and work in New York by the artist that denies the restraint of definitions. Rostarr explained, "I always believe in pushing my creativity and not getting stuck in one particular style. If I can picture something

original that I've never seen or done before, then I need to make my visions come to life, especially while I'm alive and it's in my head.”

Alexandra Chang is a writer and independent curator. She is the author of *Envisioning Diaspora: Asian American Visual Arts Collectives* (Timezone 8 Limited). She has served as the Managing Editor for *Art Asia Pacific* magazine and Features Editor for *amNewYork*. Her writing has appeared in *Art Asia Pacific*, *ArtKrush*, *Asiance* magazine, *Art in Asia*, *amNewYork*, *Time Magazine*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *Boston Globe* among other publications.