



## TYSON REEDER

*This Chicago-based artist and prankster loves to overturn expectations, even if it means embracing old-fashioned values, such as a vivid palette and traditional perspective.*

BY JULIE L. BELCOVE

The Impressionists' fondness for toiling en plein air, painting what they observed in nature, went out with Cubism and pure abstraction. Today, in the age of iPhones and Instagram, the concept is so archaic that it's downright radical, which is what led Tyson Reeder to head outdoors with an easel to make his Beach Paintings series.

"All of my students, if they have to paint a beach, Google a beach," laments Reeder, who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Maybe with good reason: Painting on an actual beach isn't as easy as it looks, he says. "You have your shades on, you're getting sunburned, and sand is blowing in the paint. Then you bring your painting inside and say, 'What the hell is this?'"

Reeder has built his artistic practice—and growing reputation—with a sly sense of subversion. Seeing everyone else painting canvases with a flattened sense of space, Reeder decided to make a

picture all about perspective: *Shoe Store*, with its yellow shelves displaying strappy heels on one side and striped sneakers on the other, practically invites the viewer to walk in and try on a pair. Reeder also parodies cutting-edge techniques that are all the rage, such as digital printing directly onto canvas. In *Green Bananas*, banana peels flit through an abstract landscape like disoriented birds. "I was eating bananas, and I scanned a banana peel," he explains. He then collaged the images onto a canvas. "It's like a poor man's Photoshop."

Reeder's ostensible subjects—flowers, boats, flip-flops—are intentionally pedestrian and, he insists, not meant as metaphors. Instead, his goal is "transforming the ordinary" in the manner of Pierre Bonnard, "where the color becomes the subject," he says. Reeder's love affair with sensuous colors is akin to that of the Fauvists of a century ago, and his paintings are peppered with unlikely patterns, some ▷



of which are triggered by thrift-store clothing finds. Occasionally, though, one senses that the subject resonates more deeply than the artist lets on. Reeder admits he's fascinated by shoes—he used to decorate sneakers for friends—and calls Foot Locker stores a “muse.” “He’s become a painter of everyday life,” says Matthew Higgs, director of the alternative exhibition space White Columns in New York. “The paintings seem casual and effortless, but they’re actually very particular. They’re simultaneously charming, seductive, pleasurable, playful, and idiosyncratic.”

Reeder typically paints on layers of newsprint or Japanese paper—he likes their smooth surfaces—affixed to canvas. He often injects an element of chance by beginning with abstract blotches of color



washes. He then adds figures or trees, which may or may not align neatly with the underlying blobs, making for red faces, say, or vertical bands of color that read as skyscrapers. Sometimes he applies paint with cotton balls, then leaves them stuck on the canvas. There’s no rule Reeder isn’t afraid to break: Once, while painting on a Miami beach, he began by rendering large flowers in the foreground, ignoring passersby admonishing him to paint the background first.

Reeder grew up in Michigan, and much of his work germinates from his bemused-outsider perspective as a Midwesterner in an art world dominated by the coasts. He titled his first New York solo show “Milwaukee,” his home before moving to Chicago. “To New Yorkers, it sounded exotic,” Reeder says with a laugh. “Van Gogh had Arles, Gauguin had Tahiti, and I had Milwaukee.”

Wisconsin also provided fodder for a series of art hijinks Reeder cooked up with his elder brother, Scott, also an artist, and Scott’s wife, Elysia Borowy-Reeder, now executive director of Detroit’s Museum of Contemporary Art. In 2006, they held the Milwaukee International Art Fair in a Polish beer hall with a bowling alley in the basement. “It started as a joke,” Reeder admits. But then important out-of-town galleries, like Gavin Brown’s Enterprise, signed up for the dirt-cheap booths. Higgs calls it “one of the legendary events of the 21st-century art world.” In 2008 came the Dark Fair, an art fair held in New York at night, with the lights off. “We gave every collector a flashlight,” Reeder says. The line to get in was down the block. Lately he’s been channeling his comic tendencies into a comedy club and dance party, most recently held in a nine-by-nine-foot room in his loft. Like his other endeavors, Reeder says, “It’s a mix of silliness and ambition.” ■



Scan the image above to view more of the artist's work