

The Creative Duo Povey and Schultz
INTENTIONAL ISOLATES

by François Lévy July 2016

Schultz (left) and Povey (right) in their studio. ©Phillip Rogers Photography The Artist Pairing Povey and Schultz are unique outsiders to the art world, and they make paintings which are a little unfamiliar when you first encounter them.

They keep a large studio in Austin. Tolar Schultz says: "Since 2004 we worked between Edward's studio in Britain and mine in Florida, so finally we built a studio in the friendliest town we knew." The irony is not lost on them: they're sociable when they're in New York, and are hermits when they're within the enclave of their studio. They paint for twelve hours every day, peppered with discussions over tea.

Povey and Schultz *De Quincey II* (2016)

They are outsiders for sure, less by choice than by disposition. They both had latchkey childhoods in which books, thoughts and drawings replaced normal social lives. Vulnerable kids alone with their thoughts. Happy in their heads, but alone until they found each other in 2003 at a lecture about Povey's work.

Povey had been 'discovered' by the BBC much earlier, initially painting multi-storied murals in Britain, and then figurative symbolist paintings akin to Balthus. Schultz later studied under him in Wales, learned quickly and pulled alongside him as a figurative symbolist painter - gathering collectors in Europe and the USA.

With the impeccable timing of true artists, their intriguing new studio space came online just in time for the 2008 financial crash, and the couple began career-coaching artists to bridge the gap, feeling the strain and digging into ever deeper material for their apprentices - all the while experimenting in their new atelier. Povey recounts, "It was frustrating as hell. A really good Chicago gallery asked to represent me, but my style was melding with Tolar and going into these new places. So instead of accepting representation we followed this exploration and struggled to pay our bills." Tolar adds, "We were exhilarated with our artistic discoveries! ... and the conclusions about Modernism and Postmodernism that we were coming to. We knew we needed to make paintings that were distilled down to a primal thing, a visceral thing that avoided story and didactic nonsense. And we couldn't stomach frigid Contemporary plagiarism."

Povey and Schultz *Heresiarch II* - detail (2016)

In late 2012 they broke through to connecting liminal human figures with pure abstract forms in a kind of conversation. They talk about painting as a kind of spell, a presence, a force which transcends cleverness and artifice. The duo often wrestle with the authenticity of art, as if it's a matter of honesty. By 'authentic' they don't mean 'being without influence' so much as 'without external expectations'. This concern is rooted in their past: each raised respectively in London and Florida by similarly threatening parents, as artists they inevitably now cannot avoid

being obsessively honest. Povey explains, "Lots of kids have oppressive dads. I increasingly think it's more the exception than the rule, but all it did to us, was to suit us nicely for what we're doing now." He grins. "All that talk and work led to this notion of a wonderful Motherwell purity of concept, and realness, that excites us and makes a language that we find we can speak in. It's delicious to us."

Povey and Schultz *Levy's Construct* (2016)

So they live in isolation without a television, partly as an experiment to control their influences, and partly because well, they like it. Their favorite places are hardware stores, cafés and museums. At the moment, Willem de Kooning and Cy Twombly are worrying them, inspiring them and challenging their manifesto. In this way they have been making their way through Franz Kline, Jenny Saville and Arshile Gorky, unearthing the laws that they used to build their immovable monuments. Povey and Schultz stand there in museums shaking their heads and whispering, children with a secret.

They think of artists as workmen, and their process is only a 'preferred habit': they conference and paint alternately, layering new ideas and solutions onto their works, and favoring whichever of the duo that has the clearer sense of the way forwards, like a paired flung bola.

Povey and Schultz *De Quincey II* - detail (2016)

There are probably about a dozen devices and techniques working to orchestrate their pictures. "While we're working a painting out, it's all models and photo shoots, and talking, planning and diagramming our little visions. In the end it's simple action-and-reaction painting and orchestration. Oil paint, plaster, cloth and stuff. We just love orchestration and those sweet and non-verbal attitudes that come back from the paintings." Povey muses, "Why is it that every time a painting is obstinate, we privately wonder if we can really do this, and whether we have reached our capacities? Okay, now it's all over! And when we find a way forward we luxuriate in the relief. It's the psychosis of painting, I think."

Once you know how they grew up, you can discern a certain quality to their work. You can taste the vulnerability of these painted human figures, whose surrounding negative space rushes in over their limbs and bellies. There is a flickering sense of these two happy, introspective little kids in the oversized painted bodies; the abstract forms are unnamed forces always antagonizing or seducing them. The children have become the authors of their visual and symbolic world, untamed by the inscrutable powers of their childhood.

Povey and Schultz (2016)

When Edward and Tolar talk about paintings, it sounds like they're talking about other people. "We always begin a canvas as an idea. A bunch of parameters and things we want to exclude and include, plus a feeling, a sense of something that we want to solve. But as it gets going it changes

on us, moves around and gets perverse or even disgusting. Sometimes it can be lovely, or too lovely, so that its corners are too rounded and compliant. So then we have to reply to that, solve its dilemmas of feeling or design, or distribution of weight, which will once again change it." They don't count the number of replies and reworks that occur in each painting. Years ago I had occasion to lift one of their paintings, and was surprised to discover that it had about 80 pounds of paint on it. These are the heavy yet child-like discussions of two isolates. That's why they look a little unfamiliar to us.

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THE INVENTION OF A LIFE

The unusual lifestyle of Povey and Schultz
Insights from Cefin Roberts

Playwright, actor and theatre director; freelance writer with the BBC, former Artistic Director of the Welsh National Theater, writer and co-director of the internationally famed Ysgol Glanaethwy choir appearing at Carnegie Hall in 2017

When I create a character for one of my plays, its plausibility lies in the tautness of the lines between who they are and what they do. The artist duo Povey and Schultz are a profound example of this circular principle.

I have known them personally for decades, and this certainly provides insights into who they are as artists, but it goes further. This recent reconsideration of them unexpectedly reconfigures my grasp of what they do; I now see that their creative process is not *chosen* by them; it emerges from who they are. If all the people I have known stood on a gradient between conventional and unique, Edward Povey and Tolar Schultz would be on the outer reach of Bohemian. They also brim with contradictions.

Edward has been a public figure since early in his career, appearing on BBC television and radio so much that his public image is quite different from the man I know. He is seen as a subversive jester, a *performer* who spent eight years on scaffoldings painting multi-storey murals, literally transforming towns in Britain. I mean, *whole towns*. But paradoxically he and Tolar are fiercely private. Even their friends know better than to visit these artists unannounced. Grumpy is not the word.

Edward Povey in 1980 painting a mural in Manchester, England

They build homes with locked outer gates and inaccessible front doors. It's surprising that their studios don't have moats and drawbridges. But there are reasons. Povey and Schultz were raised on opposite sides of the Atlantic and fifteen years apart, but both by malevolent and secretive

fathers.

They are themselves neither malevolent nor precisely secretive, but they do share an equally fervent attitude towards the use of their minds, and their deployment of time. When you meet them you don't notice anything so unusual, because they are affable and charming, even sweet in their dealings with others, but you might sense their palpable need to return to the refuge of their work. To do it behind their gates, with no influences from television (they have never owned one), no newspapers, radio, telephones or even recorded music; and you may wonder but no, religion is not their motivation.

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This is the oasis where they make their paintings and from which they rarely emerge. Its quietness contrasts with the considerable hubbub in their shared mind space. They feast on their ever-growing library, and take dinner trays into their ornate Art Deco movie theater every evening. They hold a casual ongoing debate in and around art theory, psychology, sociology, science and inventions, photography methods, genetics and artificial intelligence. (A Judge recently asked them to contribute their ideas to a closed discussion at the United Nations in New York, about the legislation pertaining to artificial intelligence and the introduction of robotics into the workplace.) Edward has written and also lectured particularly on art, theology, philosophy, and educational methodology in conferences and theaters for forty-five years. Writing and speaking were his beloved little sisters since he was a young man, and painting was always his big brother.

Edward Povey in 2007 speaking to the Californian Workforce Association about human psychology, work and meaningfulness

He and Tolar are like intellectual *Babes in the Wood*, perpetually working on several essays in rotation, and drawing diagrams and flowcharts in an attempt to unravel subjects like the decay of Fauve colour between the World Wars; and the dilution of cultural vocabulary in the Postmodern West. They don't try to impress anyone with all these theories. Instead they feel rather ashamed for enjoying such ideas, like school children truanting in a cerebral theme park.

It bemuses me then, to know that Povey and Schultz come from plain and functional working class homes, which is further belied by *their* home. They intricately design their interiors, pouring over the minutia of patterns, colours, materials, levels of transparency and types of surfaces. It extends to theatre lighting, the elaborate use of mirrors and stage fog, and various collections of artifacts. It's a wonderland in the extreme. A dim labyrinth which they have assembled themselves, organizing the spaces and shaping the effects. They like cramped and dark hallways that lead to huge and lofty spaces so as to give their admittedly rare guests a sensory experience. Even before Edward and Tolar met they were individually learning about paints, glues, tools, materials and finishes, and the processes needed to layer them.

The Dining Room at Sub Rosa, their home and studio

Their paintings are quite obviously an extension of their complex thoughts and theories, and their naturalness with all those materials and

processes. They are as comfortable orchestrating colours and forms as they are constructing ideas and concepts. As familiar with the effect of the physical space in a room, as they are with the illusory perspective in a canvas. Equally at home with Pythagoras's Armature, architectural blueprints, and the layout of intersecting ideas for a lecture. This is just *what they do*.

Schultz is a match for Povey, and brings her phenomenal 'eye' into the team, along with a history in printing and a love for all things written, constructed and mechanical, which is why Povey calls her *the man in the duo*. In her decade of making abrasive symbolist paintings, she revealed a frankly creepy style of visionary creativity, akin to a psychic with a paint brush.

Unusually in this digital age of copying and pasting, Povey and Schultz are obsessed with authenticity and *originality*, which is why they prefer live music to recorded music, and paintings to photographs of painting. They took René Magritte's *The Treachery of Images* to heart, researching downwards in a spiral, exploring honesty and deceit in paint; the visceral and the superficial; the reliable canvas surface and the contrived visual space. So plagiarism would be antithetical for them, but they soak up the influences of the New York School, Saville, Emin, Rego, Freud, Denis and Caravaggio, withdrawing conclusions about content and the use of tonal balance for example, and then distilling laws that they can use in their own work. They're passionate about the knowledge of their predecessors.

They worriedly discuss the manifesto for their paintings, writing and rewriting their predictions and plans for their devices and concepts, and debating their relevance and function in what they regard as a period of Postmodern Dadaism. They build their paintings (build is the best word), penduluming between the meticulous layering of delicate glazes, heavy plaster-filled impasto, and spontaneous dramatic revisions. Some weeks are devoted to a single canvas on which they both work simultaneously. On other weeks they rotate several canvases onto and off the easels for ongoing adjustments; and regularly works are set aside like dunces in the corner, banished until they are thoroughly reconsidered and allowed back into the class.

These two collaborators enjoy their work immensely, but that is set against periods of frowning silence as they contemplate seemingly insoluble designs, and brooding despair when a work seems to resist them. Ultimately though, Povey and Schultz succeed for the most part. Their contribution to the conversation of contemporary art is very conscious, and they are wary to reject ideas that *play it safe*, or which attempt to either consciously impress or shock. Whatever their art has, it has by careful choice, and whatever it appears to lack, it does so decidedly. They insist on thoroughly accepting *culpability* for what they have done.

Povey and Schultz could almost be Amish, but they're too culturally aware for that; and they're astute in that Postmodern big city sense, except that they're actually remarkably guileless. They are not trying to *appear* to be anything, to craft an image for their joint career, or even to make a point. I could never write a couple like them into one of my plays because they would look implausible. When I'm with them I feel like I'm in

the half-light of a world slightly removed from the one we know, because they're 'different' from the norm. They have actually invented a life around *who they are*.

I need to know: in our society, why is that so unusual?

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