
MICHEL ALEXIS: UNCONCENTRATION

Michel Alexis is an artist of French descent who lives in New York City. To me, his work captures fragments of things lost and found www.michelalexis.com. His works are large and expansive and conjure up memories that aren't fully there. What inspires him to create? Read on and find out.

MICHAEL: Hello Michel, [Your](#) work is very intriguing. It looks like pieces and fragments of things from life that you put together. Maybe these are memories or just found scraps of paper that have meaning for you. Am I on the right track?

MICHEL: Hi Michael, Yes you are. One purpose of my work is to trace a fine sensitive line in the chaos of my memories. I don't use readymade fragments which already have history and I would hate that idea, as I really don't care for most collages which leave the entire work to the viewer. I am more like a slow, ruminant animal and my fragments are wholly-digested before I use them; which means I paint every bit, even though they will look like pieces of wallpaper or fabric. The challenge is to make something new happen within this mood, this framework, as I believe memories are only a present sensation of the past, wholly unreliable and changing, therefore exciting.

MICHAEL: Wow, so all of those material-like fragments are actually painted? Cool. I notice that many of your paintings are quite large. I LOVE large works. What do you like about painting large?

MICHEL: Yes, large works mean more involvement and a clearer idea. There are two sides to large works, which are pretty contradictory to me - one is like giving up a certain intimacy, which is uneasy for me, because that's really where it starts from, like writing a private note - and the side I really like is that size enables me to mentally and physically inhabit the surface, without having to see the edges and the wall, and it's a great feeling. It goes from being an object to becoming a place. My paintings have relatively little impact from far away; they're better viewed in small rooms.

MICHAEL: Yes. Large paintings are like landscapes. What goes through your mind when you're painting? Do you [listen](#) to music or watch TV? Is the process meditative or physical? Is it high energy or contemplative?

MICHEL: I try to be present and unfocused at the same time. I guess it's a meditative state, although I've never practiced meditation really. It happens best when I wake up, in the mornings and it doesn't have to be early morning. I need [complete](#) silence, even music disturbs me and in New York I often paint with earplugs. I work effortlessly when I reach this state of "un-concentration" and let visual ideas cross my mind; great feeling, alas doesn't happen every day.

MICHAEL: How and when did you become an artist? Do you come from an artistic family? Were you an artistic kid?

MICHEL: I never knew I would become an artist until I was 23. After graduating in science and economics and realizing I could never do anything else than art, studies were intellectually stimulating, so I was stalling for time until I started an internship and became totally depressed. Then, I went [back](#) to what I was doing beforehand, as a kid, that was making copies of Dutch masters and playing the piano. I've never done anything else than art since then. My Dad was supportive as he probably was also a frustrated artist.

MICHAEL: Everyone gets lonely or depressed at times, but this really seems to be common in artists and creative [people](#). Is this true with you? What do you think?

MICHEL: Well, working as an artist, unless you're Jeff Koons, is a very solitary activity. I indeed, like many artists, spend most of my time alone and think the ability to do so is almost as important as talent. Plain daydreaming is obviously underrated in our society, and I think it's a vital part of the way we function. I don't think artists are more depressed than average, in relation to the dire straits most of us are in. When it happens with me, I tend to use more color.

MICHAEL: What does color do for you? Also, how do you use it in your work?

MICHEL: Color came late for me. It was first about tracing lines and imaginary signs on a soft ground. There's no need for color in the act of writing, except quickly getting rid of the unbearable whiteness of the page. Yet, then the drive is not so much adding color than staining the ground, so this was what my early paintings, which I called imaginary alphabets, were about. Then color sneaked in with shades of grey and more and more color as I realized that the signs I was drawing were unconsciously linked to specific colors (a mixing of the senses called synesthesia), just as a child would play with colored alphabet cubes. In a funny way, my paintings keep this sensation of assembled colored cubes from a distance.

MICHAEL: What do you think about some famous artists who "manufacture" their work with the help of many other artists and staffers?

MICHEL: Well, if the original idea is strong enough I have nothing against it. It's a wish for many artists to come up with a sketch one morning and have it turned into a massive sculpture. It doesn't work with my art though, as it is almost impossible to reproduce. I couldn't copy any of my works even if I tried.

MICHAEL: Aren't you of French descent? How do the French view contemporary art compared to Americans?

MICHEL: Yes, I was born in Paris, studied there and then lived in a secluded hamlet in the Alps for 8 years. Then I moved to Los Angeles in 1985, and New York, in 1991, for family reasons. I am not sure whether the French view contemporary art differently from the rest of the world. It seems to appeal to a much smaller group of people, who, in contrast, are very active. There's hardly any mix of low and high brow culture and when there is, it is in a very sophisticated way. I know from my dealer that my paintings look odd in Paris, probably because my main influences are European Baroque and American Minimalism.

MICHAEL: Do you think New York is the center of the art world? What about London, Paris or Berlin?

MICHEL: I would think it is still New York, but this may change as the cost of living here is driving artists away. What I like about New York is that it's big enough to give a chance to artists outside of the mainstream. It works for me, as I have never belonged to any trend or movement, but I also mean the sheer pleasure of walking in Chelsea and looking at so much diversity. I don't know enough about London or Berlin, but I love Paris and the way contemporary art plays with old buildings. It sometimes gives the fleeting sensation that history makes sense.

MICHAEL: Finally Michel, Where are you headed with your work? Is there anything new that you'd like to try and what do you want people to get from your work?

MICHEL: I really never have any direction or project. My work evolves and changes slowly and in spite of me, because I'm really trying to do the same thing. Someone (Philippe Sollers) said happy people like repetition and I believe so. I am only trying to do better, not different, although most of the time it ends up a lot different. So I have to define what "better" really means and that's the unknown part. A craft person and an artist are like a hunter shooting an arrow, the only difference between them is that the artist has no target. My audience is basically unknown to me as I rarely

have studio visits and ship the work to galleries. I prefer that way, because I know casual comments can really influence, not to mention fuck up the way I paint. I believe I paint just as privately as I play music, not for an audience, but for someone.

MICHAEL: That says it all. Thanks Michel. Great chat.

MICHEL: I enjoyed this chat very much.

Check out Michel Alexis' work at his website, www.michelalexis.com