

## Stoner in the Studio

Fred Tomaselli

I'm an artist who makes pictures that combine painting, photo collage, pills and leaves. The pills range from over-the-counter medications to prescription narcotics. The leaves vary from figs and roses to mind-altering botanicals such as datura and cannabis. These pictures, which can involve thousands of parts, tend to be intensely patterned and overloaded with imagery. After I assemble and paint these works, I encapsulate them under layers of translucent, tamper-proof resin. Some of these works can be quite large, measuring up to eight by twenty feet, and can take up to six months to complete.

I put a lot of my personal history into the work. Growing up in the land of theme parks, shopping malls and television have certainly shaped who I am. There were times in my life when I was very focused on getting high in as many ways as possible. This history has certainly influenced how I understand art and consciousness. My perception, which has been inexorably hybridized by these experiences, finds expression in my hybrid works.

My work was initially inspired by the ancient ideal that painting is a window to another reality. In this tradition, great paintings were seen as vehicles of transportation to their depicted worlds. The rhetoric around drugs, especially psychedelics, is very similar to that of pre-modern art.

They both deal with issues of escapism, altered consciousness, pleasure, beauty, desire, seduction, transcendence and the sublime. Both involve the consumption of fetishistic commodities dependent upon surplus wealth and leisure time. It's my aim to seduce and transport the viewer into the space of my pictures while simultaneously revealing the mechanics of that seduction. I like to think that I rearrange the intended use of some the ingredients in my work. These chemical cocktails can no longer reach the brain through the bloodstream and must take a different route toward altering perception. In my work, they travel to the brain through the eyes.

Anyone who knows my paintings would probably not be surprised to learn that I occasionally use cannabis. What might surprise people is how infrequently I use it, and that my major substances of abuse in the studio are nicotine gum and coffee. Being stoned all the time is not conducive to the energy and concentration needed to complete my work. It's also not conducive to the development of critical thought and the expansion of ideas and form.

While I don't believe that cannabis is a creative panacea, history is sprinkled with creative people who have used it for inspiration. Charles Baudelaire, Amedeo Modigliani, and Louis Armstrong are just a few who have used cannabis to good effect. I know artists, writers and musicians who use it constantly, and their work doesn't seem to suffer for it. For me, working in the studio under the influence of cannabis is mostly an

unmitigated disaster. I tend to get lazy, sleepy and sloppy. Occasionally, however, it has its uses.

I've found that cannabis is good for loosening me up while I play around in the sketchbook. Maybe the aphasia that it induces makes me forget to be self-conscious. Being stoned can be helpful in creating a free associative state that leads to the germ of an idea worth pursuing later. This cannabis-induced, free associative state can be a pretty funny thing. My brain works at a frenetic, undisciplined pace with no patience for sustained thought. While in this state, I'll open the sketchbook, jot down my fleeting impressions, turn the page, and keep working. It can be goofy fun when I'm on a roll (especially when I'm listening to music), or really frustrating. In the hard light of morning, many of the results can be embarrassing. Sometimes, what evolves out of these sketches has nothing to do with the original idea. It can, however, act as a springboard for later investigation when I have the energy and clarity to get the job done. This process may sound convoluted and inefficient, but it does help me to get to where I need to go. Artists go out on limbs, take risks, experiment, hit dead-ends, re-strategize, and try again. Creativity is a mysterious, evanescent process, and cerebral efficiency doesn't always get you there.

There is another instance where I find its use advantageous. When I'm putting in long hours of rote work, a very occasional puff, midway through the process, can take the edge off the drudgery. In my case, it can be quite funny and a little weird to be actually arranging and gluing pot

leaves onto the surface of my pictures while smoking the same substance. Is the pot telling me what to do with it from inside my own brain? Is that just the thinking of a total stoner? I don't know, but artists often speak about the feedback loop between the work and its maker. They talk about allowing the work and its materials to suggest ways forward and to break away from over-determined results. In my case, it can happen quite literally!

Authorities often talk of cannabis as being a gateway to harder drug use. For me, it was more a gateway to a sustained interest in gardening. When I first started growing cannabis in my garden thirty years ago, I was compelled to nurture other plants in order to hide it. I eventually became just as invested in my fruits and vegetables as I was in my marijuana. I also became fascinated by the interdependency of life forms within the garden. Gardeners bring order to the chaos of nature, which is a good model for the way in which I organize the shape of nature in my pictures. I continue to grow much of the botanical material found in my work. I eventually place these specimens in plant presses where they can dry flat to be used later. These days, my garden is a lush place filled in summer with flowers, fruits and vegetables, but sadly, due to current circumstances, you won't find cannabis currently growing there.

For me, the idea of getting stoned is actually more productive than being stoned. I don't use cannabis socially, since it makes me introverted. I rarely use cannabis in the studio because it limits my productivity.

Sometimes I use it to help me get to sleep, but really, I rarely use cannabis these days. Pot is no substitute for innate creativity, talent, technical proficiency or discipline, and anyone who thinks so must be high!

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