

INTERVIEW WITH PHIL FROST

Jimena López: Please introduce yourself. Tell me a bit about your childhood and background.

Phil Frost: I was born Philip Frost on February 7, 1973, in Jamestown, New York. I moved around Massachusetts and New York State a lot. I primarily grew up with my mom and younger sister, since my parents started divorcing in 1978.

When I was five, I got into bmx racing. My first actual bmx bike was a Raleigh Rampar. Prior to that I was obsessed with bmx bikes but didn't yet have one. Also, I was obsessed with a skinny plastic skateboard I had that I would tick-tack back and forth, initially between walls, and roll around on.

Around this age I helped out on a neighbor's asparagus farm in Hadley, Massachusetts, and was introduced to searching for arrow heads in the soil when it was freshly tilled. I lived nowhere near the coast, though I was obsessed with sharks and collecting sharks' teeth. My mom had an uncle who worked at the Cleveland Natural History Museum and he gave me a postcard of a prehistoric fish fossil head, *Dunkleosteus*, that I kept near me to constantly stare at. I always had it pinned to the wall and still have it.

I liked the Lone Ranger, Batman, Spiderman, the Incredible Hulk, the Inhumans and Forever People, the X-Men and the Fantastic Four, Woody Woodpecker, Tom and Jerry, Hong Kong Phooey, Scooby-Doo, and Mister Magoo.

I knocked my four front teeth out in a bmx bike accident in the fourth grade. After that I got into freestyle bmx. Spike Jonze taught me how to do airs to fakie on a quarter pipe at a Ron Wilkerson 2Hip clinic in 1984 or '85 in Scranton, Pennsylvania, that my mom drove me to. Around this time, I became more serious about skateboarding. On spring or summer break from school that same year, visiting my grandparents in Dayton, Ohio, I got coached how to drop in on a vert ramp half-pipe set up at the Kettering Hockey Arena by Monty Nolder. Bill Danforth was there too and taught me how to do lay-back power slides.

At the time we were living in Cooperstown, New York. I got really fascinated by the statistical numbers printed on the backs of baseball cards and began mimicking the signatures of players that I thought were cool. Cooperstown is where the Baseball Hall of Fame is located and, during induction week, I'd be allowed to line up at some early dark hour of the A. M. at the Fenimore House and wait in line for autographs. Each year I'd bring several baseballs and bats to collect as many signatures as I could. I remember Monte Irvin and Warren Spahn were so kind and both made big impressions on me. From this I became very interested in handwriting, penmanship, and scrawling.

I got sent to the Lake Delaware Military Boys Camp in Delhi, New York, in an attempt to keep me out of trouble over the summer breaks. Ironically it was there that I got introduced to graffiti in black books. I found being there really overwhelming without a bmx bike or skateboard. I ran away by planning with another camper for weeks prior and quietly staying awake until after midnight one night and tiptoeing off of the campus to get past the trees and then hiking through the mountainous woods for hours to get to the main road, which we then continued along for miles before getting caught. I did this twice, the first time with a camp mate and the next time alone.

After this second time running away from military camp, a dear friend of my mom's saw a flyer posted for a skateboard camp held at the roller rink in the mall nearby the town of Hadley, Massachusetts, where we once had lived. She offered to enroll me in it. This led to me getting sponsored by the shop Interskate 91 that hosted the camp, along with Cory Shaw, Dag Yngvesson, Wesley VaanAnen, and Jimmy Gagne. Just after this I entered Guilderland High School and lived on the outskirts of town in Albany, New York. Here I got completely into skateboarding. I would skate downtown everyday with Chris Hacker, Blake Hannan, Nick Hartman, Johnny Schillereff, Beau Connelly, Kenny Reed, Jeff Toma, Carl Schultz, Mark Cheng, Joey Vanduser, and so many others.

I was fourteen when my big brother type of a friend that I skated often with, Blake Hannan, started going to college at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, New Jersey, and my mom would let me go to stay with him for long weekends and the several longer seven- to ten-day school breaks that were approximately each quarter. This is when I got to begin skating in New York City and the Brooklyn Banks. Here, through Blake, I met Alyasha Owerka-Moore and Jeremy Henderson, who both made a big impact on me creatively. These were such formidable moments for me.

Around the time I turned sixteen, I broke my wrist and found by X-ray that I had broken it many times prior, and subsequently wore a forearm and wrist cast for the next twenty-seven months. Initially and for the duration of wearing the cast, despite being warned not to, I continued to skateboard consistently. Soon after having it removed—at eighteen years old—is when I began to transition from skateboarding to painting. My mom was notified, amidst the beginning of my senior year of high school, that in order for me to graduate I needed to earn a certain amount of additional scholastic credits that could only be acquired by being placed in an Advanced Independent Study art and math program and, even so, I needed to average above an A-grade point for the year. I excelled in both independent study programs and met the grade-point-average and graduation requirements. The art program had specific criteria to accomplish independently, such as teaching oneself without instruction how to stretch a canvas, make oil paintings, advanced figure drawing, as well as written reports on various topics of art history. When I was eighteen and graduated, I soon after moved on my own to Astoria L.I.C., Queens.

JL: When did you start painting?

PF: From an early age I was interested in drawing. I created many characters that I would draw on paper. A lot of doodling of things that inspired me, such as the ripple of grey found in Reed Richards' hair of the Fantastic Four, Batman's cowl, bmx and skateboarding logos such as Hutch, Oakley, Rockville bmx, Logan Earth Ski, Dogtown, Rat Bones, and Alva. I began painting midway through my senior year of high school in this Independent Study Program that I mentioned. At a local yard sale early in the spring of that year, I found a brown paper bag for twenty-five cents filled with partially used oil paints and a copy of the book *Francis Bacon Interviews* with David Sylvester. Reading this book over and over is what triggered my resulting passion to paint. When I graduated high school, [our family's] means had decided for me that attending college wasn't an option that I could afford. I decided on my own that immersing myself in attending museums and spending time in libraries with books is how I would learn more about the arts that fascinated me. I moved to New York City, finding union jobs working on trucks to get by. With all of my other time, I pursued my interest in painting.

I would pick dumpsters for materials found discarded at construction sites. On a near daily basis, I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a dime—as they had a policy to pay what one wants or can afford—and would stare for hours at all sorts of works and at times sit and draw, surrounded by it, in pocket paper tablets.

JL: Does visual information remain a primary source of meaning?

PF: I am a very visual person. I often stare intently at things that catch my eye and ponder them deeply. I retain images in my memory and can get lost with creating ideas with them in my imagination. Color is very fascinating to me. I like being encompassed by its power and experimenting with ways that different colors' characteristics can relate to one another.

JL: What interests you? Are you interested in portraiture? Do you look at or appreciate any other artists?

PF: In an aspect of my work, I am creating a sort of portraiture based on perception. I am interested with faces and places and how to reconnect the traces of memory to reality again by gesturally committing them to surface and building an image out of this inner dialogue. I am very intrigued by classical busts and how they communicate a striking, solitary power. Another aspect of my work has been making sense of an ongoing counting and accounting of things that are going on around me through a sort of intuitive mathematics that I am taken with, plotting it into the work and in relation to the portraits I am capturing.

I am drawn to things in my daily life as I go about it. Simple textures of broken bits and pieces of debris along a curbside, or actual objects, which are often outmoded or found out of place. I make use of them as a way to incorporate the passage of experience and thereby charting it into my work. The melding of these complementary aspects has formed the greater degree of what my work has become.

Artists that I admire are Alberto Giacometti, Francis Bacon, Georges Rouault, John Cage, Joan Miró, Jean Arp, Joseph Cornell, Jackson Pollock, Willem DeKooning, Stuart Davis, Yves Klein, Jean Dubuffet, Paul Klee, Kurt Schwitters, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, James Ensor, Robert Rauschenberg, Louise Nevelson, Naum Gabo, J. M. W. Turner, Samuel Dirksz van Hoogstraten, El Greco, Matthias Grünewald, Caravaggio, Rembrandt, Leonardo da Vinci, Jack Kirby, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Lee Quinones, Futura2000, Wes Humpston, Craig Stecyk, Pushead, Walter Lantz, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Tony Cragg, Richard Long and I'm particularly keen on Dada, the Italian Futurists and Arte Povera art movements.

JL: Do you ever think of Jasper Johns, Rauschenberg, Polke, Duchamp as a source of inspiration. I am only asking because I can see a nod to them by the use of found objects, mattresses, depictions of the American flag...

PF: Sure, I do find them fascinating. I don't find them as inspiration but rather as figures who I can greatly admire or, through working, have found I can identify with.

JL: How do you determine what goes on a canvas?

PF: Initially I am driven by impulsive ideas that resonate through my mood and in relation to events surrounding me.

JL: I believe that each new move follows from what is already on the canvas; what else is it determined by?

PF: Often it is determined by temperament and available materials.

JL: The elongated figures—are they made automatically? How are they made? Are you conscious of the different ways in which you are making them?

PF: They are pronounced through my relating the traces of memory and scrutinized ideas that I am fixated on and making sense of those things impulsively in a moment of inspirational commitment.

JL: When do you know a painting is finished? How long do you usually take to finish one painting? Let's say, of medium size?

PF: By the nature of how my work is created, it seems futile to try and project a timeline. My work can take a long while to communicate properly and is an intuitive process that I sense my way through. I finish work by arriving at an inner sensibility that appears and reveals itself within me when it is due.

JL: I see that your last works do not have a date. How long have you been working on them?

PF: All of my work is dated when it is finished or, at times, noted on the verso in stages as it progresses. My most recently released body of works are signed and dated 2015–2021, and list Helderberg Escarpment, New York, Falls Village, Connecticut, and Gulf Coast, Florida, as the three locations where I painted them.

JL: Are you concerned with the result? Do you think of what you would like to achieve when somebody looks at your work?

PF: Those are two different concepts. Yes, I am concerned with the result of the painting in so much as I am actually intuitively pursuing it. I am searching to cease upon the arrival of a certain inner stillness resonating. My work is the result of a mostly solitary dialogue of manifesting gestural results of inner impressions and charting inner quickenings, as a way of committing them into being a resulting fact of the matter. Though how one perceives my work is entirely up to them.

JL: Do you simply want to make it interesting to look at? Or do you want to make people think?

PF: I personally am not concerned with either.

JL: They are very conceptual and three-dimensional. I look at your paintings, I feel there are references there—American flag, newspaper, etc.—and the combination of them with the white elongated faces, gives you the sense that something important is happening or has happened.

PF: That is possibly because you may actually be viewing them in some way similar to how I have gone about creating them. The objects and materials they are created with are gathered as being important to the moments of time, recollection of experience or events and places where they have been created.

JL: By placing multiple portraits are you trying to convey your feelings or are you interested in the story-telling aspect?

PF: My work is not intended as being illustrative nor rendering a narrative but rather to commit that which resonates within me as testament.

JL: Society, politics, philosophy, history, religion—are they subjects that interest you?

PF: Yes and no.

JL: You use many materials for your paintings. What are they? Where do you find them?

PF: They are fragments of reality gathered along the passage of experience and worked into being part of an image.

JL: We viewers are left free to imagine. The mood conveyed responds to our own personalities, our feelings, the questions we pose to the works. There is a need for the viewers to acquire individual insight which demands time and attention as we must mature on a collective human level.

PF: Indeed.

JL: Is there a logical procedure you follow?

PF: Happenstance, as it flows.

JL: Talk to me about how you start painting? Do you follow a procedure? What events inspire you?

PF: I make panels to stretch canvases or linens over. I collect old doors as a metaphorical surface to paint upon. I find inspiring objects or pieces of discarded materials or debris that make sense to me and allow me to visualize a way to pronounce my experience into work.

JL: Do you rather work alone?

PF: I do not prefer, but I am extremely comfortable with myself and somehow have arrived at spending most of my time in life in solitary experience. If I could choose, I prefer being near woman, though somehow almost never am. There are aspects of my work that require the help of others to accomplish in a more timely manner, in keeping with timelines of accommodation.

JL: You once mentioned poetry, music?

PF: My work itself is a sort of physical and visual poetry. As a young person I was really drawn to and related strongly to New York hardcore music, as well as reggae and rap music. As I have grown older, I have seemingly grown out of music in many ways, especially in relation to my own work. Where it once used to help me spend great lengths of time alone, it now seems to get in the way of it and, though I still appreciate those forms of music, I rarely listen to them while working. It interferes with my thinking creatively and focus in a way that I find unnerving. I have, however, developed a strong inclination towards classical music and often listen to it softly in the background when I am not working or when I am doing something inconsequential of deep thought to my work.

JL: I always tend to think that your paintings provoke a sense of controversy or doubt. On the one hand, terror/horror, reinforced by the repetition of the elongated faces. On the other hand, they convey innocence and shyness, as they are hidden beneath the vivid layers of colors. Could you elaborate further?

PF: I could say that the eyes of my work seem to stare, an intent brooding pensiveness at times, a soul-searching gaze, and a stern reticence, though how you have referenced controversy or doubt, and terror or horror does not resonate with me or factor into how I perceive my work.

JL: By the use of white pigment, you are in a way strengthening the painting, but at the same time you are moving towards a greater complexity. You are in a way moving towards a negative space, are you trying to explore that area?

PF: Yes, negative space is very interesting to me. I am, through the use of white, doing several things. In using white I am interpreting ideas into what becomes a reductive mathematical codex and, in doing so, I am interested in how the blank boldness of white gesturally cuts through texture and color itself to create an entirely different idea of spatial significance in relation to the work as a whole and also in relation to it as any given aspect of or shape of itself that is then rendered into being as a result.

JL: What provokes you to move toward one direction or another? The use of white layers is produced by a feeling?

PF: Yeah, there is a fleeting sense I am moving in on. Tracing or tracking it into being. Working to materialize an invisible sense from within into a visible reality that is left behind and monumentalized.

JL: I could even say that the faces resemble primitive masks and thus go back in history. Are you trying to convey various meanings? Is there a spiritual approach here? Please correct me if not.

PF: I am not consciously attempting to convey meaning or characterize a resemblance of anything that was or is or create any new sort of mask. I am finding ways to imbue my own sense of things and relate that overall sense of self to others by creating it into something that then is, and thereafter giving it to the world to relate to it or not.

JL: Expression is a recurring theme. Is it your subconscious? Or are you aware of the feeling you are trying to convey in that specific moment?

PF: My subconscious is constantly engaged in my work as I am creating it. Energies and moments are fleeting and, through work, I attempt to accurately trap them or to manifest something of their swift transient nature into something tangible.

JL: How are your paintings constructed? Layers of information—elements familiar to us from the everyday, physical works around us.

PF: Life is lived in layers of perceiving information and observation. My paintings are constructed by these elements converging and intersecting one another.

JL: Although there is a recognizable figurative motif, the closer we are to the image, an abstract pattern is formed.

PF: Within my work, I carry out many several concepts and at times pronounce what goes on and becomes a layering thereof: Perceptive portraiture, intuitive mathematics, and to chart the flux of moments through found materials gathered in experience. Synthesizing the pulsing of inner quickenings pronounced through a lingual tonguing of nonsensical grammatical and sensed or intended numerical constructs into a web of plotted reductive information coinciding with portraiture formed of lasting impressions and traces of inner dialogue and experience.

JL: The captivating colors and shape formation within the overwhelming canvas emerge and disappear. As we immerse ourselves in their depths, new forms move to be greeted and confronted by imaginary faces.

PF: Thank you. I am grateful to find that you can delve into them like that.

JL: What is most amazing is that your work is so new and different from what I have seen before. You create your own language in such a distinctive and creative style. There is a sense of the roughness of the streets in your paintings—we can even mention graffiti—but at the same time, it is executed in a very delicate and sophisticated manner.

PF: I do what I do as my work comes through me and it appears as it does when I do.

JL: Do you ever think of your works as objects?

PF: Yes, my works are indeed objects.

JL: Are your works representative of your personality and self-understanding as an artist?

PF: I can only imagine that as my works have emerged through my own charted gesture of experience that my personality must be imbued and represented within them.