



Artist Profile :: Thomas Lawson  
Phyllis Lally



As a newcomer to the New York City art scene in the mid-1970's, Scottish artist Thomas Lawson made his entrance during a period of transition and upheaval in the world of contemporary art. Like many of his avant-garde contemporaries, Lawson championed painting as the ultimate purveyor of social meaning, a tool to confront the explosive political and social climate of the decade. "The appropriation of painting as a subversive method," wrote Lawson in his 1981 seminal statement in *Artforum*, "allows one to place critical aesthetic activity at

the center of the marketplace, where it can cause the most trouble.”

And as it turns out, time has done little to weaken the power of representation in Lawson’s current work.



In his newest large-scale paintings and drawings featured in his “New World” exhibition at [PARTICIPANT INC](#) in New York City, Thomas Lawson fuses art historical references with a bold experimental aesthetic that turns conventional portraiture on its head. In one of his busier works entitled “Doubt,” Lawson reconfigures the spatial composition of his canvas by using psychedelic patternings and palettes to blur the foreground and background of his work. Working in the vein of Cubism, his work mesmerizes and nearly consumes the viewer.

While Lawson traces the life-size figures of his paintings and drawings to individual photographs he took of young subjects in Los Angeles and New York, he attributes his deeper inspiration to the annals of art history, citing a late eighteenth-century fresco of Giandomenico Tiepolo that features a crowd of spectators turned away from the viewer. The anonymity associated with these backside “portraits” lends a universal quality to Lawson’s work that speaks directly to viewers, who stand curiously behind his towering florescent figures, and invites them to become part of the action. Between the mind-bending

distortions and fervent energy packed into his canvases, the invitation is almost impossible to resist.



The singular figures depicted in his rich charcoal drawings are arguably more straight-forward than those of his paintings, lacking both spatial distortion and dense patterns. But like their neighboring canvases, they exude the same palpable detachment – abandonment, perhaps – that reveals Lawson’s critical eye.

While painting may not serve the same “subversive” ends in these works as it did in his earlier paintings and collages of the seventies, Lawson still certainly wields it as a force of confrontation. And the viewer, weak in the knees from the consuming, dizzying aesthetic of this exhibition, is forced to succumb and reevaluate his own expectations.



A Glasgow native, Thomas Lawson completed his undergraduate studies at the University of Edinburgh before pursuing his graduate degree at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in 1979. Shortly thereafter, his work appeared in numerous solo exhibitions featured at renowned galleries including New York's MetroPictures, the Anthony Reynolds Gallery in London and, most recently, at Los Angeles' David Kordansky Gallery. In addition to his art, which earned him a coveted Guggenheim Fellowship in 2009, Lawson has also distinguished himself through his published writing. At fifty-eight years old, Lawson resides in Los Angeles where he serves as the Dean of the School of Arts at CalArts.