

The Paintings of Joseph Leo Messina, Jr.

Recent Works Gravity•Wind•Man

Joseph tells some great stories. One of his favorite sites, the Flagler Viaduct of the Seven Mile Bridge in the Florida Keys was wrecked by a hurricane in 1935 and is currently a ruin and an observation deck. Despite a magnificent storm, he decided to sneak into a restricted area at night and complete an unfinished painting. Imagine the artist as he struggled with the gale force elements, not with an easel, but with a six foot wind- operated painting machine of his own patented design. The pendulum-like structure swung wildly as paint dropped from the contrivance to produce the strokes of the finished art. Meanwhile, the artist held on for dear life, constantly negotiating both the shifts in weather and the spurts of liquefied pigment. He is at once traditional artist, inventor and conceptual provocateur.

Joseph Leo Messina, Jr. learned about art at an early age. His grandfather, Leo A. Messina, was a Senior Designer at the Burlington Company. As a child Joseph surrounded himself with the manufactured floral patterns and personalized landscape paintings of his grandfather's legacy. In his teens, Joseph began an industrial sign and neon light company where he learned to formulate typography, color and design on schedule and on a budget, in projects large and small alike. Although achieving commercial success, something was spurring Joseph in a different direction. The artist took a plaintive stroll on the beach and asked G_d how his own life should proceed. As if on cue, a small sand-polished purple glass stone bubbled up from the waves and deposited itself before him. It was etched with the single word in capital letters: "FAITH". He was directed from this experience to become a fine artist, to seek out a life based on personal creativity and helping others. He still keeps the stone in a small felt bag bearing another inscription, "My Word" in order to commemorate this personal pledge.

From the very outset, Joseph's art would be different. He began by researching his favorite painters like Jackson Pollock, Joan Mitchell, Vincent van Gogh and especially Henri Matisse. He examined the works of these artists, yet



Temp, 9/11/2003

30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Refers to the words temporal or temporary; the work of art as an object structured in time. The second in the 9/11 Memorial Series

did not set out to emulate them. In fact, Joseph insists that the essential nature of the work of art is about channeling something or someone outside of one's own experience; he's convinced his own work is richer, more resonant and mystical as a result. Conversely, the artist's creative personality also has a practical materialist side based on his industrial training and interests in science. He is an accomplished inventor, creating many product designs from a specialized laundry basket to the plans for a waste-oil refinery. His idol is the Renaissance master, Leonardo da Vinci. He is especially impressed with Da Vinci's Eight Barreled Machine Gun, 1482 where the Florentine envisioned a proto-Gatling gun creating a devastating assault. Whether the Renaissance genius actually built this contraption or not is beside the point. Da Vinci's inventions were designed to work both as technology and art, creating new definitions or boundaries for everyone living after him. It is this salient point that changed the method of how Joseph would create paintings.

The artist encountered a broken swing on the beach, its hanging chain creating unique designs through repetitive movement. Reflecting upon this process and employing the concept for studio practice, Joseph was led to invent and build a painting machine. There have been other artists who have done so, like the Swiss sculptor, Jean Tinguely, in pieces like Art Machine, 1959, also Metamatic No. 17, 1959, but these artists usually used industrial motors to do the work. Like the conceptual artists Andrew Goldsworthy, or Robert Smithson, Joseph wanted to use nature as an intimate partner in the creation of the work of art. He decided that the machine would be wind-powered and formed Gravity.Wind.Man, Inc., his own company. After six separate designs and countless trials and errors, the apparatus, (as he calls it) was completed. It is constructed from medical syringes filled with thinned out 1-Shot industrial sign paint in nine separate colors. These are held in check by a vacuum. Each color is connected to Neoprene tubing, which comes down the apparatus and ends in a spring-tipped shock absorber, similar to a finger joint. The joints are connected to nine artist-made brushes comprised of nylon and squirrel hair. Each brush takes at least an hour to prepare and can be used for only one sitting. The housing of the machine is a solid steel frame, which stretches as high as twelve feet in inclement weather. The sides of the machine are long enough so that the wind can properly move the brushes, creating the sweeps of a stroke that mimic the human hand. The canvas is firmly duct-taped onto a custom built easel at



Time to Leave, 2003
30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Puns on leaving as an action word
and/or a physical leaf stuck in the
painting's surface.



The 1st with 9, 2003

30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Painted in the Florida Keys, it is the first painting using nine brushes.

the base of the machine. The easel is a six foot steel arc, curved deeper at the center than at the sides to ensure that the strokes of paint are equal and firm throughout the completed work of art. As the artist adjusts the syringes, the paint begins to flow down. If he wants a different color or mix, he will insert his body into the process and adjust the syringe while the wind is blowing. The trick here is that if the artist inserts too much of his own will, the painting will be destroyed. Like Jackson Pollock dancing across a floor-based canvas while depositing paint, bits of detritus, cigarette butts, thumb tacks and the like in his Full Fathom Five, 1947, Joseph may use blown beach sand which sticks to the paint layer as part of the finished work. When the painting is completely dry, it is neatly stretched onto an aluminum stretcher. Joseph's use of the wind and rain as a creative force helps him to focus on cooperation with nature, rather than the hubristic pride often stemming from excessive artistic control. Nature used as a partner and held respectfully in balance gives the paintings a particularly organic and egalitarian feel.

Joseph's paintings are process-based abstract works, a hybrid of industrial and Abstract Expressionist aesthetics. In his rich use of colors: plum raspberry, midnight purple, sky blue, blazing yellow, and metallic colors like aluminum paint, one may assume he is being influenced by his favorite masters, Matisse, Mitchell and Pollock in a studio-based aesthetic choice. Yet he approaches the concept of color systematically and technically, using the 1-Shot industrial sign painter's chart. Like George Seurat picking optical mixes for his massive painting, A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte, 1884, Joseph's color begins conceptually, but through his artistic sensibility makes it experiential and ties it to the memory of real objects. The color is strong and expansive and has the saturated hues of still-life, fruits and layer cakes. In the case of his 9/11 Anniversary Series, the artist uses raw cotton duck to approximate the horror of the World Trade Center event. Within this context, the white unprimed canvas can be seen as a void or an abyss for the paint to act upon and change. In either case, environmental temperatures must be factored onto the working process as the paint is deposited by the machine. If the weather is cold, the paint thickens and must be diluted with industrial thinner. Likewise if it is too hot, the paint runs and must be thickened. Every situation is different and as a result, final painting is the sum of these choices.

In a series of recent works, Joseph retains the formats of 30"x 48", 30"x 53" and 33"x 63". The artist presents his base colors in a certain order: pink, black, silver, red-orange, deep red, green, blue-green, mustard yellow, and tan-brown. The strokes are then laid upon the pre-painted grounds. These strokes range from small and Pointillist in nature to a broad circular motion much like the patterns of a semi-circle. The painting's name is often determined by its conceptual history and working methods. *Temp, 9/11, 2003* refers to the words temporal or temporary; the work of art as an object structured in time. *Time to Leave, 2003* puns on leaving as an action and/or a physical leaf stuck in the painting's surface. Process based titles such as *1st With 9* recalls the artist's use of nine colors connected to separate brushes. *Metal # 3 Gold Missing Man Got Skipped, 2003* evokes a memory of a missing man plane formation, an Air Force flying ritual for a downed pilot which the artist observed while painting on the beach. This process of naming the works with simple industrial titles, numbers or elliptical references again recall the great era of Abstract Expressionism, calling attention to the non-figurative qualities of the works, but also embedding them with a particular experiential history.

In the past, brush marks were seen as the indicator of an individual artist; unique and irreproducible. This was the case from Diego Velazquez to the Impressionists, to the Abstract Expressionists. When Jackson Pollock dealt with this issue, he distanced himself from the problem by flinging and pouring the paint rather than brushing it on. For Joseph, it is his apparatus or machine that is physically touching the paint. So is the mark a unique gesture captured by the artist, randomly captured by nature, a product of his machine, or all three? Like da Vinci's gun, the painted strokes create a hybridized category continually open to discussion. Are Joseph's strokes ironic comments on artistic production as in Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup cans and ideas regarding Pop Art? The artist is very emphatic about authenticity even as he comments on his own mysticism. "Remember that I have worked in all kinds of geography and weather: Long Island, the Florida Keys, and Rhode Island, painting during Hurricanes Gustav and Isidore in 90 mile an hour winds. You can't fake that. The paintings create themselves. I just channel the energy from nature or beyond and it's not about me. There are times when I try to influence the painting and the painting revolts. It has a will of its own!"



Metal, #3 Gold Missing Man Got Skipped, 2003

30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Evokes a memory of a missing-man plane formation, an Air Force flying ritual for a downed pilot which the artist observed while painting on the beach in Rhode Island.



The Story of the Stone, 2003

30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas



The Stone

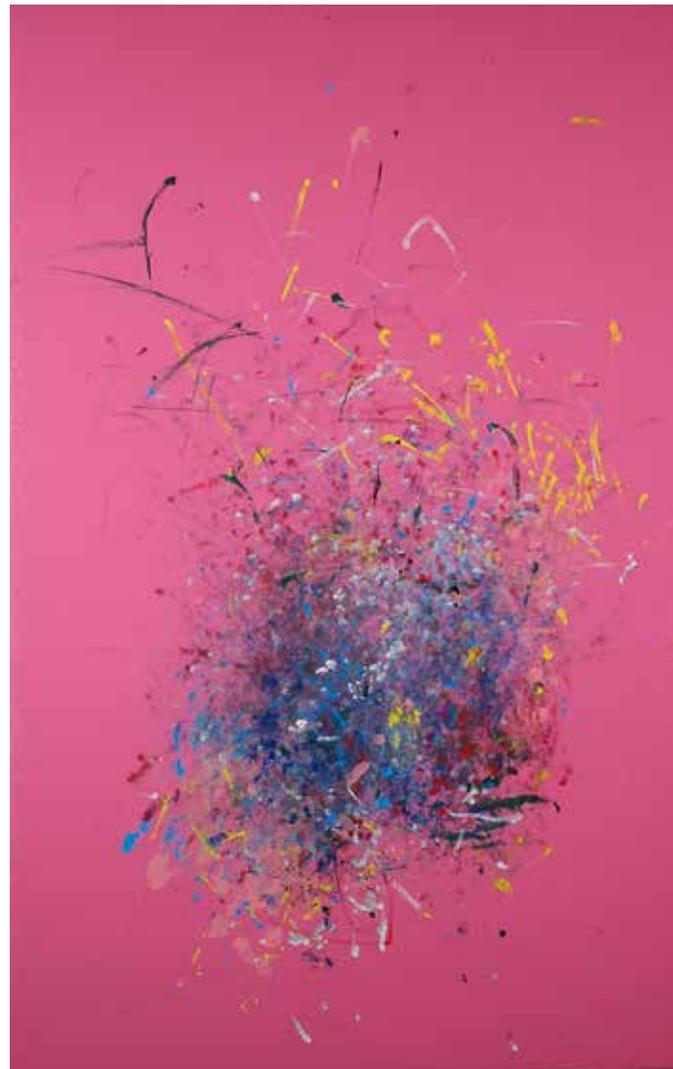
In a seminal work, *The Story of the Stone*, 2003 the painting recalls his profound experience in finding the glass stone labeled "FAITH." The stone is likened to an immovable force even as the painting becomes a metaphor of pure energy. The artist references veils of sparks, fireworks and the surging star patterns of van Gogh's *The Starry Night*, 1889. In Joseph's painting the ground is a plum red; the marks are dark blue, off-white and orange. As paint is dropped, the process of the apparatus creates bold new colors by the tertiary mixes that are essentially unplanned. The painted image is seen as a metaphysical reality where transformation can take place. The format of the veil may reference Catholic doctrine and the artist's own religious beliefs. This motif has been depicted in numerous paintings portraying *The Veil of Veronica* by such diverse masters as El Greco, 1580-82 and Domenico Fetti, c.1620. These images depict Christ's human face, disembodied after the Crucifixion and displayed on a cloth as if by miracle. Joseph's contemporary painting stubbornly retains its abstract nature, yet evokes a face. The effect in a non-objective work is at once night sky and obscured human presence. According to the logic of Abstract Expressionism as expressed by the critic Clement Greenberg, brush marks cease to describe real objects existing in three-dimensional space and assert only their own material nature and the creative artist's personality. The works of such masters as Pollock, Mark Tobey, and Milton Resnick sparkle with accretions of paint, refusing to employ figurative meaning. Joseph embraces this abstract aesthetic but updates it and marries it to a working relationship with nature, random chance and the technology of the machine. The result is a profound freedom as he seeks to express what he feels is the world beyond our senses.

There is a strong conceptual aspect to this artist's work. It is the identity of the artist as nature's conceptual advocate and society's shamanistic healer. Joseph's uniqueness is not simply based on one aspect of his artistic effort. The creation of his machine, the set-up of the apparatus, the actions of the artist while the apparatus paints, the use of random chance as a factor, and the employment of nature as a partner in art are all ideas worthy of further documentation. In fact, the artist ceaselessly photographs and videos his process, so that others may see the entire constellation of his creativity. Other artists have worked with nature in a direct and primary way. The artist Robert Smithson created the *Spiral Getty*, 1970 by moving earth with a bulldozer on the shore of the Great Salt Lake in Utah.

This let the moved earth, erosion and drought change the environment, thus creating something both monumental and impermanent. After his experiences in World War II, the German artist Joseph Beuys used fat and felt to create powerful images of healing for him and others (Fat Corner, 1968 and Felt Suit, 1970). Like these artists, Joseph's essential belief is that art is positive, therapeutic and in dialogue with the sacred. To augment his work, he volunteers as an End of Life Counselor with terminally ill patients at a hospice on Long Island. As various patients have died, he has made memorial paintings in their honor. In *Reds # 9 Watch Out Diseases*, 2003 he sees painting as essentially talismanic, warding off evil through creativity. In *Jo-Ann Made the Party*, 2003 the artist makes a memorial for his deceased mother using her actual oxygen tubes within his painting apparatus. This is a strong conceptual and performative act that would not necessarily present itself in the final work; but of course it does, because Joseph knows it matters and sees it as part of his process.

Joseph Leo Messina, Jr.'s body of work demonstrates vividness, singularity of intent and variety. His paintings mirror the color and beauty of the world in the face of elemental nature, chaos, machines and the passage of time. They retain an awareness of the environment as something far greater than we will ever know, even as they memorialize a particular kind of American "can-do know-how." This is a machine-age aesthetic married to the most astute kind of Action Painting. It's painting that addresses the unknown but has great hope, skill and aplomb. The marriage of order and chaos typifies Joseph as a spiritual seeker of the greatest sort, a person that sees art as an adventure to be lived and invites us to come along for the ride. He is an artist who considers the joys of color, the frenetic qualities of random marks, the homegrown love of building a machine, the depth of awe in the face of the sublime, and the passionate desire for divine meaning. His message reminds us that we are in current danger of losing the essential things that matter; beauty, value, significance and transcendence, the real stuff of life, the real stuff of art.

An essay by Joel Silverstein



Jo-Ann Made the Party,
2003 30"x48" Oil & Sand on Canvas

Painted in Montauk NY at Hither Hills State Park. The only painting in the Gravity Wind Man series to take nine hours to complete.

About the Artist

Born in 1963 in Jamaica, New York, Joseph Leo Messina, Jr.'s interest in making things began in childhood, surrounded by the art and craft that his family produced. His mother created handmade beaded hair accessories and his paternal grandfather was a fabric designer and styling coordinator for textile firms. Messina has been particularly influenced by his grandfather's creative spirit and his lifelong work as a painter.

When Messina was three, he and his family moved to North Babylon, Long Island. He now lives with his wife and two children in Babylon Village. At age sixteen, Messina entered the sign industry, first learning to weld and to work with plastics. He went on to acquire many skills, including plumbing, carpentry, and electrical wiring. He also worked in a variety of jobs, ranging from bouncer, candy salesman, dog breeder and kennel operator. (Messina continues to volunteer as an animal rescuer of dogs and squirrels.) It was in the sign business that Messina concentrated his efforts beginning in the early 1980s. At first he worked for others, and since 1989 he has run his own firm, Absolutely Neon. Over the years his focus has shifted from signs to neon lighting installations in residences, salons, and clubs. Clients in the New York metropolitan area and throughout the Northeast have given Messina free artistic reign in the design of specialized lighting. Messina is also an inventor of novelties, tools, and pet and home products, including a laundry basket invention, chosen in 1997 as one of QVC's "Quest for the Best" top 20 products in New York. Messina has become a curator of art shows in the metro New York area. He also is a member of the Babylon Village Art Council Board of Directors.

About the Author

Joel Silverstein is an artist, critic and teacher. He has written for Artcritical.com, Sculpture, d'ART, New York Arts and has also written several catalogue essays including, Julian Hatton and George Rada: A Painter's Odyssey. The artist/ critic is a Founding and Executive Board Member of the Jewish Art Salon and has curated, The Dura Europos Project at the Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art and UJA, NY.

