

an interview with

CASEY BAUGH

by Kavita Kaul

makeup artist & beauty writer

As the evenings descend and now bring with them a slight chill, I'm taking advantage of the fact that tonight, it's just about warm enough to sit outside without shuddering; so outside a well-known Williamsburg watering hole I await the arrival of artist, Casey Baugh. I've seen his work, I've watched his demos, read interviews and am of course impressed by his already prolific career and his incredible work, but it's hard to get a feel for the man behind the canvas through snippets and excerpts.

I'll be honest, whilst I didn't really know what to expect, part of me was totally prepared to meet a stereotypical Artiste; intensely obtuse, full of idiosyncratic eccentricities and twitches that only add to his already romantic and enigmatic aura. As I am sitting just off Bedford Avenue I'm not at all surprised to see a figure that seems to fit that mould perfectly, hovering on the corner; a tall, stylishly tousled fellow all in black, moodily dragging out the last few breathes from a cigarette. When he turns, smiles at me and asks "hello"? I am momentarily flummoxed, then snap out of it and venture a "hi". I'm then greeted with a big hug and preliminary chitchat immediately tells me I'm in for an interesting evening.



“Ammonoid” 24 x 24 oil on panel



KAVITA You seem incredibly confident compared to some artists who can remain notoriously insecure until the end.

CASEY I won't lie, insecurity happens. I got to the point where I got my first piece of hate mail saying "your work sucks! Why are you an artist? Blah, blah, blah" and it set me back a few paces. I said to myself "wait ...maybe I am doing something wrong"? After a while though, you just realize you're gonna get hate mail, and you're gonna get nice emails from people who are just as into it as the people who are opposed to it. You just have to say to yourself "I don't care! I'm just going to paint what I like". And the people who don't like it have every right not to like it; it doesn't mean I'm doing something wrong, it means it's not for them. Go find something else and more power to you! I don't hate you for hating my work, you have an opinion, and y'know I might not like your work! That's the way it goes.

The only person that should be the critic is yourself, because at the end of the day, no matter what you create, if it's music, art, film, whatever...no matter what you create, someone is going to love it and someone is going to hate it. Pick any band, any director, someone will love it and someone will hate it, therefore public opinion is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is what you think as the artist, so you have to be the judge and look at it and be honest; [he says with a cryptic smile] "being honest is the hard part". Every person is unique and original, so to tap into true originality is to tap into yourself and paint what you want to paint and hope that people out there also enjoy it. I mean, out of however many billion people there are, chances are someone else is also going to appreciate it [he says nonchalantly]. Y'know it's a tricky thing when someone asks you what you do, and it's almost an embarrassing thing to say "I'm an artist" because everyone is a fucking artist now! I hate saying that. I'm happy and proud of what I do, but the term itself? There needs to be a new term. A painter could mean a house painter; an artist could mean a million things. Everyone is an artist; I could be a Barista and I'm an artist! I say I'm a "professional artist". If there's a whole line of interrogation I just pull out my phone and show them so then that's taken care of; that's why I'm not a writer, I'm an artist.

KAVITA How is your development as an artist linked to your development as a person?

CASEY Every painting is a self-portrait. Every painting comes from where you're at, at the time. When I look at paintings I did 10-15 years ago, would I

change anything now? Of course! But I was as honest as I could be at the time, I did the best I could and I'm not the same person anymore. It's wise to pay attention to the history of your life, to learn from mistakes; you can only create what you know and of course there are pieces out there that I wish weren't out there. It sounds cheesy, but the most important thing is to be in tune with who you are and what you like and not apologize for it. To say, "I like this and I don't care if no one else likes it" and to stay with that with your work.

KAVITA How important is the "realness" of your work to you?

CASEY I think it tells a better story when we can relate to something real, or maybe something that's real in a parallel Universe; or maybe it looks real, but something's slightly... off? Some of my favorite films have almost a saturated tint of color on everything and there are colors you would never see in real life. You can set an entire feeling or attitude with color tone; you can set the stage. It's as simple as when you have food in front of you and you put salt on it. How much do you put? You can't quantify it, you just put on as much as feels right; it's instinctual and with feeling. With coloring I just try different colors until it feels right and that's the feeling I want. I don't actually verbalize or think about it in terms of "this feeling" it's more like, try it...no, try it...no... try it, that's it! It just works, I don't care why it just feels right to me.

I'm of the belief that there are no rules. Some of the best paintings might be technically on point, but you don't want to lock yourself into those rules because sometimes there are paintings that aren't technically correct, but you think are amazing. Therefore all of it's out the window and you have to paint instinctually. Instinct is everything! You have to look at it and say if it feels right or doesn't; if it doesn't, change it; now I'm changing it and moving it out of the Golden Ratio rule for example, so what? It feels better. So now you're painting with feeling rather than any other sort of rule for composition, or rule for color. You feel your way through it as the artist and it's a responsibility thinking that with every painting I'm doing, I don't know who's looking at it and I'm basically standing up on a podium in front of x amount of people from around the world and they're listening to what I have to say. Therefore I have a responsibility to say something meaningful to me.

There are cultural differences, but there are still common denominators across all races and if you can tap into that common thread in a painting, you can tap into every person...that's powerful, fun and exciting.



KAVITA Apart from your natural instinct, tell me about your process.

CASEY I sort of work like a sculptor but with brushes and paint. In putting your value and color on the canvas first, you’re essentially building your “lump of clay” and then you can move it around. Now you have something to work with, now you can move these shapes around and put them in the right spot. Y’know I want to say my time with Richard (Schmid) was everything, (but I also want to give myself a little bit of credit too in that I wanted to “make-it” no matter what), however I looked up to him like he was God in terms of thought process and how he approaches painting. I was most interested in how he painted as opposed to what he painted. Richard’s attitude is, the end is all that matters, it doesn’t matter what you do to get there. There is no rulebook to Art. When I teach it’s interesting, because often I’ll sit down with a student and say, “ok, do this” and often they’ll say “whoa whoa WHOA! Are you allowed to do that”? Who says you’re not? What rulebook says you’re not? You can do whatever the fuck you want to do and it’s ok! That is what Richard taught me.

KAVITA Were you always drawn to a cerebral approach to Art?

CASEY I always wanted to understand why something worked. If I look at two paintings and one interests me and the other doesn’t, I definitely want to know why. It’s hard because I don’t necessarily think there’s an ultimate beauty…that’s subjective, but I do want to know why I like one painting and I don’t like another. When you ask those questions what you’re really doing is learning about yourself. You’re learning that there’s a common denominator in what you find beautiful; you’re finding your own rulebook. After 15 years of painting I’d built up these portfolios of my favorite images and when I looked through them I could start to see these common threads between what I liked and didn’t. And then I’d break it down to figure out what those things were, and put that into my work so I know that my next panting is technically going to be that…beautiful to me. That’s the scientific part.

KAVITA So you would agree that you try to embody the dichotomy of Art and Science?

CASEY Right! I’m coming at this from another angle. I’m coming at this from the whole scientific, engineering angle and then trying to jump into the world of the “crazy, unorganized artist”. In reality my tendencies are more towards the methodical structure that can then give you creative freedom. Once you have the structure, you can mess it up! Take Picasso, he started with structure and then broke it down. I think it’s harder to take chaos and make it something. People do that, a lot of my friends do this…I’m just not as good at it [he flashes a smile and goes on to reluctantly admit] “I can be a control freak, but I don’t want to control everything [he chuckles to himself and says with joking defensiveness]…I just want to at least have a plan”! If I took my method to the extreme then my work would be way too controlled. With my plan, now that I’m on my course, I’m allowing for anything to happen. If it happens and it doesn’t work then I’ll get rid of it, if it happens and it’s amazing then thank you! There is definitely an element of the chaos…the controlled chaos [he says knowingly]. Someone listening into this conversation could say that I’m so controlled that there’s no amount of accident, there’s no amount of exploration. That’s not the case though. You can try to control certain aspects, and this is the beautiful thing [he leans in and takes a long drag from his cigarette] there’s still the unknown controlled accidents; you always want to allow for that. Your mistakes and failures are what teach you. In a weird way I’m looking forward to my next bad painting because they’re the ones that teach me so I can get better; if everything was perfect, there would be no learning.

KAVITA You want to break the cliché of the disorganized, impulsive artist?

CASEY That’s exactly where I’m going with this! But [he laughs at himself as he says] “I hate the idea that a painting of mine sold, and I didn’t know why”. That to me is one of the scariest feelings. How do you do it again? I know people who live in fear of that because they just stumbled across something. I want to know exactly what I did so I can duplicate it if I need to, but even if not, then at least know how that happened. I’m creating a sense of security for myself that isn’t given to you in this industry, but at the same time I need to be creating at all times, I need to feel the danger of losing it all. I thrive under pressure, which means then in turn, I set up pressure. I’ll say to a gallery I have five paintings instead of four so I can feel that extra pressure and I have to follow through. The pressure is the time that I focus and when it comes down to it, necessity is the mother of creativity. When I have to do something, I find a way to do it and sometimes that pressure unveils things I never would have discovered just sitting around and thinking. I could easily say I’ll give you one painting in the next five months; that would be easy, however I like being efficient, I like creating. I see my Gallery Owner as someone who keeps me accountable. You can’t be an artist who only works, you have to live. If you only live you’re not creating, if you only create you’re not living therefore your pieces mean nothing. So it’s finding that balance of working as much as possible but still living and absorbing and learning. We only live once, and you can take that many ways and say “well we only live once so I just want to have fun”. Well I enjoy painting, it’ fun, so that’s one thing but I don’t want to be 80 years old looking



“Blue” 9 x 12 oil on panel

Every painting is a self-portrait. Every painting comes from where you’re at, at the time.

back and thinking “there’s two hundred more paintings I could have done that I didn’t because I had a couple of extra beers”.

KAVITA What are some other passions apart from painting?

CASEY I was into Filmmaking for a long time and photography. I really wanted to be a movie director and I was making movies with my friends and upping the scale more and more and I was extremely passionate about it. If Art didn’t exist that might be something I might actually want to be. I love the idea of pre-production and planning, finding the actors and building the sets; then creating something and editing it down to tell a story and then to add audio. The only thing I didn’t like about it is that it requires such a large amount of people to create your vision. I realized as an artist I can still be a director and direct my one-framed movie that’s all in my control without the help of 500 people. I can still find my “actor” (my model), build my scenes and my sets, and I can create my one-framed movie minus the audio. So I still consider myself a one-framed movie director and I’m still kinda doing what I

really wanted to do. If I could summarize my favorite movies into one frame, that’s what I want my paintings to be.

I mean, it’s a whole process though. The painting process in all honesty is only a small percentage of the amount of work that goes into it. With every painting I’ve ever done, an entire week’s worth of pre-production goes into it with sketches, finding the right model finding the right wardrobe, finding/ building the set and pulling all of these things together. Every painting I do requires one or two preliminary paintings, rough drafts, and honing this whole story to finally then laying down the paint on the canvas for the end result. Usually I’m under some sort of time restriction and whilst rushing through, all these happy accidents happen. Certain brushstrokes will happen that I want to be in the final piece where I could never have imagined that before. The end painting is a few days work, but the whole journey is a few weeks. Painting in the most difficult thing I’ve ever done in my life, but hard work is meaningless if it’s something you want to do. I’m also very careful to be in tune to what I need; for example I don’t set an alarm to wake up, I go to sleep

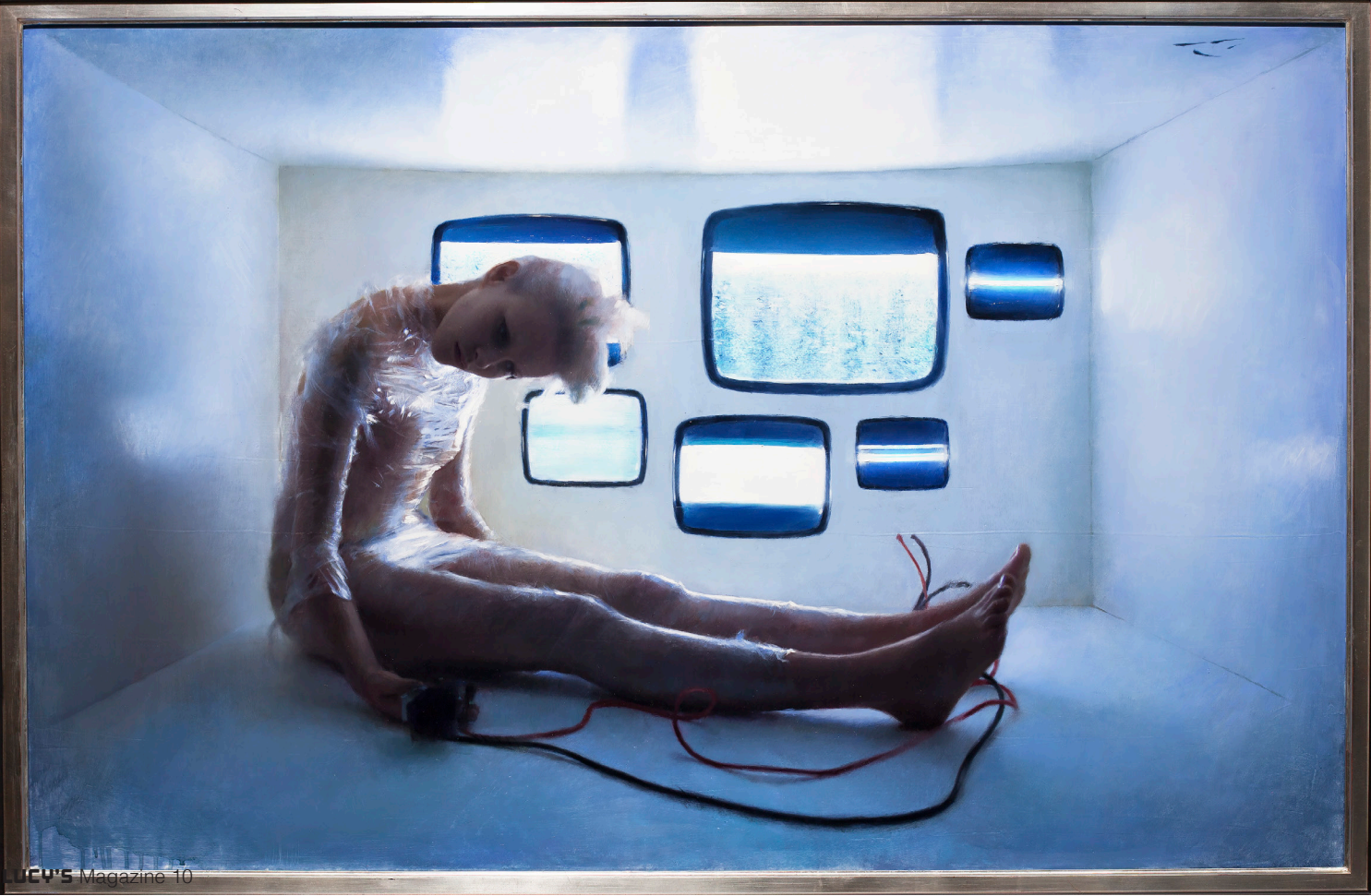
when I'm tired and I wake up when I'm rested. If I'm hungry I eat, if I need to get out, I get out. I want to be able to do what my body needs me to do and complete my work within those boundaries.

KAVITA What happens to all those sketches and preparatory work?

CASEY [With a big smile, great satisfaction and exaggerated pronunciation] “Gasoliiiiine”! It's all destroyed. No author is selling a rough draft! Why would a movie director sell unedited footage for people to watch? It's 70% of your finished product; if I want to give a speech, or write a book and I have grammatical errors and misspelled words, why would I want people to see this? That's not the story. You're seeing flaws in the story. Eliminate that... see the story. I mean sometimes I've sold sketches and it is more raw and real, like outtakes at the end of films sometimes, and they're enjoyable; there is a value to the rough draft. The problem with it is this is in years to come, people look at studies as being on the same plane as finished pieces. We'll look at a study by John Singer Sargent and everyone just assumes that's a masterpiece because he painted in. When in reality he would say “that's my fucking study! I screwed up here and this is off”. People assume because of the name that if this person touched a canvas that it's brilliance. That's what I don't like.

What is Art? Is it the end result? Is it the lack of imperfections? That's not for me to say, but all I know is that I want to say something as clearly as possible, and I want you look at it as clearly as possible. If I say something incorrectly, I don't actually want to you take that as my art; those are the sketches and studies. Now which one is actually Art? My misunderstandings, my misspellings, my grammatical errors could actually be taken as Art...go for it. I have no power over that...except for the fire and the flames [he smirks]. Look, anything can be Art...this cup could be Art...anyone can label anything as Art! Which raises another point which is probably one of the major reasons why I paint; no matter what country you're from, no matter what language you speak, if you have eyes that can see, you can get a painting; painting is the universal language. In learning the art of painting I've learned every language that exists on this planet because I can speak to every person. [He says emphatically] “That is interesting, that is cool and I like that.” Personally, I want people to know if something's a study and not to take it as a finished

“Static” 33 x 44 oil on panel



piece. If you take it as a study then it's very interesting and raw; it's a glimpse behind the curtain, to see how the structure works so to speak [as he says this he gestures in the like he's sprinkling magic fairy dust].

KAVITA In terms of structure, how much control do you have over how a viewer experiences your work?

CASEY There's a lot of control, but the thing I don't have control over is the person's experience and filter. I don't know where you're coming from. I could paint a picture of an apple and someone could say, “well I hate apples”! I don't have control over that, but that's the real fun! With music, you listen to certain songs when you're in certain moods and it makes you feel a certain way. Visually you're limited with content, composition, value, color, edge, drawing and texture. That's everything that exists visually, but with those tools, you can still guide a viewer through a piece to make them feel a certain way. With Edge you can make more things pronounced and other things subtler, so you can say, “look here and this isn't as important”, you can say “this is powerful, this is not”. You can say “look at it in this order” by setting up the composition in such a way, just like with music or in the movies; the timing of the cuts, the editing etc, can be used to cause tension for example. You can do the same thing with a painting so I like to look to all the tricks that people in film and photography utilize greatly. The control is the fun of it because again, you're directing that one-frame movie.

KAVITA How does Photography impact your work?

CASEY It's a tool to help me tell my story. If me telling a more complicated story requires the use of other tools, like photography, then I'm going to take advantage of that! I use it to capture scenes that are more complicated than I could paint from life; or things that I can't invent or situations like when a person is in motion where they can't hold it for me. With photography I can translate it into painting. In terms of the photographer and photos, I feel like you have the world of Fine Art and you have the world of Photography. As a Fine Artist you spend years trying to learn the palette and learn color... years. While we're doing that, an amateur photographer spends about a week learning the camera. So while we're spending all this timing learning the palette, the photographer's already learning the camera and their entire



“Wandering”12 x 10 oil on panel

mentality is now composition, story, lighting, wardrobe, attitude, all these things, so artists already have a disadvantage in that they're still trying to figure out their little tool. I look to photography a lot for inspiration because photographers are way more advanced in terms of telling stories with light; more so than the average artist is. In my mind, a photograph and a panting are doing the exact same thing; they're telling a one-framed story visually. Where we have the advantage as an artist is that we have color and texture...the paint itself. Technically, in a perfect world of photography vs. artist, the artist has slightly more tools to maybe tell a different story, but as an artist we should at least be as good as the best photographer in the way we're capturing a scene. In my mind, they're one and the same, but unfortunately with the mentality of a lot of artists they try to separate the worlds into Photographers are over here and Artists, over here and the worlds don't mix. We're all doing the same thing. On one hand it's inspirational, on the other, it's a tool. I'm using my photographs, I'm allowing them to help me with my paintings to see what my lighting is going to do for example. The end result is that I work from a series of photographs that I'll take and sketches and color studies that I'll bring together to make my finished piece.

KAVITA Modern Art can be controversial. A dot on a canvas can be praised, or hated, over-analyzed or ignored. Would you agree that either way, the strong reactions a work of Art evokes means the artist has done their job?

CASEY Yes! I mean if only we lived in a world where art was taken as music, or film is taken. If I was to play a song right now, you listen to it...you wouldn't give me some bullshit answer like “well I didn't study music so I can't answer that question”. You would say “I like/don't like it” and you would be totally entitled to that. But if I showed you a painting,



“Displacement” 12 x 18 oil on panel

chances are you'd look at it and say "I don't really have the education to...". [Casey is getting slightly wound up] With music and movies, you don't apologize for liking or not liking it; you don't say "well I'm not an expert critic, I didn't get a Masters in Film History so I can't really tell you if I like it or not". Fuck it, did you like it or do you not like it?

[Taking a moment to pause and take a breath] I mean, we're getting out of this now, but in the Art world we went through a phase where people in certain positions [he no doubt knows exactly who and in which positions] pushed the envelope purposefully to make confusing work and then explain it away as something that's deep. If something is confusing, you can actually get away with saying it's genius. If you do that long enough, if you put something confusing on the cover of every Art magazine, and say "this sold for \$1million" it starts upsetting the system. If you watched a movie you absolutely hated, and every person, every major critic, every magazine and every person you met said it was genius, that's gonna confuse you a little bit; and then it's going to confuse you to the point where you'll back up and say "well, I guess I just don't know". That's what happened in the Art world. It's been muddled up to the point where confusion has been labeled genius and now most people say "I don't know anymore". We're getting out of that slowly, but in my opinion it's the only art form that's done that. I don't know why, but it has...I mean...I have my opinions, but I won't tell [cue a deep, rumbling laugh]. I mean, it's not to say that I have a negative opinion of the artists who do this, I don't care, do what you want, more power to you! At the end of the day I believe everyone has just as much of a right to have an opinion on any of these paintings, or anything out there. Which is another reason why I try my very best not to put stories or much of myself beside my work. I want you to look at it and say, "I like that" or "I don't like it". You don't need a written spiel, or me to sit there and tell you about it to make you like or it not. You should look at it like a song; listen to it, like it, you don't like it...fine. [He earnestly asks] "otherwise, why are we painters? Why aren't we writers with a picture next to our words"? I don't want to do that; in my opinion, this isn't honest to what Fine Art is and it isn't a purely visual experience anymore. If it requires words and an explanation, you've now deviated from Art in its pure form. If the song

I'm listening to requires the musician to explain it for me to like it, then it's not music anymore in its pure form.

KAVITA What is the legacy you ideally want to leave?

CASEY [in a mockingly over-dramatic way] "Oh God"! [He then gets serious] I just want to be a person who creates quality work, makes people think and hopefully changes the world in a positive way. At the end of all things, I'll be dead and gone and hopefully someone can look back and say, this is a person that made the most of their life, who challenged the rest of the world and hopefully changed the world for the better and inspired who knows how many people to also do the same thing. That's the best answer I have.

KAVITA What do you wish you were better at?

CASEY I wish I had a wider vocabulary and the gift of speech; the ability to convey ideas fluently through perfect wording. I wish I were better at that among many other things. [He flashes that cheeky smile and confesses] I wish I were better at remembering people's names.

And as if on cue our waitress comes by to ask if we'd like another cocktail. I spot a friend coincidentally waiting for a spot at the bar; he joins us and in talking about his work as a Neuroscientist he brings up Photo-Realism. You can imagine where this goes, and with that, we embark on our fifth round and on into the night.



“Wrapped” 9 x 12 oil on panel



“Videodrome” 48x54 oil on canvas



“Engulfed” 12 x 12 oil on panel