



The Fine, Feathered Hugh Hayden

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Interview



When we called artist Hugh Hayden, he was hosting his weekly feast at a temporary three-bedroom farmhouse in Scotland, where the Brooklyn-based sculpture and performance artist is in residency this summer. We were interrupted four times so he could open the door for artists overwhelmed by the smell of stuffed chickens roasting.

Hayden's current sculptures feature the mosses, flowers, and fabrics of the area, but his real obsession is feathers—so he's also in Scotland to hunt. It's hard to imagine someone so soft-spoken and genteel hunting for game, but to him, it makes his work more meaningful. "The difficulty and skill it takes to hit an unpredictable flying object quickly overcomes you, and it's more about the sport, taking it out in one fatal shot instead of wounding it," he says. "I not only used the birds' feathers, I also ate them; a couple are still in my freezer!"

Back in New York, Hayden is experienced at hunting balloons. At an installation at the Abrons Art Center, Hayden dressed in head to toe camouflage to shoot huge white balloons down from trees with a bow and arrow. The balloons exploded, dropping roasted quail onto the tables. He did it to make the guests rethink things they see and do all the time: birds and eating. When he was an architecture student at Cornell, Hayden hosted a dinner party where 21 guests sucked pureed macaroni and cheese and banana splits through crude snorkel-like tubes held in place by rubber bands. Their hands were tied to the backs of their chairs. It was fun, but not for everyone. One student had a traumatic experience and filed a complaint, but the administrators just dismissed it as an art happening—they had lived through the '60s.

Elsewhere in his work, Hayden's staples focus on the cultural conundrum of assimilation. Having trained himself to fit into competitive academic environments in which everyone else was white, it's personal. Every one of Hayden's pieces has figurative overtones you might miss. He created *New Native I* by layering onto a James Audubon painting in vivid washes of neon green feathers. His artwork is arrestingly beautiful, but impossibly complicated. Hayden works in tiny, clinical layers, and if you're not looking closely, you might miss his light touch. His subtlety is instruction: it's about the things we forget to observe.

Walk by his notable piece *Zelig*, and you'll assume it's just a couple of logs, but he's obsessively reinforced feathers from 40 grouse birds over them, and as you look closer, they warp into green and then blue. Once you uncover the disguise, you see that they seem to extend into infinity in every direction. Then there's his piece *Really Pretty*, which stars in MoMa PS1's Rockaway Beach show on June 29. It looks like camouflage from real trees, but there's a hidden Diet Coke logo you have to be looking for. He shows you something universal, and then he sneaks in another hidden identity, just assimilated enough so the viewer barely notices.

ASHLEY HOFFMAN: Hi, Hugh; how's the Scottish Highlands?

HUGH HAYDEN: It's great. I've been here about two weeks. It took me some time to acclimate to it. I'm about to start working on my project. I didn't bring materials because I wanted to source local materials.

HOFFMAN: What's the significance of the materials?

HAYDEN: I think feathers and hair and skin and tree bark and plants are these sort of organs of identification. For us, clothing isn't an organ, but for humans, it's often sort of this artificial organ that humans have created to cover the body. It functions how other things function for birds.

HOFFMAN: If humans have a choice about how they look, how did you decide how you were going to integrate what birds wear with what humans wear?

HAYDEN: There's this blur between the social and the natural environment. I think of feathers like pixels, in a way. Whether it's a fabric or canvas, I use fabrics that are endemic to this area. Then I use the mosses the flowers representative to the area, and use them to dye types of tweed and tartan. It shows that camouflage, and the blending happens for both.

HOFFMAN: That's how you created this immediate sense of a place.

HAYDEN: Right, and this place represents in turn a specific family of humans that have created that official identification system. I compare that to birds.

HOFFMAN: How are humans similar?

HAYDEN: They've evolved over time. They've balanced and they're blending in to the environment. We also do things to assimilate to our natural environment. It's about protection from predators. I made this allegory from this natural evolution of birds and nature to the social environment that humans create assimilation cultural into group, and I'm exploring those things.

HOFFMAN: You talk about allegorical meanings—how religious are you?

HAYDEN: I do consider myself religious. I'm Christian, but I don't go to church every day. I don't necessarily think I'm putting religious things out there.

HOFFMAN: You've talked about being a black guy hunting when you did the installation at Abrons Art Center. Why do think your art has gone to this realm of hunting?

HAYDEN: It's an evolutionary process. I started with feathers. Typically my sources were vendors, but I wanted to collect them myself. There's a significance. They're not falling out of the sky. It can add more meaning to the overall work, the story of how they were acquired.

HOFFMAN: Are you feathering yourself in the process?

HAYDEN: [laughs] It's in my hair. I'm constantly vacuuming myself. I had to wear a mask when I first started. I got a bad sinus infection because of the dust. Now I'm much more conscious of it.

C L E A R I N G

HOFFMAN: That's good. So for the MoMA show, describe your thinking about *Really Pretty*.

HAYDEN: It's RealTree camo fabric. It's a type of hunter's camo. I've taken the same fabric and cut the Diet Coke logo and attached on top of a bag. The swatch is a big piece of fabric with another piece of fabric that has the Diet Coke logo. So it's actually very hard to see. For me, it was about drinking that Coke and then adjusting to society to assimilate whether or not Diet Coke is healthy. It's interestingly autobiography. I had my own troubles with Coke Zero. At one point I was addicted to it. For two to three years, there were some days I never touched water. But I did Diet Coke because it's more recognizable. It's also the original.

HOFFMAN: So what do you think about assimilation?

HAYDEN: You have to have a balance. Looking at this analogy with birds, there's this balance to fitting in and continuing to progress. I think that's healthy, to take certain things from the whole, and then go back to yourself. It's a creative progressive society.

HOFFMAN: That's pretty universal or normcore symbol. What are you getting at with soda?

HAYDEN: There's this idea of Diet Coke helping you be thin. It's interesting. Some people prefer the taste of Diet Coke and it's artificial. The difference is that it can mean fitting in.

HOFFMAN: So you were a fiend. What happened when you couldn't get your hands on it?

HAYDEN: It was horrible in 2010, because I lived in Williamsburg and Greenpoint. Not every bodega would have a Coke Zero. I would go to three or four to try to get some. Now I don't need it. At that time, it was an issue for me, especially if I ate Chinese food. I got some of my friends into those habits as a very specific pattern.

HOFFMAN: Do you diet?

HAYDEN: I am very self-conscious about my weight. I go in and out of being in better shape.

HOFFMAN: How have you revealed different colors in different stages?

HAYDEN: I grew up in a fairly integrated social and academic setting that was pretty comfortable. Even in college, I've always been integrated situation. I went to an all-boy Jesuit school in Dallas. I was still this black guy in a predominantly white educational setting, but I've been in that setting my whole life. It was always this balance of blending in and standing out. I think all artists' work is autobiographical in that it reflects your own opinions and experience. I've just evolved, but I'm the same person I was growing up. In some people's eyes, I've worn many hats. I was in a fraternity, I was also an architect and in student publications, and I loved arts and crafts. Those social environments all reflect in the work.



HOFFMAN: What do you think it is about you in particular that ends up showing in your artwork?

HAYDEN: That I'm OCD. When they actually realize that *Zelig* has feathers on it, people think I'm crazy. They see how obsessive I am. For example, there's the *Untitled* trunk. It's the peacock adolescent on reinforced canvas. It looks like tree bark; as you get closer, it warps into a different sort of color grade, becoming green to blue. On the immediate surface it just looks like a tree, but then as you look closer developing into something more. It's the blending from my life that shows up in the work.

HOFFMAN: What do you think people learn about you when they get a closer look?

HAYDEN: I'm sure a lot of people would answer that differently. I would say people think I'm really joking with this, or that I'm oblivious, but I'm taking in observing and evaluating different reactions. The depth of something can be misleading. I tend to not seem like I'm observing, and I think that fools a lot of people. I remember when I was in second grade, this teacher Ms. Simpson would say, "Hugh, your grades are good but you need to stop talking." I can often multi-task. I have four conversations going on in one sentence.

HOFFMAN: Your pieces work in layers, too. A lot of your work is lightly fun, but it's also confrontational. How do you find a balance?

HAYDEN: For me it's about finding this sort of harmony that keeps things in balance... a careful understanding. In my work, the humor is subtle, that's something that's a part of me. I might have picked up on something that someone doesn't ponder. You make it so that it doesn't scream in your face. When I try to understand the inherent properties of something, I'm very interested in subtlety. That's probably my personality, like you asked. There's a hidden meaning, and I'm trying to understand it.

HOFFMAN: That Smooth party in Brooklyn led to an investigation because of that girl's medical history. How do you think today's audience approaches your interactive installations differently?

HAYDEN: At that time, the whole idea wasn't common. I didn't even know the term "art installation." People definitely expect it more now. I'm somewhat involved in a more creative circle, but they still think, "Oh, this is some sort of weird art?" A lot of it is, "Is this a joke, or is this art?"

HOFFMAN: When you're producing chaos in this scripted environment, what do you see as your role in the whole communal experience?

HAYDEN: I guess it's a test to see if it works on people.

HOFFMAN: What surprises you about the reactions you get?

HAYDEN: Well, sometimes people see the work completely differently. A lot of it exists in the subconscious. Someone might make a comment about something that could have been in my subconscious. So I love when people look at my work and think of ideas that I've thought about, underlying things. I enjoy learning from the readings.

HOFFMAN: What's the most important thing that your art could ever do? How would it work on someone?

HAYDEN: If I could change someone's perception in the end... a bird is so common. It's a big accomplishment to change someone's idea of something they take for granted.

HOFFMAN: Do you think that's actually something you could observe, changing someone's perception?

HAYDEN: A lot of times it's when they realize how something is done, but I like hiding the process in the work too that. I like that it's not clear how it's been created.

HOFFMAN: When you know what you're trying to say, does that make the mental struggle of the artwork harder or easier?

HAYDEN: When you're clear on your ideas, you have a much better understanding with each piece. You go through these moments when it becomes different. There's still a struggle that doesn't go away, but like what you asked before, I think with the puzzle of the art, there is satisfaction in just figuring that out.

HOFFMAN: One piece that's puzzling is that painting of the parakeet on top of the James Audubon painting from the 1800s—it's like a miniature sculpture. How does taking something like that on affect you emotionally?

HAYDEN: Yeah, it's one of my favorite pieces. I cried when I finished. I got this dead parakeet, and I was taking feathers off of it in batches—that sounds really gross. It actually it took me a month. Each feather was so small. It goes through three different color phases. One is all brown and white. It's on top of his painting, so it looks like the painting, but it has the slight neon green. It's so subtle.

HOFFMAN: How'd you get that painterly look without making it look like macaroni project?

HAYDEN: I use tweezers. With each feather, I take things off and redo it. With *Zelig*, the order didn't matter, but with this Audubon piece, each feather had to look like a painting, and I was trying to understand it's not truly decorative on a bird. I had to make the decorative individual item flamboyant in the work. I can only work on the piece three of our hours at a time because I was a little obsessive. I'll get frustrated.

HOFFMAN: What is the deeper feeling that this kind of work produces?

HAYDEN: Creation. I don't want to sound pompous talking about God and creation and evolution. It's about man's ability to subjugate nature, and the skill of being able to manipulate nature. That's a beautiful thing. Most people are appreciative of birds as these beautiful creatures. I'm trying to elevate the perception of something you've already thought of as one thing.