

Grappling with the Dark Side of the Human Condition - In Conversation with Cleon Peterson

Interviews



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Dystopian scenes of clashing figures in a perpetuating struggle between power and submission is what characterizes the work of Cleon Peterson. While drawing from his own experience with addiction, incarceration, social inequity, and stigmatization, Cleon perfectly reflects the fluctuating architecture of our contemporary society. Chaotic and violent, these paintings evoke Thomas Hobbes' description of life as war between individuals - "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Removed from any scenery and depicted in a distinctively stark color palette, these hostile, entangled figures are as mesmerizing as they are disturbing.

Cleon's latest body of work is currently on view at albertz benda gallery in a show titled Mr. Sinister. Investigating mechanisms of power, fantasy, and morality, as well as the oppressive structures burdening our society, these allegorical paintings challenge dualities of right and wrong, black and white. Executed in his immediately recognizable style, these images do differ from his previous work by addressing violence in a less explicit way.

We had a chat with Cleon to learn more about this captivating body of work and the evocative symbolism behind it. In an exclusive Widewalls interview, Cleon talks about the human condition and its underlying principles, his own personal experience that continues to inspire his work, intriguing characters inhabiting these paintings, shifts in his practice, his stylistic choices, and much more.



Cleon Peterson - Babylon Burning, 2022

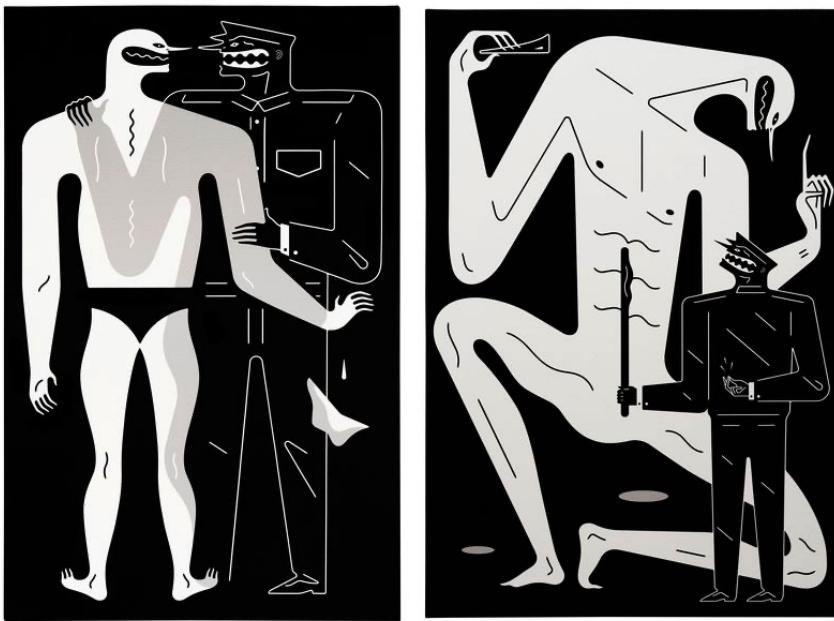
Surveying the Human Condition

Widewalls: Your work is characterized by violent, chaotic and anxiety-ridden images, featuring devious, clashing figures removed from any scenery. What does your work tell us about the human condition and its underlying principles?

Cleon Peterson: I often feature extremes in my work, the point where desperation turns to action. The subject of power is always central. The early paintings, set in broken cities, explored breakdowns in the social contract, deviancy, and what it is to be an outsider. Later, when I started painting large murals, I needed an iconic shorthand, an image that one could absorb when driving or walking by that had the same emotional underpinnings as the more complex set works. Because of their scale and location, these works assumed the natural world as their environment, this time being less narrative. Instead, they showed explicit and direct violence exposing a taboo subject in the often controlled public spaces.

Widewalls: The struggle between power and submission has been a recurring theme in your work. How do you think this reflects the architecture of contemporary society?

CP: I came to the subject through my personal experiences. In my 20's, during the '90s, I was addicted to heroin and got in deep trouble with the law. At that time, there were draconian penalties, and I was at the point where the three-possession felonies I was sentenced with really stigmatized me and created resentment towards authority and what I saw as broad social cruelty practiced on people under cover of bureaucracy. Being locked up and seeing people around me, being sentenced to long periods of time for petty offenses, deeply affected me. At that point in my life, I was culturally alienated, a total outsider. Eventually, I cleaned up, got past my legal problems, and re-joined society. That experience and the feeling of marginalization made me hyper-sensitive to how power is often unjust and can inhabit every aspect of our lives; interpersonal relationships, social norms, and even political actions



Left: Cleon Peterson - Brotherhood, 2022 / **Right:** Cleon Peterson - Carrot and Stick, The Shame Game, 2022

Mr. Sinister

Widewalls: Currently on view at albertz benda, your latest body of work explores mechanisms of power, fantasy and morality. In these works, two figures stand out - a ghostly clown and a figure in an authoritarian uniform. Can you tell us more about these characters?

CP: The Ghostly clown is a do-good moral character that always has a bright idea, the kind of unquestionably righteous idea that God is behind, which permits him to break whatever rules necessary to make his vision happen. He's a ghost because he is always conjuring up a story of the past which will serve him in making the world in his image. Being fantasy bound and both moral and immoral at the same time, he possesses the energy behind Jack Nickolson's quote, "I always tell some version of the truth" (*Something's Gotta Give*, 2003). The authoritarian character represents institutional, bureaucratic power. Both characters one another to meet their ends. These characters are at odds and simpatico simultaneously, needing one another to succeed in making the world in their vision. However, one more essential character is hiding behind a mask in the painting, *Listen You Fuckers*, 2022. He represents you and me, the modern individual and cynical voyeur.

Widewalls: These new paintings tackle violence in a less explicit way than your previous work, seemingly charting a new chapter in your practice. What has propelled this shift?

CP: My previous paintings were my version of realism; in those, I tried staying away from referents to keep the work visceral. My life and work was set in the physical world at that time. With today's pervasiveness of technology and media, our shared reality and much of our experiences have shifted into the fantasy realm. This work enters that fantasy realm. This space is much scarier than our traditional physical world because action and accountability are detached but profoundly influence our real lives. It's deeply concerning because I see a connection to my dark past once again. I was alienated from people and society by drugs and addiction. I can't help but feel like we're falling into this same kind of pit of alienation from one another, but this time through living these solitary technological existences.



Left:ftCleon Peterson - Listen You Fuckers, 2022 / **Right:** Cleon Peterson - The Voyeur, 2022

Tight Compositions

Widewalls: Your compositions are flat and clean, executed in a signature, limited color palette. How do you think these stylistic choices amplify your message?

CP: Flat and clean is the design training in me, always looking for the most direct mark to make or color to use. I love tight composition and form but will always be jealous of people who can let it go. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Whatever that means, haha.

Widewalls: What is next for you? Any future projects that you would like to share?

CP: I suppose I'll go home and do what I always do. Try and project where we'll be next year, sit down and make some sketches that don't make sense to me and spend the next six months trying to piece together the puzzle.