

Weston Uram

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ART Habens

My art encompasses ideas of celebrity persona, market-reflexive art objects, and the ever growing need to be your own brand ambassador. I'm really interested in artists who do not see their work as autonomous from the economic demands of today, but rather use their work to reflect the current social pressures and anxieties each individual faces. I produce some physical objects but the majority of my work is made in a digital medium. I use this medium to highlight the inundation of technology into almost every aspect of our lives, and how that can help or hinder access to art. With my work I want to achieve reflection, the work should display all aspects of my life without condoning or applauding certain activities. Rather than establish a power dynamic that is based around me looking in at others, I want to place myself within the critique. It is important that I claim responsibility for the actions I exhibit, and resist acting that I am morally/intellectually superior to indulgences. My work succeeds if it is enjoyable, it is not dependent on "getting" a joke or unearthing a deeper meaning. I want my images to be instantly palatable and pleasing, but also provide additional substance for those who spend more time with it or have an art historical background. I have grown up on the constant stream of visual imagery, and the reality that most people will not spend more than ten seconds with an image. Therefore, I do not find it necessary that the audience thinks critically about my art. Rather, I see four seconds or thirty minutes as equal forms of engagement. My art is a process of revealing my lived experience; I use technology to recontextualize the imagery I am surrounded by and speak to the way it has defined my generation.

Weston Uram





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An interview with

Weston Uram

An interview by **Josh Ryder**, curator
and **Melissa C. Hilborn**, curator
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Artist Weston Uram's work focuses on the ideas of celebrity persona, market-reflexive art objects, and the ever-growing need to be your own brand ambassador. In his body of works entitled 10 Magazine Advertisements series that we'll be discussing in the following pages, he draws the viewers through a multilayered visual experience that on the surface speaks of beauty, but that at the same time urges the viewers to explore meaning and to inquiry into social pressures that affect our unstable, ever-changing contemporary age. One of the most impressive aspects of Uram's work is the way it accomplishes the difficult task of questioning contemporary visualization practice that intends to draw the viewers into an immersive, intense visual experience: we are very pleased to introduce our readers to his multifaceted artistic production.

Hello Weston and welcome to ART Habens: we would start this interview with a couple of questions about your multifaceted background. Are there any experiences that have particularly influenced the way you currently conceive your works? And in particular, how does your cultural substratum inform the way you relate yourself to the aesthetic problem in general?

My mother is an art professor and practicing artist, so I grew up surrounded by art. From a young age I was engaged with critical language about visual media and I feel blessed to have had the opportunity to go to so many galleries and museums during my youth. My mom teaches photography, so after school I would go to her classroom and mess around on the computers while she taught



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or worked on her own art. I have been playing with cameras and Photoshop since elementary school. My dad worked with computers in the Air Force, so for my entire life I've had a computer and he's always encouraged me to tinker with the technology. Also, growing up I spent the majority of my free time on the internet. Many of my friends in high school I knew only virtually, and I think the communities I was a part of online were greatly formative for the art practice I have today.

Your works reveal an incessant search of an organic symbiosis between a

successful attempt to capture elusive features of reality and a tendency towards self-reflection. The results convey together a coherent sense of unity, that rejects any conventional classification. In particular, would you tell our readers something about the evolution of your style? Do you conceive your works instinctively or do you methodically elaborate your pieces?

Technology mesmerizes with a utopic self-presence, promising flawlessness and repeatable results. Then technology fails—not only does it break, but its perfection is exposed as exploitable, and it becomes an operative of the culture and identity industry. I've always admired an artist like Wade Guyton, whose works seem to be about the failure of technology, the battle between perfection and reality, a glorification of technology's sub-abilities. In that same vein, my style has developed to push the limits of technology and to harness its errors. I also have dedicated much of my practice to digital art because of its accessibility and ease of distribution. It can break from the typical modes of display that necessitate an institution with physical space to display it. It also has the potential for a more diverse viewership, some who will engage with the work online would not feel comfortable walking into a gallery or museum. I think a lot of these are false ideals—digital art is still limited to a privileged audience both in accessibility to web media, and education in an art historical narrative. However, I think because the digital realm was such an influential space for me growing up and still is where I spend the majority of my time, I find it important to make work that reflects that.

The body of works that we have selected for this special edition of ART Habens and that our readers have already started to



admire in the introductory pages of this article has at once captured our attention of

your inquiry into the liminal area in which figurative and abstraction find an

unexpected point of convergence is the way you provided the visual results of



advertisement, article title, or a social interaction will jolt me out of my normal apathetic scrolling. I want to recreate that moment of shock, I aim to take something that has been normalized and recontextualize it in order have the viewer relate to it but consider it differently. Working with the language already found within pop culture is important for reflecting the society I live in. The digital pieces shown in Art Habens are re-paintings done through Photoshop. A piece begins with a found image, and then is cut up into layers based on colors. Once those areas are isolated, I digitally paint, with varying brush styles, on top of the image. Afterwards, I go in with a blending tool to fill in all the little holes that are left over. Finally, the image is merged into one layer, a few more brushstrokes are added to tie the separate sections of the image together, and then the whole image is enhanced with adjustment curves until the color approaches excess.

With the physical work, right now I am experimenting with three things: image transfers, 3D printing, and laser burning. The image transfers can be seen in Micky or True Love, where the image is broken up in Photoshop, printed onto transfer paper (commonly used to iron photos onto shirts) and then placed onto the canvas. These images are then painted over, attempting to replicate the original image precisely but inherently revealing the artists hand and breaking the image, dislocating it from the typical way of viewing the imagery. For 3D printing, found in Where Does One, I am doing 3D scans of my body, and then warping them in Blender (a 3D graphics and animation software). I want to speak to how dissociated I feel from my body at times, but also draw a parallel to the idealized

*your analysis with autonomous aesthetics:
when walking our readers through the*

*genesis of these works would you shed
light on your usual process and set up?*

Most of my pieces are born from surreal moments that happen to me online. An



male body of Greek sculpture. My poses are meant to capture an emotion while also situating the work within an art

historical canon of body depiction. The third and most prevalent practice in my work right now is laser cutting. The tool is



typically used to cut cardboard or acrylic for topographical architecture models, but if run on a very high speed and low power

one can singe the canvas without burning through it. The range of tone recalls drawing-based practices, and when

perfected the laser cutter can recreate a near picture perfect image onto canvas while also revealing the fragility of the material.

We would like to pose some questions about the balance established by colors and texture: your pieces combine vivid tones and contrasting shapes that create tension and dynamics. We have really appreciated the vibrancy of thoughtful nuances that saturate your works. How did you come about settling on your color palette? And how much does your own psychological make-up determine the nuances of tones you decide to use in a piece and in particular, how do you develop a painting's texture?

As far as colors, I basically have a winning combination from the start! The ads are predesigned to be eye catching and psychologically gripping for the viewer. As far as texture, I'm really particular about the brushes I use. I manipulate the length, how thick the application is, and orientation of the bristles. Even though the image is inherently flat, the brushstrokes and layers allude to surface and depth. With the laser cutter, I'm really happy about the subdued gold color of the charred canvas, reminiscent of sepia photographs. On thicker canvas the images are embossed into the fabric, where the darker areas are cut more deeply into the material. This impression gives the flat canvas a sculptural component, and on the deepest areas of the burn the canvas is held together by only a few remaining strands or has been completely cut through.

As you have remarked once, you are really interested in artists who do not see their work as autonomous from the economic demands of today, but rather use their work to reflect the current social

pressures and anxieties each individual faces: this is clear especially in ageless. A consistent part of the history of contemporary art has been concerned with the ability to affect social consciousness and politics through images: but while artists from the contemporary scene, as Ai WeiWei or more recently Jennifer Linton, use to express open socio-political criticism in their works, you seem more interested to hint the direction, inviting the viewers to a process of self-reflection that may lead to subvert a variety of usual, almost stereotyped cultural categories. Do you consider that your works could be considered political in a certain sense or did you seek to maintain a more neutral approach? And in particular, what could be in your opinion the role that an artist could play in the contemporary society?

Art's ability to genuinely create social change is a concept I frequently wrestle with. On one hand, I do not think art is an effective way of helping the disadvantaged or causing an ethical awakening, especially because of the inherently privileged and exclusionary group that makes up the art world elite. However, I think recognizing one's own role within that culture and using that platform to reflect its complicated nature can be powerful. I wouldn't say that my work is a moralistic endeavor, but my best pieces have something to say, a dialogue to be had between artwork and viewer. I want to instigate that dialogue with the observer. I'm not trying to outright criticize the culture I see, but rather speak to the reality I live in in order to destabilize its proscriptive nature. I want to cause a stutter within the viewer, but I would not call it political as there is no singular emotion I want to invoke from the audience.



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While you make physical paintings and objects, the majority of your work is made in a digital medium: how would you consider the relationship between contemporary digital realm and traditional techniques? Can you recognize a contrast or a synergy?

Many digital artists who make ephemeral works struggle to be legitimized in today's art world. Although there is a growing interest in the medium, some denounce it as unskilled or not qualifying as real art. Of course these same critiques were lobbied against photography, so it's only a matter of time until digital art becomes normalized into the realm of fine art. What that idea in mind, as digital art becomes more accepted it will be interesting to see how it collected, shown, and engaged with. Previously I worked for the artist Amalia Ulman, who is most well known for her Instagram series where she posed as an affluent young girl with sugar daddies and a party lifestyle. The images were all faked, and drew into question curation of digital identity and how we legitimize each other's virtual presence. Following the popularity of that work, many collectors and museums wanted to somehow purchase the piece. It ultimately was printed on large canvas and sold in editions, but in a way this is more of a documentation than a replication. The act of standing in a museum looking at a large canvas print is a very different experience than laying in your bed, scrolling through Instagram and reading the comments. I think the best digital artists right now are inventing interesting ways to convert their practice into a physical medium, such as Petra Cortright, Jon Rafman, and Hito Steyerl. I think that there are clear divides between the digital and physical realms, but what I'm most excited about is how to

merge the two, and the kind of engagement and dialogue that can stem from that.

Despite clear references to real world, your works, as the interesting Where Does One, often reject an explicit explanatory strategy: they seem to be the tip of the iceberg of what you are really attempting to communicate. How does representation and a tendency towards abstraction on a semantic level find their balance in your work?

I'm obsessed with slogans. These abstract declarations sound authoritative, they roll off the tongue, they are memorable, but they rarely state what the product is or its actual benefits. I keep a running list of slogans that I find jarring, and I frequently look back at them when coming up with the text for my pieces. Statements such as "Champions aren't born - They're made," "If nothing else, be like nothing else," and "Act now, feel good later," are all examples. When forced to think about them, they seem so hollow and alienating. In *Where Does One*, the text "Where Does One Learn to Love" at first sounds like something one would find in a hallmark card, but quickly it becomes more eerie, the joke gets sour and the longer one spends with the words the more disturbing they become. I use typical strategies of marketing, but as the fragmentary words unravel the viewer experiences another set of tensions and implications of the work. Using the analogy of the iceberg, I grab the viewer's attention with the shiny tip, but then through both embodied and social connections, contexts, and implications, they realize the massive structure that is underneath.

Your images have on the surface a seductive beauty and allow a multilayered experience: they are instantly palatable

but also urge the viewer to a more personal, intellectual way. The power of visual arts in the contemporary age is enormous: at the same time, the role of the viewer's disposition and attitude is equally important. Both our minds and our bodies need to actively participate in the experience of contemplating a piece of art: it demands your total attention and a particular kind of effort—it's almost a commitment. What do you think about the role of the viewer? Are you particularly interested if you try to achieve to trigger the viewers' perception as starting point to urge them to elaborate personal interpretations?

More than anything, I want my work to be memorable for the viewer. In this way, I try hard not to privilege one form of engagement. I grew up with social media and the constant stream of visual imagery. Therefore, I recognize that many people will not look at an image for longer than 10 seconds. Even in the art world, especially at art fairs, so much weight is put on being seen as opposed to seeing the work. I don't think that's an inherently bad thing, and I also think it's becoming an undeniable form of viewership within the art world. I want my work to respond to that reality, and function in a way that is powerful even when viewed for only a few seconds. That being said, my art cannot exist solely on a superficial level, there must be something more to sink your teeth into for those that want to spend more time with the piece. Whether that be a reveal of internal struggles, art historical references (Watching was strongly influenced by Nam June Paik's TV Buddha) or an intricate play with the materials, the work must be meaningful to those who want to more actively participate with the piece.

One of the hallmarks of your practice is the capability to create direct involvement with the viewers, who are urged to evolve

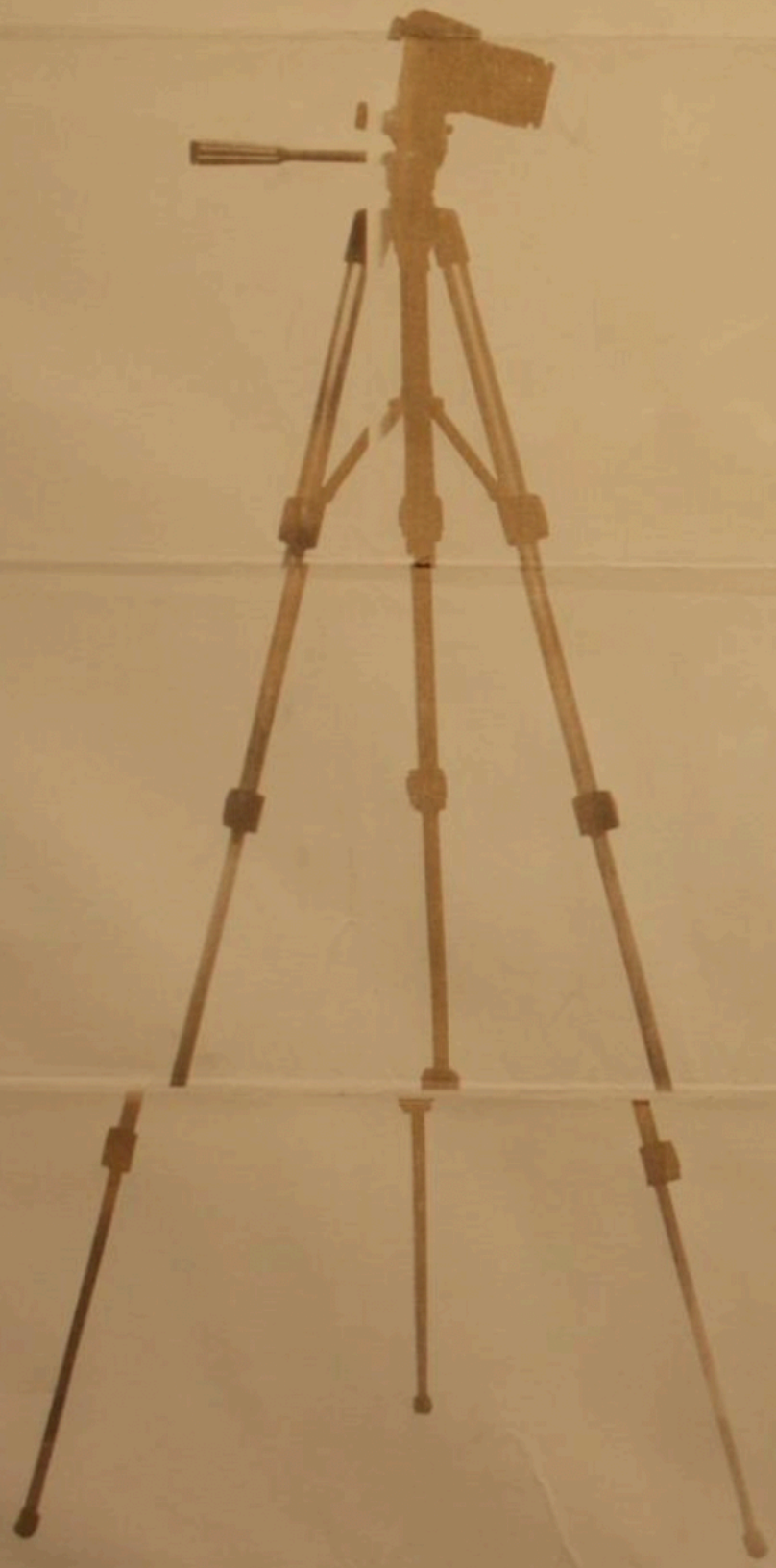


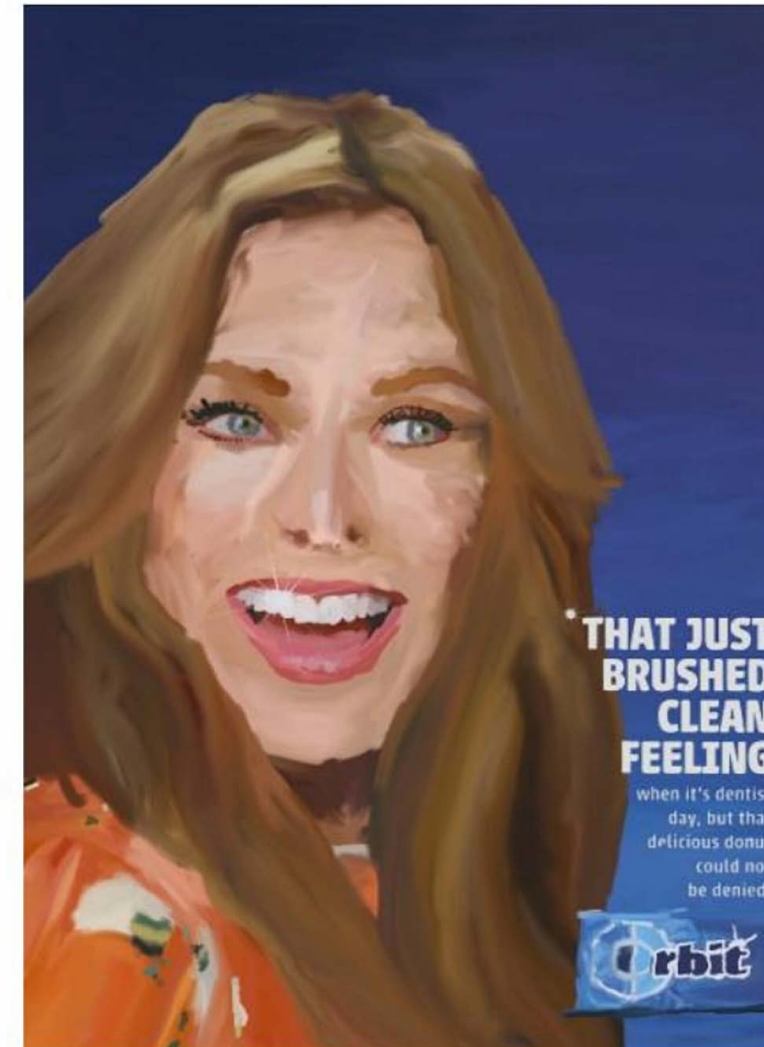
from a condition of mere spectatorship. So before leaving this conversation we would like to pose a question about the nature of the relationship of your art with your audience. Do you consider the issue of audience reception as being a crucial component of your decision-making process, in terms of what type of language is used in a particular context?

Audience reception is constantly something I think about through the creation of my work, especially the audience's ability to relate to the subject. In the past I have done performance pieces (basic tasks such as eating, folding clothes, or painting) streamed live on a sex cam website. I was interested in exposing the way my body could be objectified from viewers protected by anonymity, but was frustrated by the dialogue that occurred within my audience. So much of it was



TODAY, BECAUSE OF SURVEILLANCE EVERYONE SEEMS SO SCARED OF BEING WATCHED
BUT IF I'M GOING TO BE HONEST
WHAT I'M MOST TERRIFIED OF IS THE IDEA THAT NO ONE IS WATCHING ME





disgust or humor at what the viewers were saying to me, but the physical audience never seemed to recognize the similarities between them and the cam watchers or admit to having the same thoughts and actions of the users being put on display. In response, I created a piece that attempted to implicate the viewer within the work. Only wearing underwear, I sat in a glass box in the middle of the gallery while live streaming myself to a masturbation website. Those watching could message me, as well as pay me \$1.50 to drink a shot of vodka. A computer was set up nearby, so the physical audience could witness the comments of the online viewers, as well as Venmo me money to take a shot. The physical audience quickly became complicit in the objectification, and many paid me to take a shot. Even more videotaped it or snapchatted it to their friends, captioning it as "HAHA best 1.50 I

ever spent" or "look at his butt!" I ended up making \$15 in total, which was more than I spent on the Vodka so it was wonderful to actually make a profit on my art! Joking aside, I want to make my viewer become more than just a spectator. Ideally, regardless of how or how long the audience engages with my work, I want to make sure it is not passive.

Thanks a lot for your time and for sharing your thoughts, Weston. Finally, would you like to tell us readers something about your future projects? How do you see your work evolving?

Thanks so much for giving me the opportunity to show my work and talk to you! The projects that I'm working on right now consist of creating aluminum and bronze sculptures out of my 3D printed objects. I'm developing a procedure where I can scan objects or design them within Blender, manipulate their size and proportions, and 3D print them. With this positive mold I can then cast it and burn out the resin, leaving a negative mold for different metals. The goal is to further enhance the eye-catching quality of the work as well as the references to classical sculpture. I also have been experimenting with different colored layers of paint on top of canvas, and perfecting the laser cutter to burn only through a certain amount of layers, varying at different spots, in order to expose multiple colors for the artwork. I'm only 20 so my process is still evolving and changing pretty rapidly, but I'm focusing on honing these skills so my future works can be a seamless melding of the multiple materials and tools.

*An interview by Josh Ryder, curator
and Melissa C. Hilborn, curator
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