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Informally with Erik Thor Sandberg

Interview with Vesela Sretenovic, December 2017

Vesela Sretenovic: Let's start with a biographical note. Are you from this area?

Erik Sandberg: Yes, I was born about twenty, thirty miles south of DC, right off of 95, in Quantico Marine Base. My dad happened to be at the shooting range so apparently, when I was born I got a twenty-one gun salute because they announced it over the intercom. Of course, I don't remember that but apparently I had some fanfare!

VS: Did your family move around a lot?

ES: Not so much. I think my mom put her foot down and said 'no, I don't want to move that much.' What I remember is that my dad went to work in DC area all the time.

VS: So you practically grew up in DC?

ES: Yeah, which is good because I got to go to the National Gallery all the time. My Mom took me there first, and I still remember *Watson and the Shark* (1778) painting by American painter John Singleton Copley. I was so scared of it!

VS: When did you get into art?

ES: I hate when you hear artists say 'Oh I've been making art since I was five years old.' Every kid draws at the age of five and holds crayons in their hands. So, in elementary school, I was like every other kid because we had art classes. It was later in high school when I actually thought that this is maybe where I should go because I was a loser pretty much and people would often say, 'hey, that's not so bad' you know, your drawings are fun.' I loved comics! I remember when I was probably thirteen years old showing my mom a comic book and saying 'If I could ever draw like these guys, I'd be so happy.' I'm glad my mom was the way she was because she didn't go, 'Oh yeah you can do that someday.' She just kind of looked at me like 'really' and said, 'You can do better than that... Aim higher.'

VS: So who were you looking at in high school and later as you were getting serious about art?

ES: Well in high school, I don't know that I was looking at a lot of fine artists. I liked David Hockney, my art teacher loved Hockney, and so I learned a lot about him. I don't know, not to put down our high school program, but we didn't have a lot there. I probably worked harder than most of the kids. Then as an undergraduate, I had a pretty good teacher at George Mason whose work I really liked (Margarita Hull) who does magic realism. She told me about that term first and I really hated the sound of it, but that's probably what I would call or label my work now. I prefer it to surrealism because the "surreal" is not what I'm trying to achieve; yeah, magic realism is the closest label I'd put on myself....

VS: Who were your influences in college; you went to George Mason, right?

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ES: I remember my freshman year I looked at one of Chuck Close’s self-portraits; it’s a fairly early one where he has longer hair and dark glasses; he’s unshaven with a cigarette hanging out of his mouth and I just thought, ‘yeah, I want to be that... I want to do cool stuff, I want to look like that guy.’ But then I wanted to be exposed to so much stuff as possible. And when I saw Goya’s work that was it; it was probably the biggest influence on me at that time, not his painting but his *Los Caprichos* series of prints from 1797-98.

VS: Did you see Goya’s prints in Spain?

ES: Yeah, yeah in Prado. My first visit there, ohh, I was blown away! They have so many wonderful things! I also discovered di Rivera there since they have so many of his works. One thing he does so well are hands, old men hands, with all the wrinkles and spots – I loved that.

VS: What about the Dutch and Flemish old masters? Your work is frequently compared to theirs.

ES: You know, almost everybody points to my work and goes ‘oh it’s like Bosch.’ Obviously, I like Bosch but I didn’t really look at Bosch so much nor intended to copy him. I think it has to do with a small scale of his figures that at times relate to mine. But I was playing around and trying to learn the stuff, trying to make my own language out of things; that’s how I started doing small figures and them grouping them, so I get when people say, ‘Oh I see that connection.’ But, I love Bruegel much more than Bosch because of his humanity. But then again, in the 1990s there was a resurgence of the figurative work; a lot was about the body and identity politics. Practically there wasn’t a work without a representation of a figure or nude, an animal, a skeleton, so naturally those elements became the base of my kind of vocabulary. This is not to say that I was doing it just because everybody was doing that or that I’m not inventive on my own, this was simply in the air and I think that everybody can admit that before you find yourself and make your own things, you look at others and take away in what suits you.

VS: All in all, was Mason a good environment for you?

ES: Yeah, yeah. When I started school, I really didn’t know what I was going to do. Initially, I wanted to be a sculptor. By the time I got there, they had gotten rid of their sculpture teacher so they had no sculpture for a while. By my junior year, everybody knew me and said ‘hey, we need somebody to run the woodshop, we need somebody to run the gallery,’ and said ‘hey you’re good, right?’ and I said ‘yeah’ and they said ‘so you know how to do woodwork’ and I’m like yeah so they put me in charge of the woodshop and I had no idea what I was doing. Basically, I did everything and tried different things—including photography—and I learned a lot. But, I hated painting the first semester—I think we might have been doing acrylic and I don’t like acrylic at all, it just wasn’t for me. Maybe it was the second semester when I took Marguerita Kendall’s painting class that things changed. We were assigned to do self-portrait in oil, and I thought ‘oh god this is gonna be horrible,’ but I painted for fourteen hours straight and liked it very much, and thought ‘maybe painting’s not so bad.’

VS: Why did you dislike acrylic so much?

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ES: Mainly because of blending. With oil you can come back to something, you can work on something much more gradually than with acrylic, and with oil you can achieve a more raw expression, which I was always drawn to.

VS: Clearly, your work is rough. Although it is storytelling-based, your stories are pretty impenetrable.

ES: Yeah, I've always liked doing narrative work but without knowing where it's going to go. I don't want to do the straightforward stuff, I prefer having a little element of mystery and the unknown. I don't want to have the story told to me; therefore I can't present my art as that. I like when people look at my work and they interpret it in different ways because that may change my view. If somebody is just telling exactly everything it gets a little boring. I try to leave my work open ended and unpredictable.

VS: And how do you start a painting? Does the story come from your head or from something you have seen, heard about, or experienced?

ES: A little bit of everything. Mostly, my paintings express how I feel about some situations, issues, or ideas. So much of art is trying to explain something that is not easily explainable. I'm not a writer, if I were a writer I could probably write a novella to explain things but I need an image to try to convey ideas and emotions. And from there the questions arise: what is the best way to do that? How should the figure or plot look like to embody a particular feeling or situation?

VS: Does this mean that everything is pre-determined in your work, or things become resolved gradually in the process of painting itself?

ES: I always have a basic idea or structure in order, but other things can change. Sometimes if I don't like what I initially thought should be there, I make a substantial change—like a change to a character, what s/he represents. But before I make any change, I take a photo of what came before and then start over until I get it right.

VS: In other words, your pictorial decision-making is based on the psychology of the situation/character?

ES: Yeah, and I want the viewers to look at the painting and go 'what is going on here?' I want them to project their own feeling onto what they see.

VS: Most of your work is really dark and disturbing.

ES: True, and I know it may be tough on the eye, but I don't want to exclude that kind of work. There's sadness, there's darkness in life and there are some ugly people in the world, capable of being horrible. You can be ugly to your wife, you can be ugly to your children, you can be ugly to your neighbor and not mean it. I always try to be the best person I can but I fail. I mean everybody does, and that's what I'm talking about with my work. I try to go for universal ideas through a particular narrative, so it's not about deciphering the plot but understanding the basic idea or emotion.

VS: Your process is extremely laborious. Tell us more about it, including a constant shift in scale.

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ES: Painting is my job. It is really fun to come up with ideas. It is also fun to go look at other art to help you generate your own. I spend most of my time alone working. My hands cramp up at the end of the day and at times dull paint gets ingrained in every crack of my fingers, and then when I go to the store, people look at my hands and go–disgusting! So, yeah, it’s a lot of work, and it’s really fun sometimes. As far as the scale goes, when I work in small scale–imagery comes from the head; when I work in large scale I use life models. I usually hire three times more models than I would end up using in the work because stuff I did with them often does not work. I photograph them rather than draw them simply because the poses I am interested in capturing are often very awkward or unnatural and thus demanding on the body. I have a lot more freedom with the small scale; I don’t care if the anatomy is perfect or if things look exactly right. For me, the small figures are like action figures, like toys I get to play with....these are imaginary worlds that I get to change anyway I want. But, that’s why I’m anxious to do a very large figure next, because it’s always rejuvenating to start afresh and also play with a different world.

VS: Do you work simultaneously on a few things? And how long does it take to finish a painting.

ES: It is rare that I ever just do one work from start to finish without interruption. But it depends on what I’m doing. In my early work, I did a lot less detail on the small figure; the figures are loose and the anatomy is weird and awful and I was just making it up from my head back then, and I know a lot more now and am more picky about the lighting and the brushes I use to get finer details, and I am more thoughtful about the overall compositions, so everything takes more time.

VS: Your recent paintings are on wooden panels. Why and when did you shift from canvas to wood?

ES: I’ve given up canvas, I think a year ago. I used to do large paintings on canvas but I will do them in wood now. I have a problem with the absorption of the paint intensities. Materials seemed to have changed or something happened in the formula, but recently I started to get some cracks on the surface. But then, I also like to experiment and make changes from time to time, especially when I feel a little stagnant...I think everybody does. Besides shifting to wood, I also like to change the background or support of my paintings, for example from flat to curved panels. I still do under-paintings, i.e., drawings; I love my drawings! I try to take pictures of the drawings before I actually paint over them. Then, I do the color, at least two maybe three layers, then I do glazing... not as much as I used to; I used to rely on it! Now, I’m enjoying a little quicker and more prominent brushstroke, a bit closer to *alla prima*, which I used to love doing. I used to take a pallet knife and paint. I wouldn’t do that now....oh my god, it would take forever to dry!

VS: By and large, your work is based on inherent contradictions of human nature and there is also a deep sense of mortality that runs through your work which brings to mind the *memento mori* tradition in painting with its rich symbolism and impeccable technical execution.

ES: I think in contrasts and I love conflicts. Without that it gets a little boring. And, yes I use a lot of traditional Christian symbolism too, which has nothing to do with faith. I like to play with the idea of vice and virtue, but also subvert it so that the ugly is not always portrayed as old, and that the beautiful is not represented through a female body only, but the opposite.

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VS: What about the representation of kids in your paintings?

ES: The kids are kind of me—playing. I mean, they are me most of the time—the blonde hair boys. In other works kids are little cherubs acting viciously; they are minions who take over the superiors because, as we know, children are not always cute and innocent; they can be cruel and awful. So, here too, I subvert the common symbolism of kids as innocent children.

VS: And what about the hexagon shape that appears in your most recent work?

ES: Initially, I was interested in a pattern itself and was playing around with the design. I wanted a landscape behind them but then I thought, what if that landscape was broken up with the hexagon structure? From there, I went further thinking more like a sculptor who likes well-crafted things and started to design wooden hexagon panels alternating the ones with the painting and without the painting in an interlocking pattern, which led itself to wall installations.

VS: And how are these sculptural paintings related to the previous curved panels that also carry a third dimension?

ES: Well, with curved panels I was trying to resolve the question of landscape; I am not very fond of landscape as a genre so I wanted to create something that has 360 degree feel and wraps around you.

VS: What about the “sliced-face” females in your recent works, especially the Blossom series? It seems like they are carrying masks...does this allude to their multiple-personalities?

ES: Not so much to their multiple personalities but rather to different aspects of their personalities at different times, different situations, and in different settings, natural and social.

VS: What about animal nature versus human nature?

ES: Yeah I don't really separate them too much from people; they often interact because they share some basic feelings – love, fear, affection, aggression.

VS: Tell us, what are you working on now?

ES: It's a large painting on wood. I think it will be called *Hard to Reach*. It is a composition where a woman is trying to reach a spot on her back. What I want to illustrate here is an idea of somebody trying to touch a part of their body, which they can't get to. I guess, I want to emphasize an effort of getting ahold of something intangible. But instead of capturing a psychological effort, I want to depict a physical action. So, I put a band aid in the most unnatural place—on the middle of the model's back. But, what is the band aid covering? An itch, a scratch, or a wound? The woman doesn't know. She is buffed, with the head turning red, caught in an exhausting position. She is annoyed by psychological uncertainty more than physical discomfort. I like that because it's like something universal. We all have had at times something that gnaws at us...be it an itch, a scratch, or a wound, or—in other words—the burden of the unknown that causes us to worry and fear and then act out. That's what my work is about.