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As part of a collaboration with Art21, hear news-making artists describe their inspirations in their own words.

Caroline Goldstein, January 30, 2020



Production still from the "Art in the Twenty-First Century" season five episode, "Transformation," 2009. © Art21, Inc. 2009.

For the first time, the American artist Paul McCarthy is having a survey dedicated entirely to his drawings and works on paper, opening this February at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles.

A provocateur who is best known for his performance and video art, McCarthy's work is often grotesque and sarcastic, deriding American icons by transforming them into objects of revulsion. The drawings reveal a more process-based practice than many of his sculptures or videos, though they still have a certain unfinished, craggy quality to them.

In an exclusive interview with Art21 as part of the "Art in the Twenty-First Century" series, McCarthy explains his fascination with Hummels, the German porcelain figurines of cherubic young boys and girls which have served as inspiration for many of his works.

"The nature of the [Hummel] sculpture itself, which is this idea of purity and cleanliness," he says of his interpretation of the figurines, "I kind of believe that hygiene is the religion of fascism." In fact, McCarthy's sculptures of the same name are vastly different—instead of glossy pastoral innocence, his work is rough, asymmetrical, and creepy.

"I'm not trying to satisfy an audience," he says in the video, filmed in 2009. He makes a distinction between art and entertainment, and while the latter is predicated on generating a positive response, he has no such hangups as an artist, saying "my responsibility is to the ideas."