



The Beauty of Abstraction

Artist Jesse Draxler discusses mutating the human form and questioning the known

Written by Kyle Fitzpatrick / March 13, 2019

Courtesy Jesse Draxler

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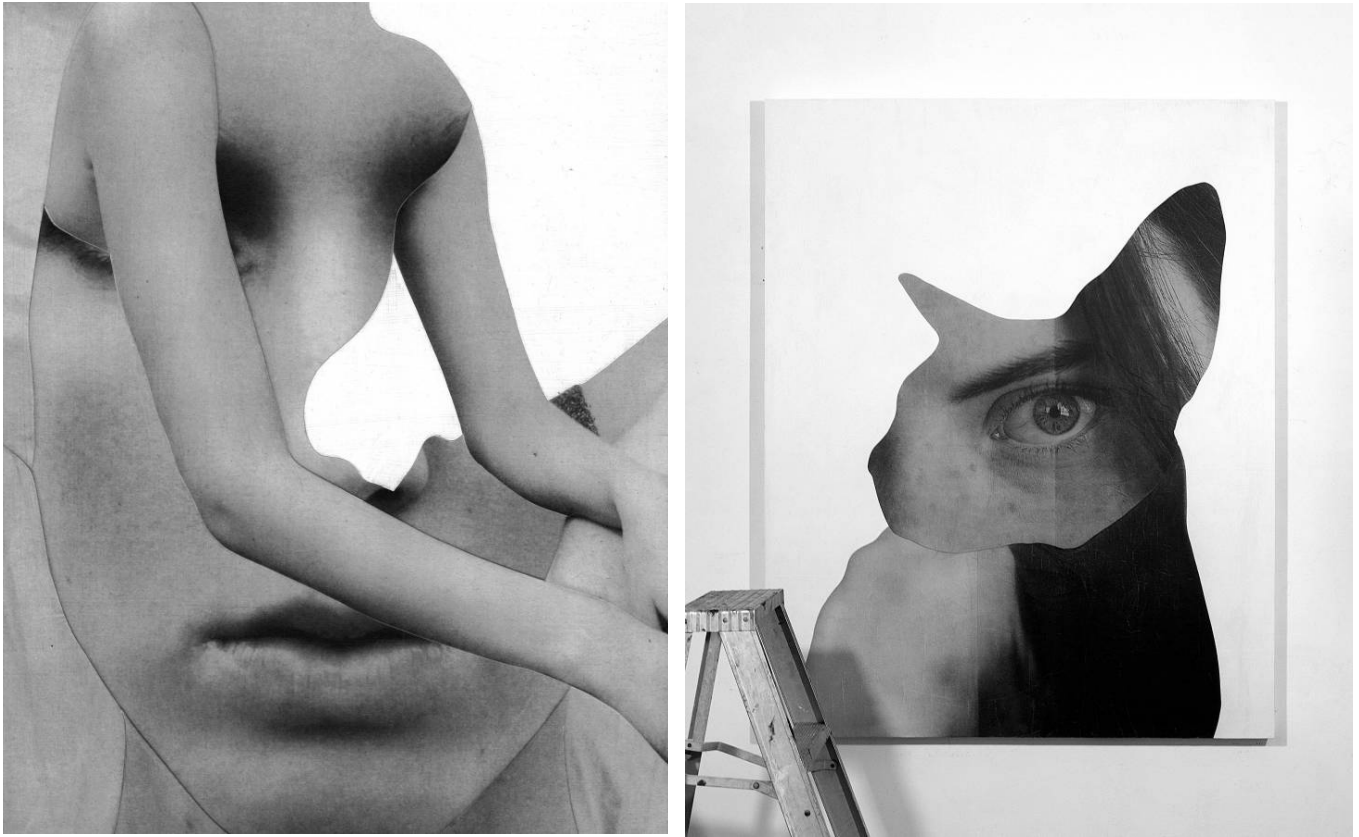
To encounter the work of artist Jesse Draxler is to encounter the known unknown. Draxler creates and uses the human form, a touchstone to ground the eye, to reveal that all that you are looking at is not what it seems.

His signature is to paint and collage faces over faces, limbs over limbs, all to draw a viewer in while pushing them out. What you see in his creations is the human abstract, a person mid-question conveyed through various shades of black, white and all the grays in between. Everything is abstracted just slightly, just enough to unnerve and entrance—and he isn't quite sure why.

“This is a question I ask myself often,” the Los Angeles dweller responds when I ask him about the inspiration behind this very specific technique. “I never have an answer that satisfies me.” The key to his making lies in universality, in working from the body out, using the self to create other selves: he brings humans to the human by way of the inhuman. “Everyone has a body,” he explains. “If you're reading this you have a body...probably. So, when you abstract or deform the body, it is an immediate signifier. I appreciate that immediateness.”

He hypothesizes that consistently breaking down an otherwise natural form derives from his tendency to keep his practice “in progress” instead of managing his work, a creative act that can numb both viewer and artist alike—one that can easily be described as existential. Draxler's work feels as if his subjects are slowly focusing and refocusing, trying to become clearer.

He constantly asks himself, “What does the viewer think they know?” And then he works to test that theory, letting images and ideas come to him. “My strengths lie more in chance, or creating situations for things to play out,” he explains. Such an approach—to let the future of each work, and his career, unfold naturally—has proven successful enough. Last year's commissions included MCQ for Alexander McQueen, The Atlantic and The New York Times.



This is a process of timing, reacting versus acting, of playing things as they lay. Unsurprisingly, his dark, mysterious palette has had a similar path: he's been distilling a style over time—and doing what is natural for him. “I went through a long phase of wanting to shed anything that was not essential, both in my life and in my work, not that there's any difference,” he says. “I'm also color blind/color deficient so it felt pretty natural. It never felt like a big decision I was making.”

“Color is creeping its way back into my work though,” Draxler says. “Very slowly and subtly...I'm looking forward to seeing where that continues to go, if anywhere.”

Like color, Draxler's inspirations and collaborations seem to overlap in an interesting way. A great example of this is the work of Franz Kafka, a legendary existentialist who inspires Draxler with the fusion of the real and the surreal to comment on the human condition (anxiety, self-knowledge, etc). Kafka has no doubt inspired Draxler's work and then he was called upon to commission reproduced covers of the author's most beloved works. “Being inspired by Kafka and then having my work in turn used to represent his work is one of the more satisfying things when it comes to commissions,” he says.

“Music and books both inform my work quite a bit. I intake a lot of both. I feel fortunate that my work is able to be used across a wide breadth of subjects and mediums because, much like my practice, my tastes are very broad.” Even when Draxler is approaching something literal like the work of Kafka, his tendency toward abstraction remains. Such is the appeal of abstracting in general since it forces to viewer to engage and heightens perception.

“Abstraction represents a situation in a much more visceral way than what would be considered a real representation,” he explains. “I'm much more drawn to work that makes me feel something than recognizing the likeness of something else. Abstraction is the language of the unconscious, the inner-verse, the imagination—realities of their own that I know at least I spend most of my time within.”

“Those worlds can be more real to me than what is sometimes referred to as consensus reality,” he says.