Silver, Leigh. “Interview: Hugo McCloud Talks Inventing a Whole New Way to Paint,” *Complex*, May 10, 2014.

COMPLEX

Interview: Hugo McCloud Talks Inventing a Whole New Way to Paint

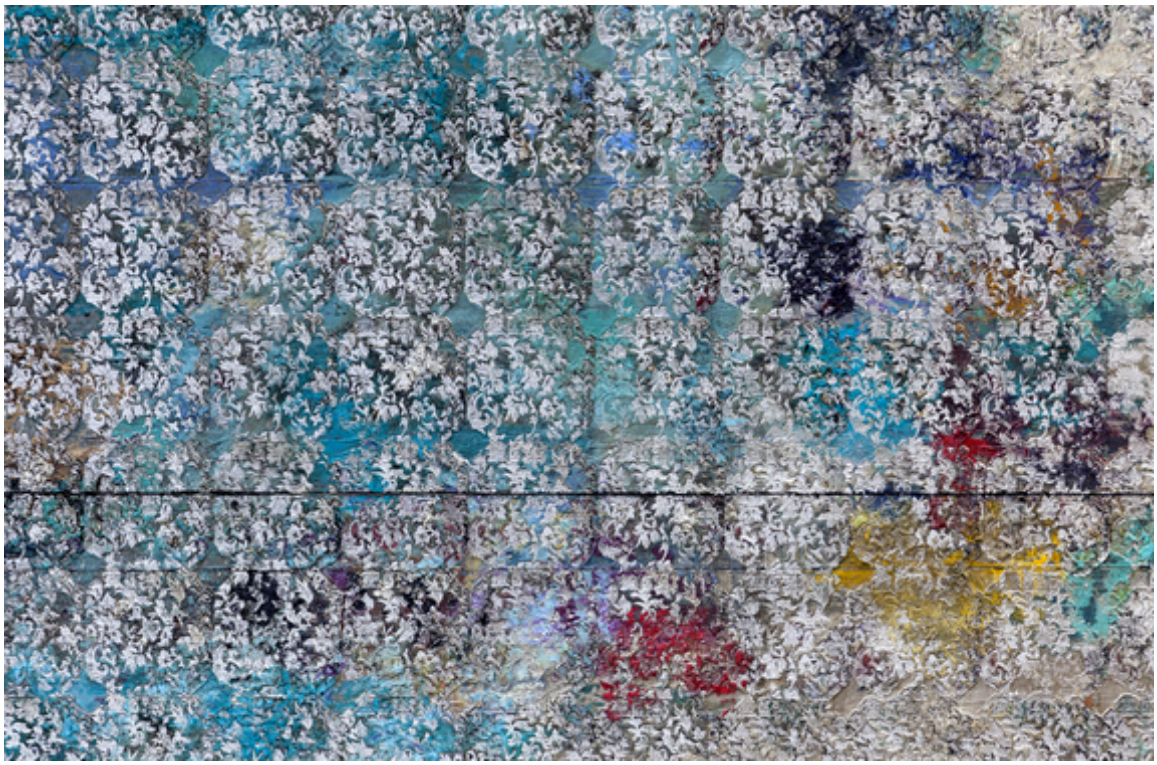
Image courtesy of the artist / Hugo McCloud 2014

Hugo McCloud is a painter who owns only three brushes and doesn't uses canvases. Instead, he corrodes, torches, and sands his materials, often sheets of metal, to make them decay into an array of colors and textures. For his most recent works, the young artist pieced together roofing materials, rubbed them with oil sticks, ran a blowtorch across them, and pressed woodblocks into the wet paint. McCloud's nontraditional methods have garnered him attention in the art world. In his words, he seems to just have "popped up" from nowhere. It's clear that he's here to stay.

McCloud's art career started when he began designing and making water fountains for his mother's business in Redwood City, Calif. He dropped out of college and eventually started his own design practice, producing high-end furniture for wealthy clients. Feeling stifled creatively by working in design, McCloud moved into fine art, and he took what he learned along with him.

The Bushwick-based artist completes his large, abstract works in a studio space behind a coffee shop he owns. While he may not have gone to art school, his design background has made him comfortable working with materials that are hard to manipulate. In a market doused with old favorites, art lovers have flocked to McCloud's experimental paintings and entirely original processes.

Just this year, McCloud had his first solo show with **LUCE Gallery** in Italy, and the same gallery is showing his work at the **NADA** art fair in New York this weekend. Tomorrow, he is opening a show at **Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld's** New York town house called "Put in Place." And he has a show this summer with the city's **Sean Kelly Gallery**. We spoke with McCloud about his processes, inspirations, and rise on the art scene.



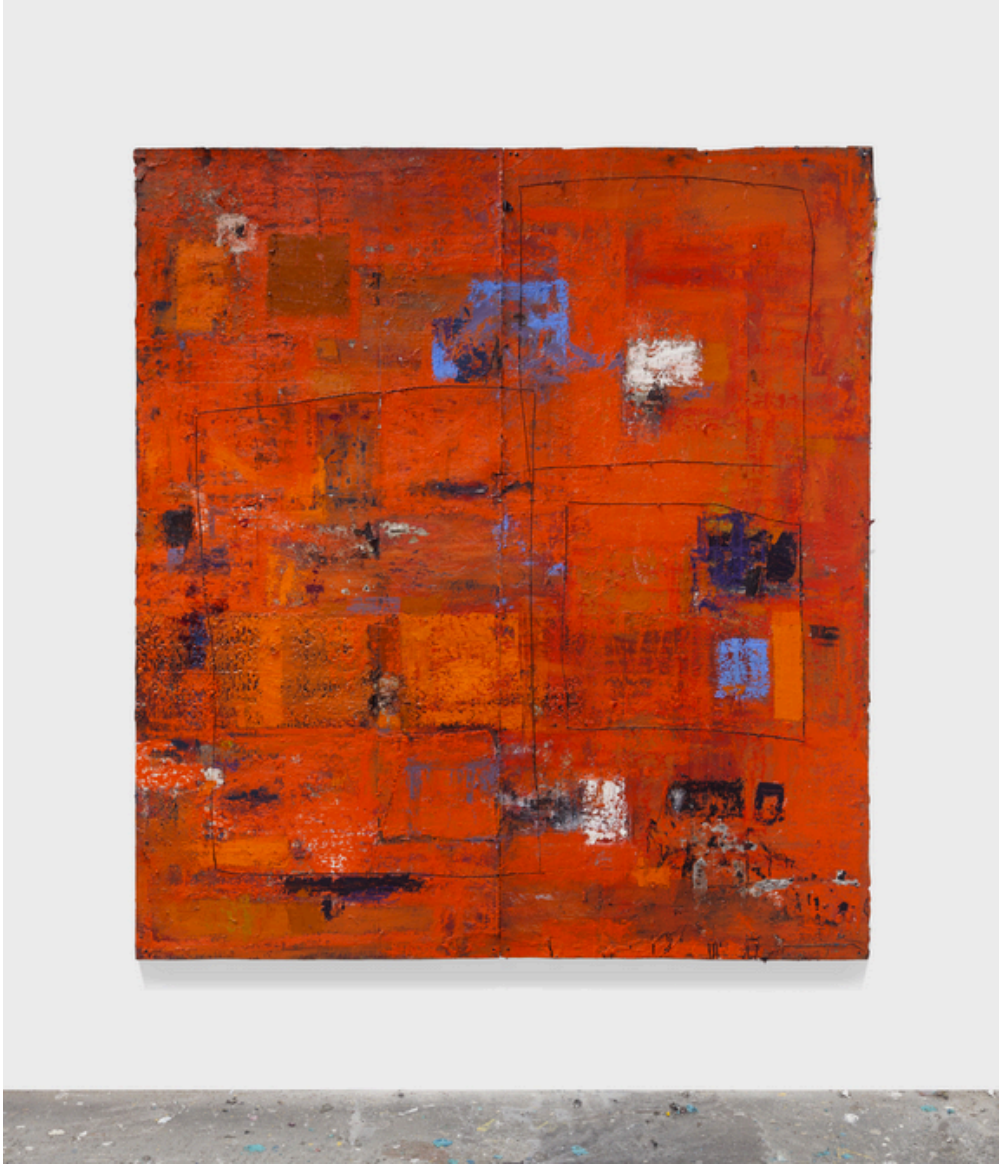
How did you move from designing fountains to creating fine art?
The more I got involved in the design world, I was looking to withdraw myself from it at the same time because of the seriousness and the craziness of doing large scale projects and dealing with the clients. So much of it was not creative. It became very, very exhausting, and I needed something that had full free expression from the beginning to the end, that had no boundaries.

The thing with design is, the only creative part is the initial design. I felt with fine art I could change at any point in time, and that's really how my paintings are. They usually start off with one idea, and they're completely different by the time they're finished.

Did your design projects give you the financial freedom to do your paintings?
That's the beautiful thing about it. It wouldn't have been possible to move to New York without the design background because it's the thing that actually floated me. Even if I was caught up doing design projects, it still kept me in the element. I didn't have to do other things to make ends meet. That's a huge, huge blessing.

You come from a very nontraditional background. How were you able bring something that isn't considered fine art into the fine art world?
My designing always started with the creative side, which forced me to learn the craftsman side: the welding, the woodwork. So when it came to the fine art, I had all these processes down pat, all the patination and chemical oxidations.

When I did the patinas in the beginning, I was looking for perfection. Then when I finally understood the imperfections were the beautiful parts, I knew how to make those mistakes. And those mistakes became my intentional practice within my fine art.



What attracts you to this decayed look or these mistakes?
I think being heavy in the design world, looking for that level of perfection and cleanliness, and really understanding that none of that ever lasts. Nothing ever stays perfectly new, and the more you try to keep it new, the more those imperfections show. In my work it was always about trying to create this balance between the beauty in how things fall apart, the beauty in how things decay. I always look at it as related to life. As we grow up and we age, we're falling apart. We're continually, daily falling apart when you really think about it. It's sad, but it's the truth.

It's like a fresh pair of Converse. Whenever I see somebody wearing a fresh pair of white Converse on the train, I don't like it. That's so unrealistic, to have a clean white pair of Converse! So when they're even a little bit dirty or little bit dusty, that looks so much better.

Do you ever wonder about what will happen to your work if it starts to decay?
The materials that I use are all industrial-based materials. The stuff in my studio is all roofing materials, used outdoors in extreme elements. I think the sustainability is definitely there. But you never know because nothing that I'm doing is traditional. That's the interesting thing about elements and materials, is that some things just don't mesh.

Did you make the block prints?
I did. I went to India with my friend and was really interested in the block printing process and the imperfection of handmade things. It was something I really wanted to explore, but I needed to find something that was my pattern source. I bought ornamentation books that had patterns from all over the place, and I liked a lot of them, but at the same time, what relationship do I have to 17th century Arab patterns? How can I justify that, especially coming from this nontraditional artistic background?

I was trying to figure out, where can I get patterns from, and how can I get patterns that would make sense to who I am. Something that was very relative to me is being in these very urban/industrial neighborhoods for the last 15 years, from West Oakland to Bushwick, everything from the homeless drug addicts, to prostitutes, to the projects.

I run a lot, and always on my runs I would see thrown away bed mattresses and furniture, and in these neighborhoods, they never pick them up. They're there for months. So I started documenting, taking pictures of the mattresses in their environments as well as close-ups of the textiles on them and the way they were pleated. I started copying that, and those became the patterns that I then would trace onto the woodblocks. Even though they're floral patterns or paisley patterns, they became something that was interesting because I was taking something that was discarded or thrown away and overlooked.

The question I always have is, "What is beautiful?" Because that mattress that was there for nine months was obviously not attractive or desired, but now I'm taking the same thing that was on the mattress, and I'm putting it in a different context, so then it becomes valuable.

Speaking of context, your new show is in an old town house. How do you think that will change the whole experience of your work?
It's going to be really amazing because of the way I'm curating the show. There's three rooms with old gold leaf crown molding, so I made these four paintings that actually fit directly into the crown molding. What's interesting is that I'm taking these contemporary paintings, and I'm fitting them into this space. The whole space is really going to be transformed. I think that there's going to be an interesting conversation and relationship between the work and the environment.