

## Brian Calvin's L.A. Youth the artist behind Raf Simons' Spring 13 prints



*Born and raised in California and now living in Ventura County, artist Brian Calvin's work has become synonymous with the sun-drenched sands and relaxed lifestyle of Los Angeles. His portraits of bleary-eyed youth are painted featuring backgrounds that Calvin describes as "generalized" glimpses of the California coast. For Spring 13, longtime friend and acclaimed Belgian designer Raf Simons, featured Calvin's portraits and landscapes across oversize t-shirts, silk scarves, and crewneck sweatshirts, a print that lent a relaxed feel to Simons' tailored sportswear and suiting. SSENSE caught up with Brian Calvin to discuss self-expression, clothing as art, and understanding Los Angeles in Raf's collection.*

We read that you sold your first painting for \$50 – can you tell us about that painting and the experience of selling it?

**It was a tall painting of three dogs and a pond, sweet and simple. I had only been painting for a year or two and a professor wanted to buy it. It was very flattering. I'd love to see the painting again now to see how it compares to my memory of it.**

How has your life changed from the time when you sold your first painting to now?

**I was 21... barely out of diapers! Honestly though, painting has remained a constant ever since. My practice has certainly deepened but I already knew that I was on a path.**

Do you have backstories for the character you paint? Do they have names?

**I don't have backstories. Occasionally I will give a painting of a solitary figure a name, but that is always after the fact. The image has to come into existence before I have any thoughts about it. I arrive at the image through painting, not through thought.**

What's the story behind the Killer character that we see throughout the Spring collection - where is she going, where has she been?

**For me there is no story. I don't even really have a definite opinion about the gender. There is only the image. I work on the painting until it generates heat and is speaking for itself. That conversation happens first with me through the process of painting. After that the image is free to generate a multiplicity of stories and meanings as it circulates.**

As a life-long Californian, what are the images that you most closely associate with the state?

**No images, but sun-blانched all the same.**

As a kid, were you one of your bleary-eyed apathetic youths, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes on the beach?

**I don't think of the figures that populate my paintings as apathetic at all--world weary perhaps, but not apathetic. To answer your question though, the paintings don't reflect my actual past or present. The desire for self expression in youths is often ridiculed or belittled, but I see a profound mythical beauty in that complicated investigation of identity.**

If you had to describe LA in one word, what would it be?

**I can't describe anything in one word. I would say "Los Angeles" but that is a two word answer.**

Do you see any features of Los Angeles in Raf's collection?

**Certainly I do see some refracted aspect of Los Angeles, but mainly I just sense Raf. I feel Raf and Raf was feeling Los Angeles.**

How did the collaboration with Raf Simons come about?

**Raf and I have been friends for many years now although we only get to see each other once in a blue moon. Raf called me about a week after he became creative director at Dior. At that important moment, I think he was also wanting to look back a bit at the path he has taken. Over the years, Raf has always supported my work and owns several paintings. As I mentioned earlier, I believe that once I finish a painting it is free to communicate with whoever lays eyes on it. Raf understands this and felt compelled to push the images into a different context. I'm not ordinarily interested in having my images on clothing, but with Raf it's different. It's art.**

What was it like seeing your paintings on the runway?

**Simultaneously exhilarating and alienating. Alienating is probably a poor word choice as it has a certain negative connotation and it wasn't negative at all. I guess I would say that it was exhilarating and confusing. My work can be a bit polarizing. At the time, I had a nagging worry that this would be the one collection by Raf that went down in infamy. I'm glad that it didn't turn out that way although that might have been an interesting experience in and of itself.**

We read that you have no idea why you make paintings, but that it might be to keep your head from exploding.

**I'm sorry but my head explosion avoidance techniques are closely guarded trade secrets. If I weren't a painter? Hmm? I suppose I'd do everything I currently am doing and I'd have a lot more time in which to do it.**

Thank you for speaking with us, Brian Calvin.