

## **HUGH SCOTT-DOUGLAS: "Hugh Scott-Douglas on Toronto, Los Angeles and What's Next"**

Written by Leah Sandals  
January 18, 2013

Hugh Scott-Douglas is looking forward to a pretty big 2013. The 24-year-old artist, who was raised in Edmonton and Ottawa and graduated from OCAD University in 2010, opened a solo show at Los Angeles's Blum & Poe last week. He's also included in "Pattern: Follow the Rules" at the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum in Michigan, which opens in March. And in June, through San Francisco dealer Jessica Silverman, he'll be featured in Art Basel's Art Statements. Mixed in along the way is a move to New York with his wife, fashion designer Lara Vincent. Recently, *Canadian Art* caught up with Scott-Douglas by phone to discuss Toronto influences, decayed denim and his signature series of cyanotypes.

**Leah Sandals: Currently on display at your Blum & Poe exhibition "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" is one of your cyanotype-on-cloth projects. You've also done a book of cyanotypes with Mousse. What drew you to this somewhat unusual medium?**

**Hugh Scott-Douglas:** In school, I studied sculpture and became fascinated with the idea of negotiating the tactility of an object or an idea. That fascination is tied into another big narrative for me—the idea of negotiating the value or currency of an image. I'm interested in how images can have both inflated and deflated values, and in how we might negotiate them.

A lot of different works have come out of these themes. The cyanotypes in particular came out of trying to investigate the idea of the architect's blueprint—the image before an image.

They became a way to investigate other areas of interest too, because blueprints are sort of graphic and they are a method of mechanical reproduction, but the process is also unstable and analog, which gives it this tactility I was referring to. It's a very hands-on approach to the production of an image.

**LS: A lot of the PR texts on your work emphasize its links to painting, cinema and theory. But when I saw your work at Jessica Silverman's booth at NADA Miami 2011, I noticed many people were drawn to it in a visceral sense. How do you parse tactile or visceral appeal versus theoretical readings?**

**HSD:** I think that's sort of the project of the artist. We can speak about managing all of these very conceptual and theoretical positions, but ultimately we are dealing with a kind of affect-based—or we can call it commodity-based—object. We do call these the fine arts, so for me, at least, the conceptual exercise does need to bridge the gap into an object discussion.

There could be other ways of making a blueprint, for instance. But they might not be as beautiful as what I think I am doing—not to say that I think what I'm doing is *most* beautiful, but I am pleased with them as objects. When I first started working on the cyanotypes, I realized that this could be part of their potential.

**LS: Your cyanotypes sometimes have a stained or aged quality. They seem to fit into a decayed aesthetic popular among artists of your age—or at least popular at that NADA fair, which had more than one decayed-mirror sculpture! I wonder how much this aesthetic might be related to growing up with a very digitally rendered, clean-looking visual culture. What are your thoughts?**

**HSD:** I'm trying to think about what the root of my interest in that aesthetic would be born from. I don't know if I ever considered it as a reaction to something digital.

I mean, some of this is just fashion as well—anyone who denies that is not being truthful, because these are trends that emerge on a broad level. Whether it's by going through blogs on the Internet or by going to exhibitions of artists they admire, people begin to consume a certain aesthetic. Then it will shift as people begin to work in their studios.

I think that if you look back to artists like Martin Kippenberger or Sigmar Polke, this aesthetic may not be as fresh to our generation as it was to theirs. And even they're borrowing from something else before that. It's very much like a zipper—every part before it has a part to interlock to create this long strand that is history.

What I'm trying to highlight by noting connections like that to other artists and art movements is that there is something like a covalent bond or a locus that draws an aesthetic sensibility together over time; the factors that influence it are hard to pinpoint. I agree with you that this kind of aesthetic is absolutely present, but I'm not sure if its growth is as simple as a relationship to the digital.

I mean, I think back to the jeans that people my age wanted to wear when we were in high school, which were the caricature of what a distressed jean would have been—shredded and bleached ad infinitum. That was a very present aesthetic, and it was kind of born out of an Abercrombie and Fitch look, this tattered beach-bum kind of thing. It's possible you could stretch those jeans and they'd be a hit at NADA now.

**LS: Over the past few years in Toronto, you were involved in curatorial endeavours like the group show "Chopped & Screwed" at MKG127 and the operation of Tomorrow Gallery with Tara Downs and Aleksander Hardashnakov. What plans, if any, do you have to continue work of the curatorial kind?**

**HSD:** I find it really fascinating to work in that capacity.

The MKG project was almost an extension of my own practice, and it explored a number of things I was extremely interested in at the time. I mean, I write a lot, I research a lot, I spend a lot of time looking at art. Projects like that one are an extension of working in the studio. Through curating those kinds of projects, you learn a lot not only about other kinds of art, but also about your own art.

Tomorrow was a totally different kind of endeavour. That came out of travelling a lot—my family was living in Europe while I was in university, so I was spending 26 weeks of the year at OCAD and the rest of my time travelling between Paris and Berlin and London. I saw so much art in that period of time.

Going and seeing all that art and then coming back to the classroom at OCAD or to the galleries on Tecumseth or Queen became a very frustrating experience, because there was so evidently a fracture between what was happening in the rest of the world and what was happening in Toronto. This fracture was also confusing because Toronto is a major metropolitan centre; there's lots of money, and lots of cultured, interested people, but there's not much support from the market. And the

market is generally what brings new art to places quickly these days—at least, more quickly than institutions can.

So Tomorrow became a way for us to bring some of the art that we thought wasn't getting seen to Toronto.

**LS: OCAD peers like Downs and Hardashnakov have been a big influence on you. Who in terms of OCAD teachers was an influence?**

**HSD:** Ian Carr-Harris is such an amazing teacher, and he really supported a lot of my projects. So did George Boileau and Ginette Legaré. Those are basically the thesis advisors I had.

I never enjoyed being in the classroom that much, and often I would take the assignments and do sort of what I liked with them, which was not always well received by the college. But those guys [Carr-Harris, Boileau and Legaré] pretty much always accommodated my projects as I presented them, which was fantastic.

I did have other professors who basically just told me to stop and give up what I was doing, because it wasn't going anywhere. It's really detrimental for a young student to hear that from somebody that they think is in a position of power.

But those three really stood behind me. And it gave me the confidence to do what I'm doing now.

**LS: It's been a big few years. What are you hoping will happen next?**

**HSD:** I'm really just, at this moment, looking forward to some time in the studio. Lately, I've been really focused on film, both 35mm and video, and I would like to keep working and see what comes from that.

**LS: As you move forward, what artworks continue to serve as touchstones or inspirations?**

**HSD:** Growing up, I was really struck by Abstract Expressionism. Richard Diebenkorn and Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman were my favourites when I was 14 or 15. And I still love it—the Rothko room at the Tate remains totally magical. I don't know if I'm as engaged with it now as I was then, but it still resonates.