

# artist profile

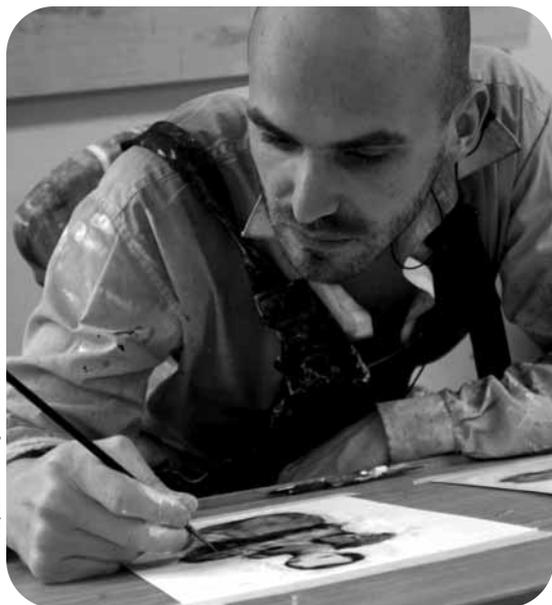
Interview By Louise Buyo

## The Enigmatic Art of Chris Berens

*"I seem to have infinite inspiration, as I paint what is and has always been inside me ... What I do now makes sense. Finally."*

—Chris Berens, artist

Photo by Esther Coleço Belmonte.



To experience the art of Chris Berens is to glimpse into a universe outside of our own – a place the Dutch artist refers to as his “second dimension.” In this timeless space trapped in perpetual winter exists wonderful creatures, sad Madonnas and other ghostly residents who have floated in from various climes and eras. They live in a world of eerie stillness, filled with both darkness and light, under the sea or in the clouds, or in a snowy ether between the two. And like a waking

dream, Berens’ images possess a mysterious quality that haunts viewers but ultimately eludes definition. It is this enigmatic quality that has led to the meteoric rise of the 34-year-old artist in just a few years.

“When I’m working, I try to think as little as possible,” explains Berens. “I work 12 to 14 hours a day; it usually takes me a couple of hours before I get in the right flow. I really have to let go of the here and now; it’s almost like meditating. I start tossing away what I know and really start looking. I need an open connection with the source of my imagination. And once the connection is made, magical things start happening.”

Using a complex mixed-media painting technique of his own design, Berens attempts to externalize his internal world for a growing international audience. Since being accepted by the famous Jaski Gallery ([www.jaski.nl](http://www.jaski.nl)) in 2005, where he found his work alongside art by Takashi Murakami and Andy Warhol, Berens has become an up-and-coming art phenomenon. Every one of his exhibitions have sold out. Kirsten Anderson, owner of Seattle’s Roq la Rue Gallery

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*The Kiss (It All Comes Down To This)*, 2009, by Chris Berens. Mixed media on wood panel, 54 cm x 54 cm.



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At The Zoo, 2009, by Chris Berens. Mixed media on wood panel, 80 cm x 125 cm.

([www.roqlarue.com](http://www.roqlarue.com)) and editor-at-large at *Hi-Fructose Magazine*, has been eagerly bringing Berens' art to America collectors for several years, hosting his first U.S. show in 2008 and scheduling a second for this October. In December 2009, Berens had his first New York solo show, *The Only Living Boy in New York*, at Sloan Fine Art, where he exhibited an astounding 39 new works. Berens has also exhibited in several prestigious European art fairs, and had his first museum exhibition in 2009 at the Noorbrabants Museum in Holland.

Despite the expeditious rise in popularity of his works, Berens' primary concern continues to be presenting his internal world with increasing accuracy.

"I always had this really special feeling over me," Berens confided in a 2009 interview with friend and arts writer Amanda Erlanson. "It's a feeling of another place, a warm place, deep inside me, and I fill that place with all that I see and hear ... I always knew that the world had a lot more in store for me, and vice versa — pretty much resembling that feeling you get the night before your birthday, or on Christmas Eve, when you don't know what you're going to get or what's going to happen, but you do know it's going to be absolutely fantastic."<sup>1</sup>

### Learning from the Masters

Born in Oss, Netherlands, Berens became obsessed with art at an early age. His father frequently took him to exhibi-

tions of the old masters, and in his room, he put up posters of works by Bosch, Rembrandt and other exemplars of the Dutch Golden Age. Eventually, these artists became his mentors. At the beginning of his career, Berens inserted iconic figures from master works into his paintings, including those by Vermeer, Bougereau, Ingres and Delaroche.

"My friends, the old masters, have made such a profound impression on me that there always will be a hint of it in what I make, I suppose," says Berens. "Less and less dense, and smeared over other influences, but it's right there in the soil, right there in the foundations."

He eventually left Oss to study illustration at the Academy of Art and Design in nearby Den Bosch, graduating in 1999. From 1999 to 2003, he worked as an illustrator for newspapers and magazines, and at an animation studio. His ambition was to illustrate children's books, but he discovered that the stylistic requirements of those commissioning the illustrations were too confining.

"I was always trying to bend the angle to my own vision, much to the frustration of the editors," he recalls.

During this time, Berens turned to his favorite painters again and began the painstaking process of teaching himself to emulate their methods — literally painting on top of prints of

<sup>1</sup>"Chris Berens is the Only Living Boy in New York" by Amanda Erlanson. <http://www.erraticphenomena.com/2009/12/chris-berens-is-only-living-boy-in-new.html>



*Sweet Surrender*, 2010, by Chris Berens. Mixed media on wood panel, 200 cm x 300 cm.

their works. As his skill level and technique evolved, he was determined to realize the sprawling narrative that he had always carried within him. In 2006, he relocated to Amsterdam and began to seriously pursue gallery representation. By the year's end, he'd been picked up by the notable Jaski Gallery, and by 2005, he'd had his first solo show in Amsterdam.

"I just never thought of myself as an artist (in terms of how I approach my work)," Berens confesses. "Because of my education, I thought I needed a piece of text or other sort of guidance to be able to make something. As it turns out, I seem to have infinite inspiration, as I paint what is and has always been inside me ... What I do now makes sense. Finally."

### A Technique Born from Frustration

During those early years of creating, Berens grew frustrated at the realization that traditional oil painting didn't enable him to adequately express his internal visions. He embarked on a decade-long experiment to instill greater accuracy in his work, a journey that combined his considerable painting skills with an original mixed-media technique.

"At first, I was able to transfer only a small part of my inner world to the canvas," Berens admits. "At the time, my technique was still too limited for what I wanted to express. Fortunately, my ability has increased ... I've come a long way, but I'm far from satisfied."

Each of Berens' current works consists of hundreds of

small, translucent, rectangular fragments, painted and layered one on top of one another onto a wood panel, forming a perfectly balanced, luminescent puzzle. When creating a work, Berens first sketches all of the figures that appear in his art repeatedly until drawing them becomes second nature. He then paints the figures using drawing ink and *bistre* — a pigment made of boiled soot and water — onto glossy inkjet photo paper coated with parquet lacquer. Because the ink is watery and, when combined with the lacquer, takes days to dry, there are different levels of malleability throughout the drying process. Berens adjusts the images during this time, using various tools to shift the ink. When the images are almost dry, he uses a blow dryer to heat the photo paper, causing the ink to sink into the lacquered plastic. The edges of the figures begin to blur, causing the brushstrokes to disappear and creating Berens' trademark soft-focus effect.

The plastic coating of the photo paper is then separated from its backing through an additional heat process. Once he has just the transparent painted sheets, Berens uses an X-Acto knife and cuts out what he considers to be usable 1" to 3" wide rectangular fragments, adhering hundreds of them in dozens of layers to a wood panel using book binder's glue. Berens paints the same faces and objects between five and 15 times, sometimes layering different versions of the same figure onto the board until he achieves the look he desires. The result evokes such luminescence that the image appears to glow. A combina-

tion of drawing ink and varnish unifies and seals the fragments into a completed work.

"It is always evolving," Berens says of the technique. "Still, it frustrates me that the final product isn't closer to the actual thing. But that's an inevitable loss in translation that is endured as soon as you turn an idea into any kind of medium. And it's the good kind of frustration — the kind that makes me jump out of bed every morning, brushing my teeth on my bike on my way to the studio, forgetting about lunch every single day."

### Knowing When a Work is Complete

Despite a potentially infinite process and admissions that he is only capturing about 50 percent of what he truly sees in his inner visions, Berens is able to recognize when a work reaches the point of balance.

"When the painting is all you see, when there is no way of linking it back to the real world, then everything has to fit," he explains. "This doesn't mean the picture is perfect in the sense that moving or replacing any element would disrupt the whole thing. It just means that at least every element is from the same world; everything is subject to the same physical laws and does not behave suspiciously. You have to feel it's been there before, and it will be there when you've left. Authenticity might be the word I'm looking for. Or natural. Nature is weird, hysterical, random, tragic ... but somehow it all makes sense, even a giraffe."

In his mission to bring his visions to life, Berens thinks constantly of ways to communicate with his audience, even potentially moving to other mediums in the future: "Film could be interesting. It's all there: sounds, music, images, movement. You can actually take (people) by the hand into your world and make them feel what you feel when you feel it."

These are new ideas waiting to be explored. For now, Berens' perseverance in honing a technique that more closely conveys this inner world has paid off, and he doesn't plan to change it anytime soon.

"Right now, I'm so happy painting, happy I am slowly closing the gap between my imagination and the final product," he says. "I do love to paint, but only because it gets me where I want ... I don't go looking for inspiration. I'm not trying to stand out, to create my own symbolism or imagery. If you could all see what I see, I'd be done." AC

*In addition to his many exhibition achievements, Chris Berens has had three limited edition books of his work published: Zilver, Ninety-Nine and 2239. He was also commissioned by Blondie guitarist Chris Stein to create the cover art for the band's new album Panic of Girls. His work will be on view at the Roq la Rue Gallery in Seattle, Washington, in October. For more information, visit [www.ChrisBerens.com](http://www.ChrisBerens.com).*

*To learn more about Berens' unique mixed-media technique, watch Kirsten Andersen's in-depth video interview for Hi-Fructose Magazine at the Roq la Rue Web site: [http://www.roqlarue.com/artists-42-Chris\\_Berens.html](http://www.roqlarue.com/artists-42-Chris_Berens.html).*



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