



Artist Spotlight: Interview with JJ Cromer

Self-taught artist *JJ Cromer* drew Audubon birds and Charlie Brown as a child, but it wasn't until he married did he pick up a pen to draw passionately and professionally and he hasn't looked back since. Bursting with color and minute details, Cromer's work is weave of mediums that create intricate eye-catching illustrations. We had the pleasure of interviewing Cromer, where he dished about his work and his life. Read on...

Where did you grow up? and where do you currently reside?

I grew up in Tazewell, Virginia. It's a small town in the southwest corner of the state. My wife and I have been traveling around for school and work, but we're back in Virginia, not too far from where I grew up. We live on a farm, in the mountains. We're keeping bees, and we've been planting apple trees, Asian pears, pawpaws, blueberries, plums, cherries . . . It's good to be home!



Ductshaha

What influenced you as a child?

Curiosity and stubbornness mostly. And my parents. I had very supportive parents. They both taught science in the public schools, and they valued creativity and independent thinking.

What was the first thing you remember drawing as a child?

I was named after John James Audubon. My mother's always been a devoted bird watcher. As a child I loved looking at reproductions of Audubon's work. I was a nerdy little kid who loved the natural world. We had a couple of books that weren't quite double-elephant-folio-size, more single-sheep-folio-size. Still a lot of fun to look through. I copied every single page, many times. I was also a Charles Schulz fan. The earliest drawings I remember were mash-ups of Peanuts characters with Audubon's birds and animals.



No Sound of an Explosion Was Heard

You have M.A. in English and B.A. in History...are you a self taught artist? (Please explain how you came to realize you wanted to be an artist.)

I don't have art training. I'm a librarian by training. The need to make art blindsided me. I started drawing shortly after Mary and I got married in 1998. I've drawn probably ever day since then. I think I tapped an obsessive vein. If I have to choose a label, I guess "self-taught" fits.

Your paintings have a doodle-like quality about them, do you have a set "design" in mind when starting a painting – or does it take on a life of it's own?

Any given piece begins with a shell, just an outline of the drawing's central forms. From there I fill it in. The filling-in process is "doodly," I guess. "Intuitive" may also describe it. I certainly love filling up space with color and shapes, and I welcome mistakes. I integrate them happily. In both subject matter and the way I approach technique, I like art making best when my hand just does its thing and my mind is elsewhere. Recently as I draw I've been listening to audiobooks.



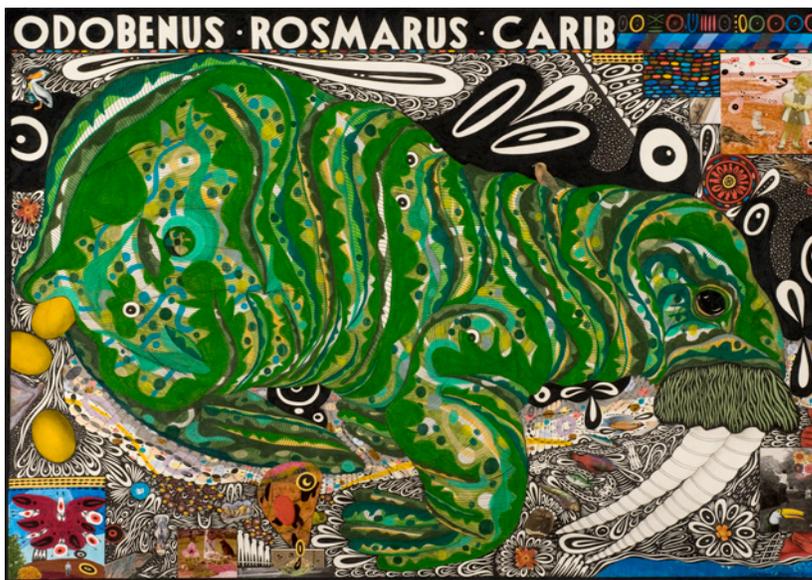
Something Meteorological About Us

Where do your ideas come from? Describe your creative process when getting ready to start on a piece.

It's a stew of observations about the world and my own psychological muck. The current piece is also always directly related to its predecessor. Any time I'm working on a drawing I'm always looking for a loose thread I can follow in a subsequent piece. Ideally I want every drawing to have lots of loose threads.

In The Caribbean Walrus – what mediums did you use?

Ink, colored pencil, acrylic, and collage. I used two kinds of collage elements: those I've created myself (old pieces cut up and reused, as well as new pieces created specifically for the piece) and found sources (recently old family photographs, college yearbooks from the 1930s, my childhood stamp collection, and science books for children from the 1960s and 1970s).



The Caribbean Walrus

Which is your favorite piece you have done and why?

I don't have one. I enjoy looking at older work to pick up where I left off or to reuse something for a new piece. I'm always looking for those loose threads.



Wish I Knew

**How long did it take you to complete An Institutional Stronghold?
Can you explain this piece? And...are those teeth depicted?**

Three weeks or so.



An Institutional Stronghold

I can't explain the piece. In making art (and looking at art) I value ambiguity, intuition, skepticism, mystery, play . . . As a librarian I can hand out explanations all day; as an artist I'm a little cagier.

Regarding the "teeth" figures: I've called them Asterisk or Asterisk Man (as in "Piltdown Man" or "Nebraska Man"). They could be teeth, or ghosts, maybe not. I know some things about them. They're flat as flounders. They appear to be armless, but they do in fact have arms. The Asterisk are either observers, their arms held insouciantly behind their backs. Or they're prisoners, their arms bound behind their backs. I never know which one they are from piece to piece, or even within the same piece. I don't know. I do know they have arms, and probably hands; I'm not sure how many fingers. They don't have feet. They're sexless too. I'm not sure how they reproduce, though I've been told transdifferentiation has something to do with it.



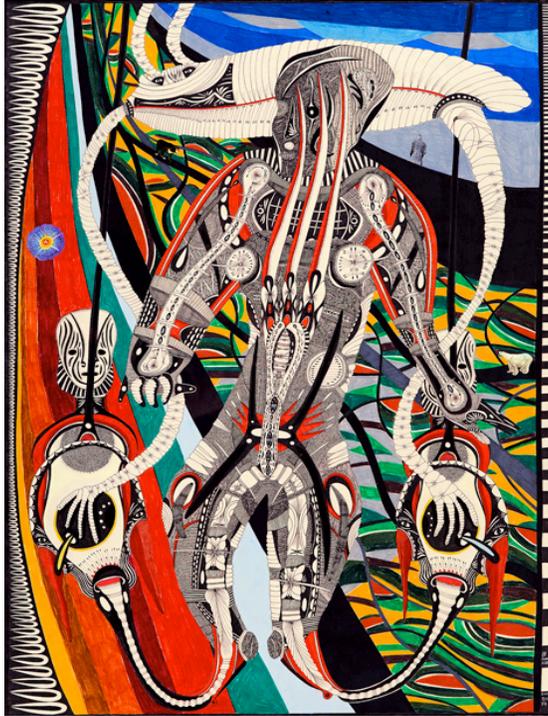
Asterisk Man

Who are your favorite artists?

Mose Tolliver, David Shrigley, Malcolm Mckesson, Max Ernst, Albert Louden, Chris Hipkiss, Francois Burland, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, Domenico Zindato, Christine Sefolosa, Philip Guston, Francis Picabia, Frida Kahlo, Saul Steinberg, Walker Evans, Rafael Ferrer, Tony Fitzpatrick, Jim Nutt, James Ensor, Kara Walker, Jon Serl, Raymond Pettibon, David Humphrey, Arturo Herrera, Jim Woodring, many many . . .

If you could spend the day with any artist living or dead, who would it be? What would hope to gain from the experience?

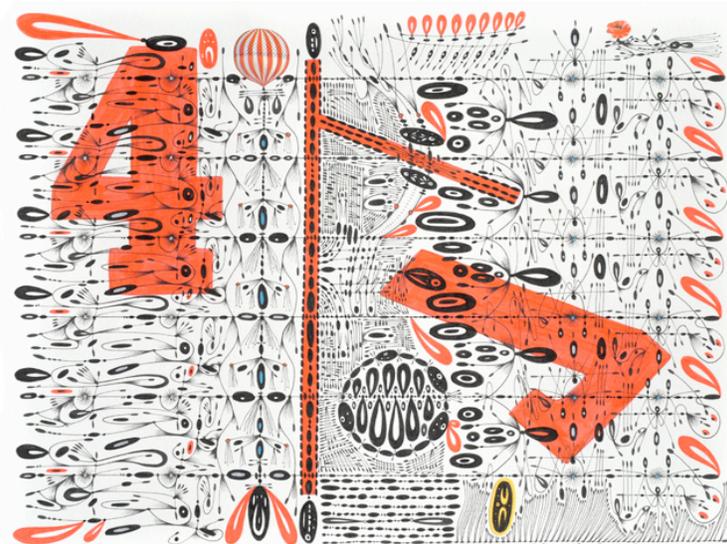
17,300 years ago in Lascaux. To be at the beginning . . . and maybe pick up some tips on hunting mammoth!



Trunks and Suitcases Belong to Engal

What is the most interesting critique you've heard or read about your artwork?

A couple years ago [Gerry Mak at Lost at E Minor](#) said, "If [Joan Miro](#) had spent time in Africa and set up shop in rural New Jersey, his work might look something like [Cromer's](#)." Good golly. If Mak's still selling, I'm buying. I'll take that comment any day.



Loenograph 17

What is your greatest ambition as an artist?

To keep working. Maybe find a cave on the property somewhere.

Describe yourself in 5 words.

I had to ask my wife. She gave me five words: "Pretty much Scorpio straight up."

What was the last book you read?

The Troubled Man by Henning Mankell

What are you currently working on?

Little drawings, lots of little drawings.

Do you have any upcoming shows?

I have work in the current show at the American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore. "All Things Round" will be up until September 2012.

What type of advice would you give to future budding artists?

I'm not really one to give advice. If I were cornered though I'd say, "Life is zooming by. Stop talking to me and get to work."

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