

# Christian Rosa

**I** meet Christian Rosa in his new Grand Vista studio space, a former warehouse in downtown Los Angeles, where he is mob-deep, hanging out with a coterie of friends, family and his dog Papi. Inside, his gang is variously engaged in gathering the ingredients to cook spaghetti, play music, and opening boxes of skateboard gear. Elements of Rosa's legend abound; unfinished canvases, bearing the artist's characteristic calligraphy, blocks, lines line the walls; the bronzed and buff Arnold

Interview  
by

Hannah Bhuiya, Schwarzenegger cardboard cutout is still here, flexing behind a drum kit. But there are surprises too, markedly the sinuous metal sculpture that stands tall in the center of the studio. Outside, in the warm Californian night, around a picnic table, with the others mixing mimosas, opening beers, we talk about how the artist's hand-drawn line has led to right here, right now.

— Your recent exhibition [at Galerie Meyer Kainer] in Austria had graffiti tagged outside, “Same Old Shit?”

“Same Shit, Same Rosa.”

— Yes. You posted this on up on your own Instagram with your own caption “haha haters gonna hate, love Vienna its so good”. Tell me about the haters.

I don't know... Austria, Vienna, the place I grew up is such a... how do you say, “conservative” place that people don't want to see

you grow without them helping you. Being part of that, there is a lot of jealousy and talking shit behind backs.

— But that's not behind backs, it's right there in red paint outside your show. Isn't that kinda shitty?

Actually no. I think its kind of charming that people would go there in the night, be kind of like, secretive about it, to challenge [me]. You have to have the guts to go out there and spray that.

— Given the names of some of your works, using the word “shit” is actually kind of positive.

Yeah.

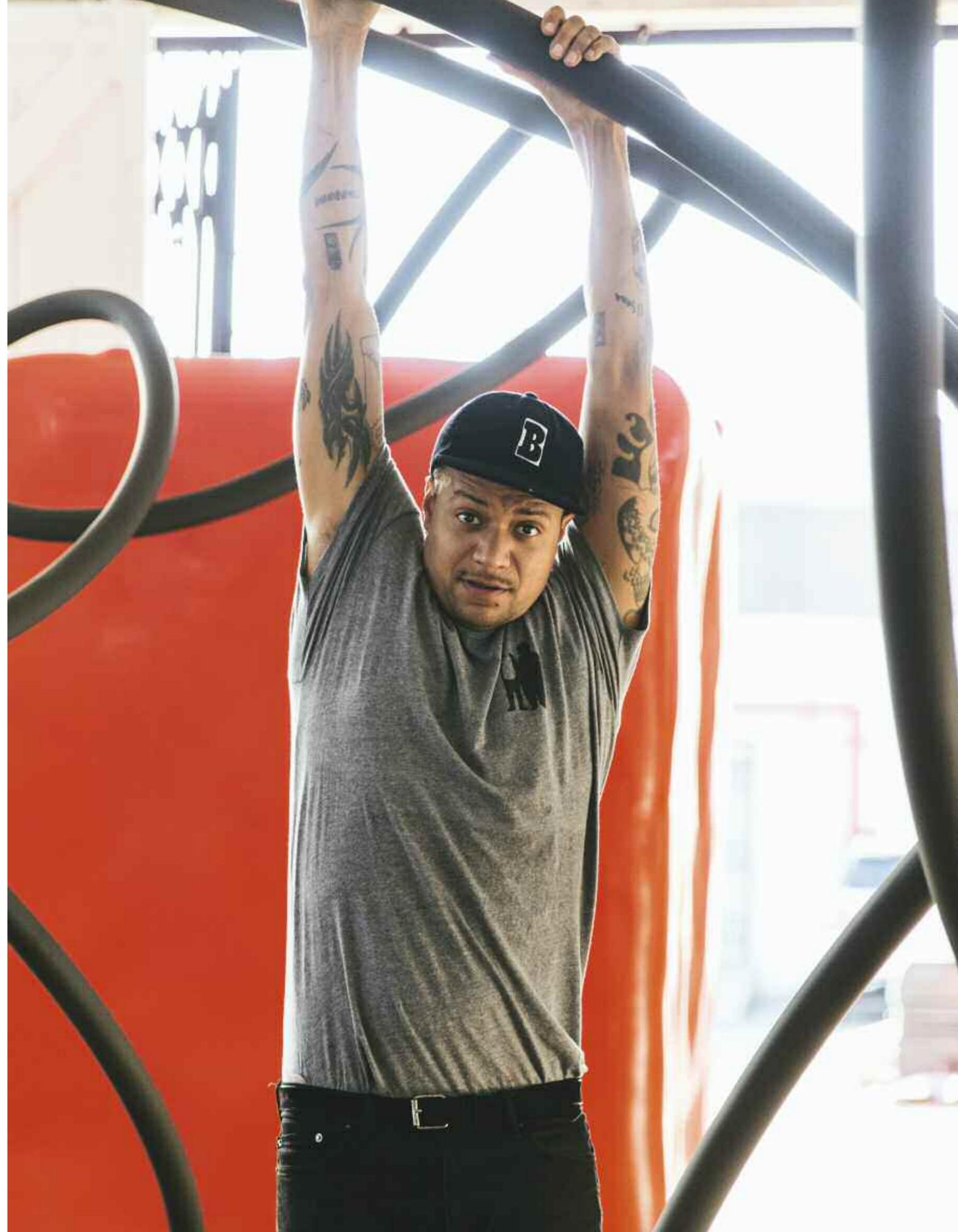
— So do you think it was a fan, not a hater?

I just think it's some people who are kind of bored... and jealous. Because, if you look at my works, they look very easy to make. This is the concept of my work, to make it look very easy, but it's not.

— Your name continues to provoke a strong reaction in any art world context. “Christian Rosa” is associated with certain things. People often mention money when your name comes up.

I don't know why. I don't have that much money. They have this illusion about me driving a Ferrari that I didn't pay for, but that's what they don't know about... I think it must be the car.

— Or the auction prices.





The auction prices, they don't go into my pocket. They go into the pocket of the person who sold the piece.

— *Exactly. So when that started to occur, when pieces started to go from the low \$20,000s, \$30,000s to the crazy sums, which we have heard about, to above \$200,000, to \$209,000, [at Christie's, New York in 2014] how did that feel?*

I felt really bad about it. Because I thought I would have way much more time to not get into this situation. For a young artist to be in auction—it's a pretty hard thing to be. And then suddenly, you get prices like that and people who bought the works for, let's say, \$15,000 or \$20,000 and who don't have that much money, they are going to be like, "Ahh, I just paid \$20,000 for it, maybe I can sell it for \$200,000 right now." So, it's not a good thing for the market, it's not a good thing for me, and it's not a good thing for any other young artist. Now it's cooled down, but like a year ago, it was a very speculative thing that was happening in the art world, it was like a brand new thing that young artists like Oscar Murillo, Lucien Smith, Israel Lund, and me, and a few others, went through. If you get into this kind of situation you just pray that the people who represent you and stand behind you will take care of it. If suddenly a painting goes up to \$200,000, and the next only goes for \$20,000, then the people who buy it in the gallery for \$60,000 will think, "Hey, why did I pay this price?"

— *It becomes so unrealistic.*

Unrealistic, for everyone; nobody knows what it's worth, it's all up in the air, basically.

— *When you did become "successful" as an artist, in all senses, how did it feel?*

It felt really great in the first moment. Then in the second moment, oh shit, it's getting really serious right now. It's not like it used to be, going into the studio and trying some stuff out. It just became a real job. I love painting and I love doing art, but that's when I realized, "Oh my God, this is getting serious."

— *How do you come up with your titles? For example, No Way Out, (2013), which has a twisted black line in its center, which seems to offer no way out. Do you come up with them first or last, is it some kind of semiotic process?*

It varies. It depends totally on the painting. Most of the time the titles are bits or parts out of songs that I listen to, that kind of like... make me feel... the painting... what it is for me, and that's how I get the titles.

— *Kind of like an earworm? That echoes in your head?*

Yes, an *Ohrwurm*.

— *I really like the title, "Oh Fuck," (2013).*

Oh yeah. It's like a surprise, "Oh Fuck!" You can see it as "Oh fuck," "I fucked it up," or "Oh fuck, this shit looks good." You can take it like you see my paintings, for every person it's a different... you can see something else. The viewer has their own vision of the painting, or their own version of the painting. So that's why with Oh Fuck! the viewer is going to go there and look at the title, be like "Oh Fuck! what does he mean by 'Oh Fuck?'"

Then they start looking and everyone is going to see it differently than the way I see it, and that's what I like.

— *When I first saw this title in the catalog at CFA Berlin, I laughed out loud: Look At This Shit, (2014).*

Look at this shit... Yeah, it's like, I painted it—and then I was like—"Look at that shit!" So it's the same thing again, like "Look at that shit, does it suck or is it actually good?" It's kind of controversial, where I'm not sure anymore. Definitely the viewer is not. But in the end, it's just... I am sure about it, because that's why I finished the piece, and showed it.

— *To me that kind of title has ironic humor in that it makes you seem like you don't value your work as precious, but you do, as you are presenting this way... The title of the exhibition [at Kunstverein Heilbronn in 2015] and the subsequent monograph that both of these works are featured in is "I Am In Love With The Coco."*

"I'm In Love With The Coco," is all about my love... for coconuts... [laughs]

— *Something you also love is skating. You skated a lot in your life.*

I started skateboarding when I was seven, or maybe six. And I still skate today. We just went to Baker [Skateboards] and I'm going to do some skateboards for them. I'm actually designing the skateboard graphics for all my heroes from when I was a kid. It's such a great thing; I talked to the art director and the people who run the company. They were so into my ideas. I'm going to do five boards, to come out in summertime, and I'm so happy to do that. Dustin [Dollin, a pro skater and Rosa's long time friend] helped me do it.

— *Do you think—this is my hypothesis—that the haphazard nature of skating, and the way it interacts with the environment—you are flowing and you are moving and you are encountering obstacles, and you are overcoming them or not.*

You are falling down, you are getting back up, you are trying hard and then you finally get it done, and then you have to do something new, and you fall back down again...

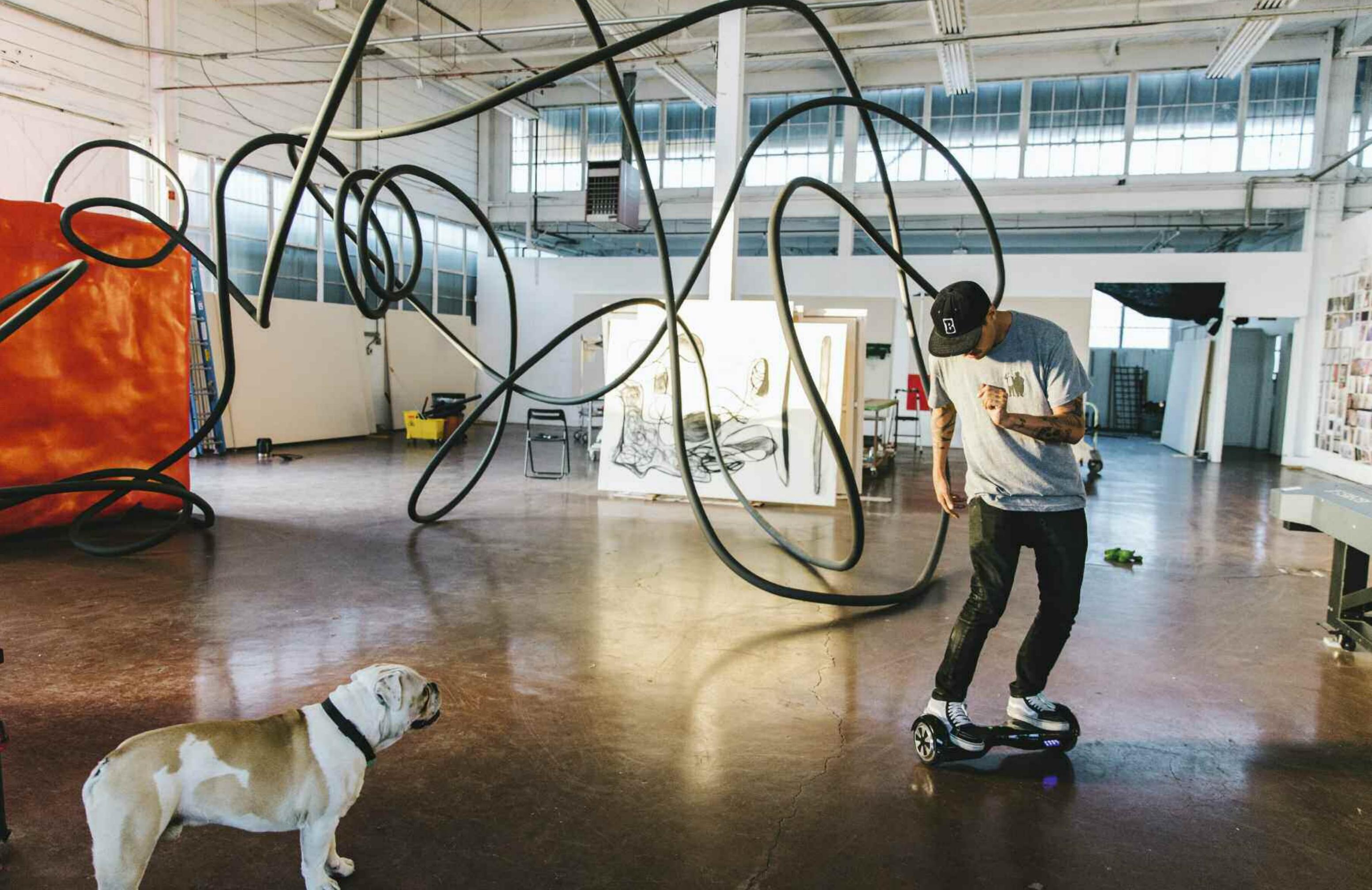
— *It's not like playing tennis, not just back and forth. Skating, you have to come up with it yourself, it's your own encounter with the environment. Do you think that, subliminally, this has come out in your "line"? For me, when I see your line, I see this finding and falling and jumping.*

Yes, it is, it is in a way. It's a "lifeline". In the way that distractions are like these messy parts, that's like, ok you are having a problem, but you are trying to find your way out. When you find your way out, there's gonna be an obstacle that you have to get over, that's when the obstacle can be a shape, or a form, or a color field, where you have to deal with the problem, that you have to get over with. And then the line continues, it finishes, or it goes out of the frame, and then it starts anew.

— *Or you just pick up your skateboard and you have a beer. Your "line" stops, you give up, or keep going.*

There is no real "giving up" in my world.

— *Then "stop," I mean. You can pick up your board.*



And go out, and have a beer, and meet my friends, and the next day I come back, and have the solution to the problem.

— *When you are in front of the canvas, where is your mind? Is it blank and meditative, or is it busy, where are you when you are there?*

It's very meditative. I'm trying to be as empty as I can, just to be at the place where I am and not think about all my troubles, all my next shows, all my next...

— *Next... Bullshit?*

Next bullshit, tax payments, girlfriend whom I just broke up with, I'm just trying to be in the moment.

— *A work like Warum Nicht, (2011) seems to employ a very different method to your current style. I'd really like to see it in real life.*

Warum Nicht—Why Not... was a much “busier” painting.

— *How did you arrive at your current, more pure, less “dense” technique?*

Well, that is how I started. Let's say in 2008-9 I started with those scribbles on the paintings, and everything was super busy. It just became less and less. The more I took out, the more problematic the painting became, and the more I had to deal with, and solve problems. Nothing is harder than having an empty canvas work, at least for me. It was just a challenge for myself, to make it work.

— *Studying under the painter Daniel Richter [at the Akademie der bildenden Künste in Vienna] must have been interesting, given your very different styles. How is your relationship now, in life? Are you still friends?*

Now? We are still good friends. We just talked two days ago. He always gives me really good life advice, and painting advice too. He came to my show in Vienna and we talked a lot. When I get stuck in life or in painting, I can call him, as a friend, and I see him as a friend.

— *I love Gelitin, and have seen their performances in Miami, the Venice Biennale... How was it, participating in their kind of work, such as Blind Sculpture, (2010) back in the day?*

Very much fun. They were my first ... let's say, the Gelitins and Franz West were my first supporters in Vienna. Because they have the same, or similar, background, an outsider background, like me. They liked what I was doing; that I do what I do and nobody can stop it.

— *Yes, you share a similar attitude. How was it to be a performance artist for a while? To “rock out with your cock out?”*

Oh, it was fun, with them, it was fun. It's always basically getting undressed most of the time, and doing funny stuff. And if you are comfortable with it, it's OK. As I kid, I grew up in Vienna, Vienna Actionism is all about that.

— *Were you at the Venice Biennale in 2011 when they did their performance in the Garden of the Virgins, with the pouring of the glass?*

Yeah, I was part of that. I was playing a music concert there. But my music equipment broke down, so we could only play one-and-

a-half songs. That was my big music debut at the Biennale... [laughs]

— *That was a good year, in Venice, 2011. Are you still making music?*

Yeah, a little bit. I'm still making music with my friend Charles [Derenne], and with another friend, in Vienna. I started playing the drums half a year ago. Music is my biggest influence, I would say, besides my friends and my family. Without music there wouldn't be my artworks, all this, the sculpture, or me having fun. If you are driving in the car and you are in a bad mood, and suddenly you hit the radio and you can think of a memory that you had like ten years ago with your best friends, suddenly your mood changes.

— *It's like a mnemonic that unplugs all these things... What is the most violent thing that has happened to you in your life? When you were in Brazil?*

Well, my family left Brazil because my brother got kidnapped. Not I... I was so young. That's why. We left Brazil, and moved to Vienna, because my stepfather is Austrian. But I think the most violent thing that has happened to me was getting beat up by ten people, maybe... or moving in with Dustin Dollin... [Dollin, sitting nearby, grins.]

— *What I'm getting to is that we have so many examples of artists who have thrill-seeking behavior as their motivation, from Caravaggio, to Van Gogh, living in a frantic sort of way. Do you think a certain emotional instability and a frantic nature is essential to being an artist?*

It's not essential... I just think that all those people who did art back in the day, they were the way they were, and through their art they just could be who they wanted to be. For me, also, it was just like a way to be who I want to be.

— *And so you have. At this point in your career, what would you consider your goals?*

Oh my goals... [sighs] I don't know...

— *You haven't achieved them all yet, I'm sure?*

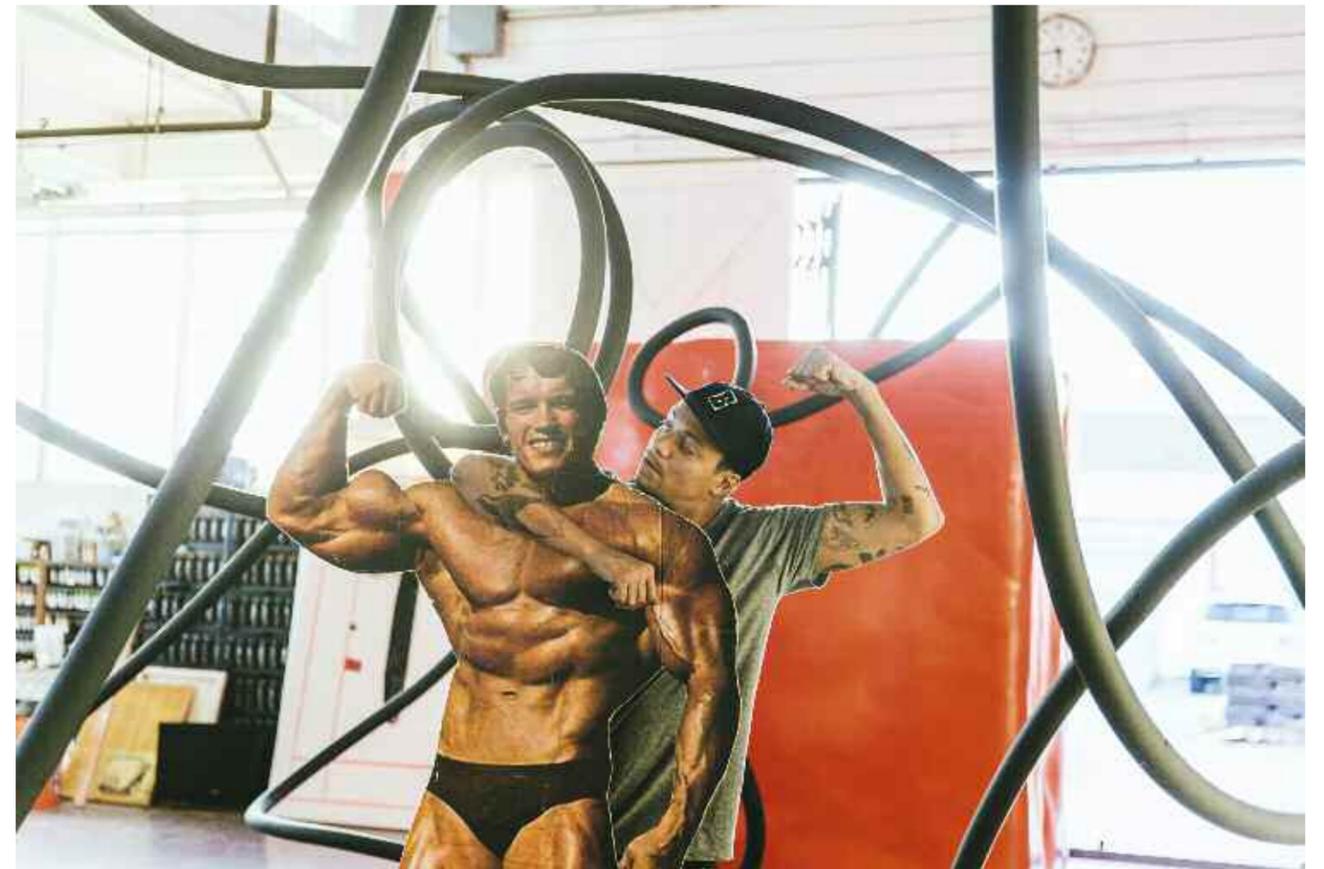
I have achieved most of them. Really, the goals that I wanted to achieve, I want to see my friends grow, be happy and healthy and successful, as much as, more than me. I just want them to be healthy and happy.

— *I've seen your generosity here in LA over the past months. Tell me about Hooper Street Projects. How did that all come about, here in LA?*

Hooper was an idea that I had about doing a residency in LA and inviting artists and friends whom I appreciate, who should have a chance to show their works in the U.S. I was doing it with, back then, some really good friends, who became not-so-good friends, in the end.

— *It was a very “idealistic” idea.*

It was an idealistic idea, an artist-run place, for artists, but in the end it became money-driven, like “Let's make money-money” and that's where I was like, “I don't want to be part of this.”



— *Who are some of those you invited, whom you think really did benefit from it, whom it worked for?*

I think Alex Ruthner, who else benefitted from it? I think Rade Petrasevic, they have representation in the U.S., and in Europe now, and they can live off their works now.

— *That's the idea, really, for everyone, isn't it?*

That was my idea, and it still is, with my new space, Grand Vista.

— *So, Grand Vista... [A large tubular sculpture fills up the middle of the studio inside.] What is this?*

This is a new sculpture that I made, it's a 3D version of my paintings, it's an extended arm of my artworks.

— *Before you arrived, the boys told me it weighs a ton. How do you go from a line to a ton?*

First of all, we had an idea to make this, and then you have lots of meetings and meet lots of different people ... Everything works really slowly, but in the end it just works out. Its just an idea that becomes... real.

— *And now it's sitting there, huge and metal. Practically, what is it made of, and how was this made?*

It's made out of aluminum, fiberglass and steel. I made a miniature model, then it gets scanned, and then every part, every

curve is mathematically calculated, and then bent by hand, and then they are put together.

— *How high is it?*

Maybe like four meters?

— *So, sculpture is the next dimension for your work?*

Yeah, part of it. Sculptures, and videos, and I'm just finishing my photo book, 2006-2016, ten years of my travels, my working, my friends. It's basically a diary, a very personal diary, a very personal view of my life and my friends.

[Dustin Dollin brings out the miniature model of the sculpture.]  
Dustin Dollin: There is the mini-one.

This is how it all started. It was a little idea, it was a little dream. [Looking at the model on the table, made of wire and wood.] And now it's in there.