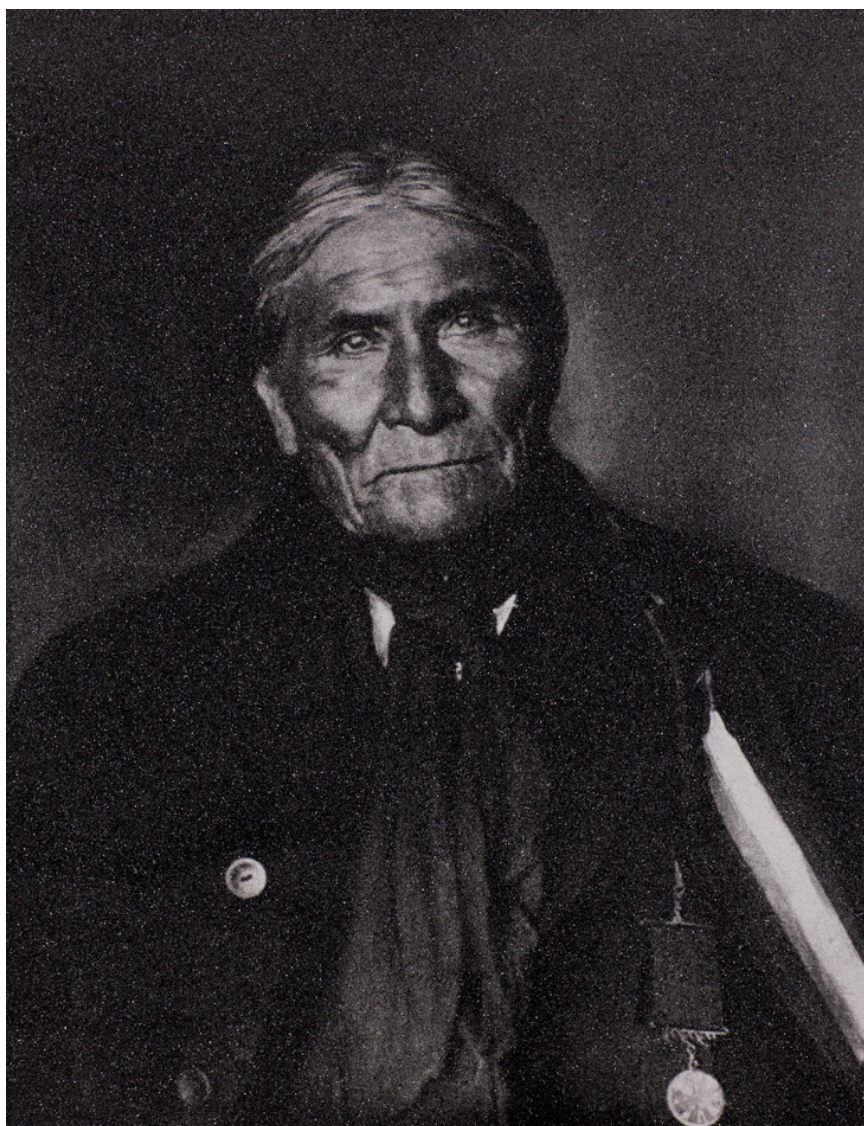


Noah Becker's

# WHITEHOT MAGAZINE

of contemporary art

## 5 MINUTES OR 50 YEARS: THE WORK AND PRACTICE OF RUSSELL YOUNG



*APACHE CHIEF - GERONIMO, 2009, acrylic paint, enamel and diamond dust screen print on linen,  
62 x 48 inches*

By **COLTER RULAND** February, 2019

Art—what it does and how it moves us—can be a difficult thing to articulate, as artist [Russell Young](#) and I soon learn when speaking with one another. “It’s an interesting thing being an artist,” Young tells me. “It’s full of contradictions. You have to do what you

feel like doing.” It is that feeling, more like an intuition, that is often difficult to explain. Young and I both sometimes struggle to find the exact word to translate the visual experience of his work, of art in general, and what it means to create. Maybe that is the great trick of art, making us believe that there is meaning behind it, or, to be more precise, that meaning must be articulated rather than felt. Young’s work, rooted in the physical processes of screen printing and experimentation, evokes and accentuates awe, glamor, grit, and mood rather than filtering them through commentary. In other words, Young is attempting something more primal, a language of the body, of movement and sensation.



*AUDREY HEPBURN, 2017, hand pulled acrylic, enamel screen print and diamond dust on linen, 70 x*

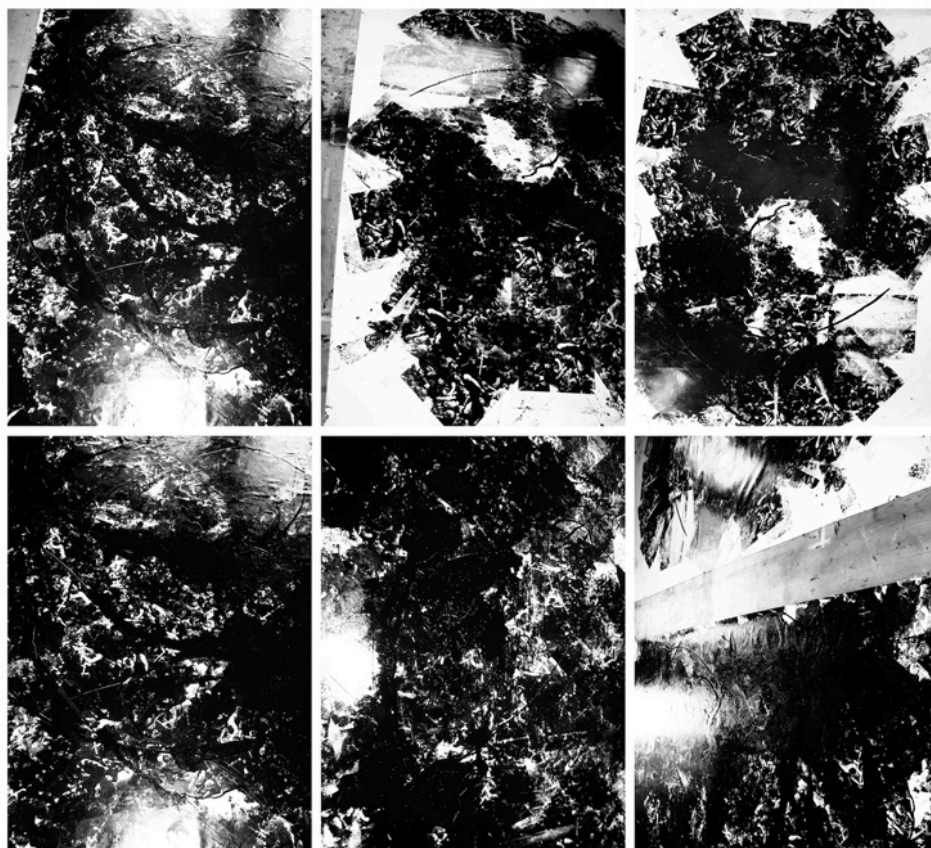
While we may be lacking in words to describe artistic experience, there is no shortage of them to describe Young. Two words he provides for himself are “feral” and “nonchalance,” which, when getting to know him, couldn’t be more accurate. He tells me stories about

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surfing on the California coast during storms when no one else is around, about hiking in the mountains for twenty-four hours or swimming in the ocean to gaze at a full moon, about using his own blood in his work. He tells me other stories about surviving the H1N1 virus, being in a coma, and having to relearn to read and write again. Young is a like a wild creature, but that is what is so captivating about him: a kind of weathered charisma.

Young grew up in Northern England. He describes it as brutal and grey in all things from the weather to the food to the constant fights that loomed around him. It might rain for a month, not very hard, but like a consistent misery. He remembers nights when, despite the streetlights, it seemed to grow only darker and darker. There was a pervading “absence of light.” There were no real prospects other than working in the factories, and, as a creative person, the environment threatened to stifle him. “Everybody told me why I couldn’t do something,” says Young, and ever since his life has been a dogged reaction to what is considered possible.



*HELTER SKELTER, 2014*

Of his time in Northern England, Young credits two achievements: a unquestionable willpower and a sardonic sense of humor that comes right from Liverpool. These two elements shape some of his best work, work that is ironically so demanding and physical behind-the-scenes despite the polished, celebrity subject matter. Screen printing is a taxing process, especially with the size of some of Young's pieces. It often takes a team to press, stretch, and scrape the paints onto the screen. The pigments used are mixed from scratch and sourced from a master in Florence. Diamond dust is pulverized. A piece might take three to four hours of pure concentration of both mind and body, and by the time it's over, Young might even fall to the floor in exhaustion. "You almost feel like you don't breathe during that time." Sometimes viewers ask him how long it took to create one of his pieces, and he responds with that slight bite: "Well, it takes five minutes or fifty years."

Young's work is driven by the inexplicable reactions between body, intuition, and technique. When screen printing, Young says, "It stops becoming an image and the screen becomes like a paint brush. Even when I'm doing a portrait, I stop looking at the images and start looking at how the colors and the inks react with each other." The hands-on approach that Young champions in his work isn't just cathartic for him as a self-described physical and masculine being, it also adds dimension. We've all seen Audrey Hepburn before, but we haven't seen her the way Young sees her, dazzling within diamond dust, screen printed on linen, in a shade of pink that feels almost newly discovered.

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*TEXAS COWBOY, 2018, Hand-pulled acrylic paint and oil-based ink screen print on linen, 105 x 71 in*

In many ways, Young is exploring fame, too. To be honest, I'm more interested in those who are in proximity to fame rather than those who are famous, and Young has been within that proximity throughout his decorated career. As a photographer, he worked with the likes of George Michael, New Order, and Björk. His clientele for his work now includes global stars like Drake, who recently showed off one of Young's pieces on Instagram. If anyone can namedrop, it's Young, and yet he speaks of celebrity with nuance.

While Young's work focuses on celebrities from the past, he still sees them as beacons of some quality sorely missing from today. "There is a quality about them that is different, that they are not like the rest of us," says Young. "It takes a tremendous amount of hours to be that talented. They have to have the mental talent, they have to have a lot of luck, and then

they have to have this work ethic. Most people don't do all those things...Now we get to today where you get to be famous for being famous." It's not that Young is being nostalgic, if anything he sees fame today as its own kind of artform. "They are relentless in their pursuit," he says, perhaps recognizing a familiar tenacity.

But Young's work is not necessarily interested in celebrity itself but in how time edits celebrity. In his series "This Land is My Land," he creates screen printings of actual Native American chiefs glittering with diamond dust alongside still images of cowboys from American movies. There is something deeply sarcastic about it. "That to me is quite humorous," he says, referring to the way he is almost reappropriating Hollywood "glitter and glam" from fake cowboys and giving it back to true Native Americans. Perhaps being an outsider now living in America has given Young a unique lens through which to exacerbate or critique American myths.



*THIS IS YOUR LAND, 2018 Hand-pulled acrylic paint and oil-based ink screen print on linen 44 x 36*

If anything, Young is trying to get us to slow down. His work, as tiring and time consuming as it can be to produce, results in the slowing of time free from distractions. “There’s not a lot I can do to stop a nuclear war,” Young says, perhaps abruptly. Of course, he is right, but he is not a defeatist. Young has stopped reading and watching the news altogether, hoping to also be free of distractions beyond his control. “It’s probably one of the best things I’ve done for myself creatively,” he says. While he has been accused of having his head in the sand, I find Young to be doing something quite radical. Over the past few years, I’ve heard artists of every kind publicly questioning the point of art when so many terrible things are occurring throughout the world. The only options then are either to admit defeat and accept that art has no tangible power or to create art that overtly enters political discourse. Young has opted for a third option: to create art despite the climate. He is not disengaging from the world, he is bypassing its most intrusive aspects. He is championing creativity that is not molded by our news or politicians, a creativity that instead circumvents these intrusions. Now, he sees so much more time for work and for his life. In many ways, he is reliving his time growing up in Northern England, a time he recalls as a “seed growing amongst concrete.” So too does his work grow amongst the concrete of cultural hysteria.

Young indeed has a feral heart. He is reminding us not only what it means to be an artist but also what it means to be a human being, perhaps even what it means to be an animal, an animal both beautiful and untamed. Young has made the long trek into the primal but majestic ocean, paying no mind to what might be happening on the shores he has left behind, and yet, floating atop the currents, it is as if he is waiting for us all to swim out and join him. **WM**