

**BRIAN JAMES THOMPSON**

# DESTIG

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BEST OF 2020 | TODAY'S GREAT CANADIAN ARTISTS | SPECIAL ART FEATURES | HOT PICKS



DESTIG  
BEST OF  
2020

## MEET THE ARTISTS

"HOW MARVELOUS THAT THEY BROUGHT FORTH SUCH  
MAGNIFICENCE FROM THEIR BRUSHES AND CHISELS."

- ANONYMOUS

**"Art is so much a part of my waking (and sometimes even my resting) consciousness. As Christopher Isherwood once said, "I am a camera." Living the dream. I do not become free when I do artwork; I become whole. It is as if I am out of focus when I am not working on art. When I do, I am totally in focus, like a lens that is sharp and has no blurriness around the edges."**



**DESTIG BEST OF 2020**

Brian James Thompson is a contemporary painter and digital artist based in Houston, Texas, USA. He draws his inspiration from nature, the human form and abstractions of color, form and pattern. His work explores the inner spaces between dreams and wakefulness, the illusory and real, and the continuum between them.

As a kid you were fascinated with drawing birds because "they did whatever they wanted", more recently you described art as "flying wherever you want to". Does art liberate you and if so, how? It could be that birds are attractive to children because they move a lot. Often children have to remain seated and be quiet to be part of a group. That was not me - the quiet part. Birds come and go, make

noises, and generally do as they please unless threatened. They are also quite beautiful. Even the darkest plumage has a luster and sheen about it. I was very curious about everything. In order to get me to focus, my grandmother and mother discovered that a pencil and some paper were the solution. Then I learned to read and that was the other "window" for my constant search for new and unexplainable things.

My parents and grandparents were very encouraging, and as I became older it was apparent that I had a very acute ability to focus on the artwork - so much so that I would not hear someone calling my name or notice the time going by. I realized later that I could just start drawing and I would put the rest aside temporarily. Now art is so much a part of my waking (and sometimes even my resting)

**"Emerging artist Brian James Thompson is the invited artist at Galeria Regina, with his exhibition entitled A Persistent Rumor. Though self-taught, his works offer clean, pristine and elegant fields of color, juxtaposed with geometric shapes and thought-provoking titles as The German Case and Dance of Matches."**

**Susie Tommaney, Houston Press**



**"Thompson's paintings explore the dialogue between form, color and attenuated movement, with some pieces taking their cue from Dadaesque satire and the dream-like free association of Surrealism. The artist engages viewers through the juxtaposition of elemental forms, strong colors and simple lines. Known components add up to an unknown sum of parts. Squares, circles, letters of the alphabet, curved and straight lines serve as anchors in compositions absent of logical frames of reference.**

**Yet the familiar offset the unfamiliar, and seek to work together in unison. The visceral experiences they create underscore a sense of play and movement. In some works, through the lens of abstract intuition, Thompson also filters strains of Dada satire in combination with Surrealist representationalism. He studies internal spaces and their arrangements. The ordinary are laid open to the full range of the imagination and, in the process, develop a way to free it. Depictive and psychological elements embrace the idiosyncratic and incongruous, and result in the non sequitur. Dreams and reality intersect along a unified plane of expression."**

**Galeria Regina  
Houston, Texas**



consciousness that unless I'm at the grocery store or driving I am working on some art project – traditional or digital. As Christopher Isherwood once said, "I am a camera." Living the dream. I do not become free when I do artwork; I become whole.

It is as if I am out of focus when I am not working on art. When I do, I am totally in focus, like a lens that is sharp and has no blurriness around the edges. As we find out

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**"I am not constrained by one "mode d'emploi". It is always me, all me, in my own style, but I like to create different expressions of it. And I like to have the freedom to choose."**

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when we get older, no one is really able to completely do whatever they want. The reference to birds is a kind of analogy to my collection of work. I am doing one thing on Monday and then a few days later, I have an idea that is completely different, perhaps in a different medium. I am going from one thing to the next, and I express myself in a variety of different "languages".

So I "go wherever I want" in the sense that I do not do the same thing over and over again. I am not constrained by one "mode d'emploi". It is always me, all me, in my own style, but I like to create different expressions of it. And I like to have the freedom to choose. I am not inclined to create variations on a theme in order to achieve a recognizable style.



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**"I am not inclined to create variations on a theme in order to achieve a recognizable style."**

**Please tell us about your background.**

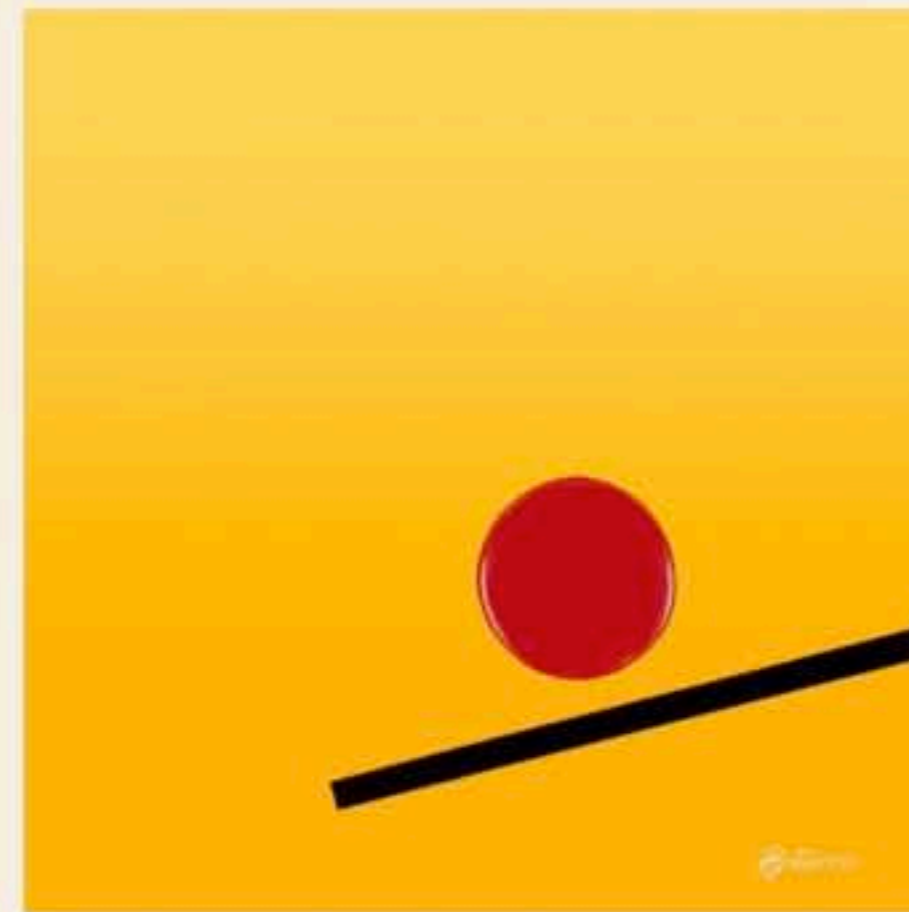
I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which is located on the Arkansas River in the Northeast corner of the state. It is the home of the Five Civilized Tribes – the Choctaw, Cherokee, Muscogee (Creek), Chickasaw and Seminole peoples – in the foothills of the Ouachita Mountains. The Arkansas is a major tributary of the Mississippi and, as a result, the area is very lush and green unlike the state's Western Panhandle.

I was educated in Catholic schools: a Benedictine elementary school run by nuns and an all-male (at the time) college preparatory school under the guidance of Augustinian priests. My two younger brothers and I were given every opportunity to be successful in our studies; chores never overlooked. One brother earned a degree in the fine arts and the other became an accomplished baker and chef in restaurants and hotels. After graduation, I enrolled in the graphic arts program at the University of Tulsa.

After two semesters, I decided I would be better served by working rather than following an advertising track to a degree, respectability and mortgage payments. That way, I could acquire skills and experience, and also be paid rather than incur student loan debt. The winding road led to a graphics apprenticeship, freelance art assignments in the music industry, and the production of close to 150 concert posters over a period of 10 to 12 years for the iconic Cain's Ballroom, which had undergone a revival.

In subsequent years, I moved to coastal Southern California and eventually to Houston, Texas, where I met my wife and where I currently reside and work.

I obtained a degree in Computer Animation from the Art Institute of Houston and that educational opportunity allowed me to combine the traditional techniques I was constantly working on with new digital skills, to build a body of work that was uniquely my own.



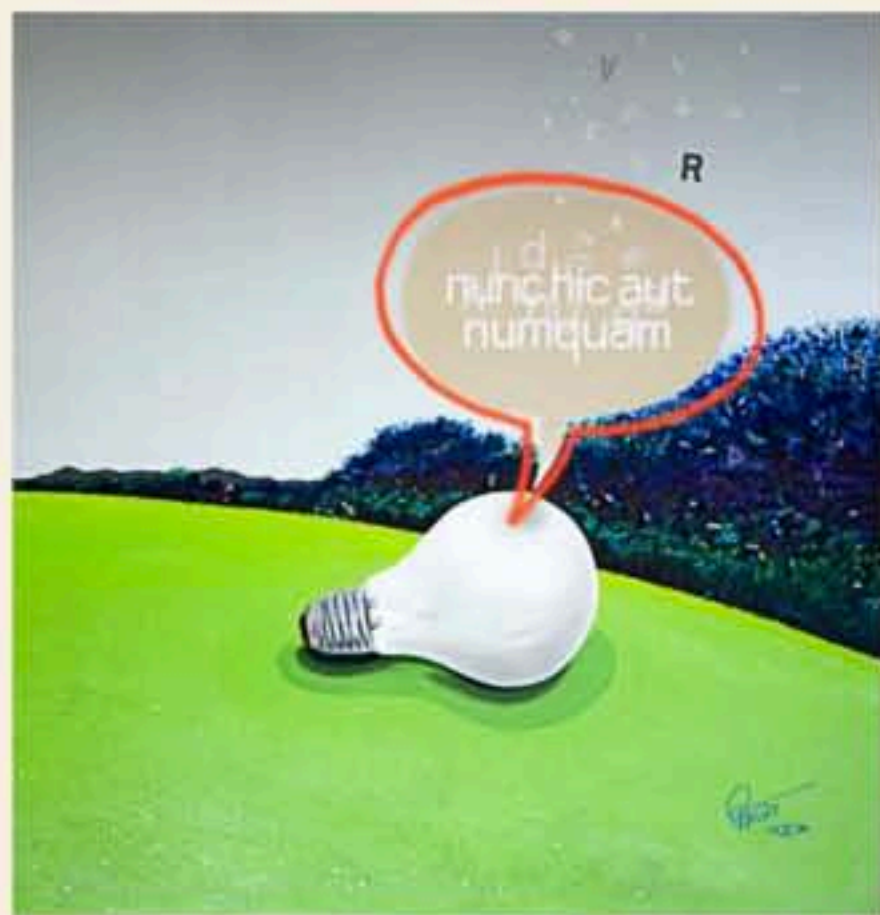
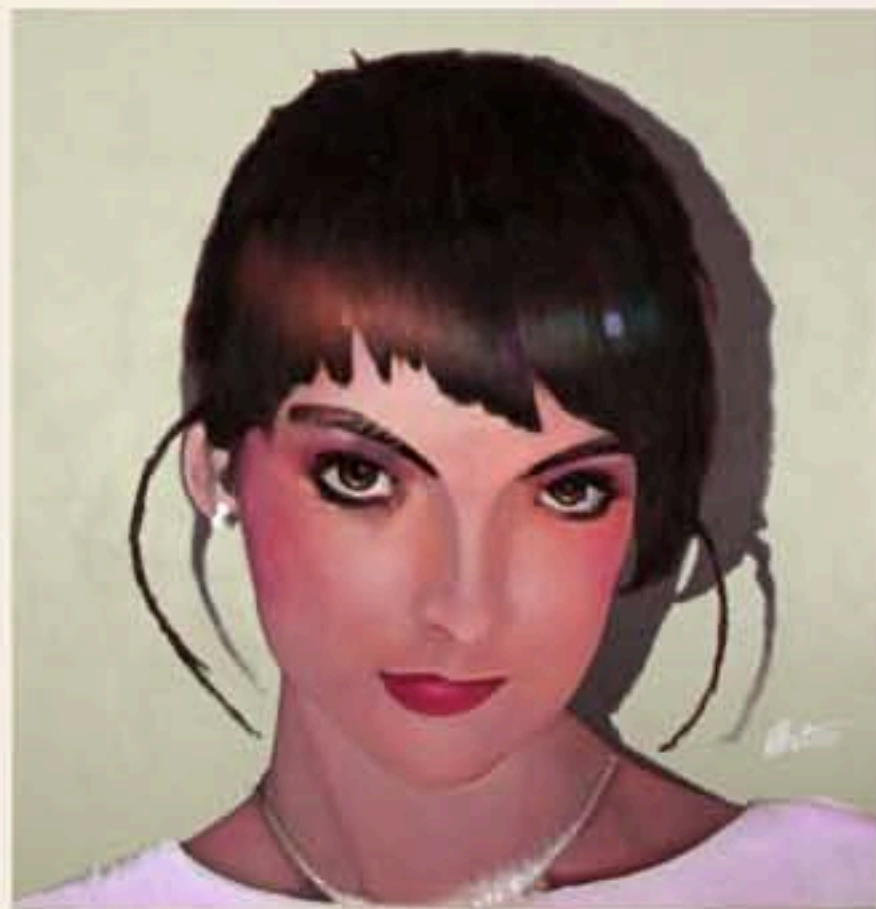
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**"I do not really think about the work in terms of motivation or goals."**

**How do you decide what to immerse yourself in, what are your typical motivations and goals when focused on a given specialism?**

When I was growing up, I was given all the supplies I needed and a drafting table. My maternal grand uncle was a Franciscan friar and he taught me about meditation and introduced me to illuminated manuscripts. I began to practice script calligraphy and Speedball lettering from the movies and cartoon intros. The posters followed an unconventional graphic design path. The painting was coming along as I met local artists who were in with the musical community. My father had spoken with an art professor at a local university about their fine arts program and was advised that a charismatic instructor might change my approach, and to let me find my own way because I would need my own "voice" in order to be successful.

As a result, I migrated like a bird from one interesting insight to the next. I had no idea how much the digital apps would change my approach. For me, they completely complement the traditional methods. I can work with more confidence and with less waste, temporally and physically. Electronic preview allows for series work groupings and reduces endless paint color swatch matching. The output mediums serve the artwork, and I concentrate on themes that are consistent with my oeuvre. Some pieces are better painted traditionally – others more suited to using mixed media. Digital pieces that have a certain scale or chromatic quality are executed as prints. I do not really think about the work in terms of "motivation" or "goals". I seem to get these ideas or concepts that fit into a particular mode of communication rather than in historical style classifications. I may see textures and patterns in masonry or a botanical source, but the original visual may morph into something entirely different. I end up with two or more possibilities from the single inspiration. Lately, the tendency has been to geometry or patterns, but I find that representational rendering is more easily defined as "Pop", "Cubist", "Fauve", "Impressionist". I have influencing precedents but I try to avoid appropriating any of their trademark wonderfulnesses.



**"It depends on the medium. I see graphics as a vehicle for my social satire."**

How much of your personality comes out in your art and how do you see your work from your perspective? It depends on the medium. I see graphics as a vehicle for my social satire. I grew up with William Gaines' Mad magazine, and all the wonderfully talented panel illustrators. Later I was fond of Charles Addams, Edward Gorey, Gahan Wilson and the Zap Comix artists.

The music posters were a direct channel for that. Insinundo [BT terminology] and cheek were never a part of my "fine" art. The two never meet. My painting Dispose of Properly is as close to a statement as I have ever come to social commentary. I prefer to let the viewer parse the meaning.

My intent is for a piece to be a harmonious part of the space that it inhabits, and to hopefully raise the spirit of those who cohabit with it. Color and geometry together create a feeling. Realism triggers memory, of pleasure, beautiful things or places.

In your twenties you created several hand-lettered posters that were included in Paul Grushkin's 1987 compendium, The Art of Rock: Posters from Presley to Punk. What did that early recognition inform you about your work and ability to impact?

The interesting aspect of the posters was that no one knew if it would be successful. It was just a trial balloon to see if there was any interest. The building had been

closed after its operating heyday as the Home of Bob Wills in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. It was in a rundown warehouse district 50-60 feet from a new freeway overpass. Saved from the wrecking ball by inches. I was offered the job with no guarantees – but after several moderately successful shows I was given free rein to create the ad flyers. They became larger in a few months for visual impact. My gallery became hundreds of telephone poles and shop windows around town. Cheeky worked. Word of mouth spread and in the end I created nearly 150 posters, numerous promotional shirts and the lot.

It was a case of right place, right audience. A moment in time. The Art of Rock was kismet. A chance meeting at a religious convention between a Cain's production manager and the legendary Rick Griffin. Rick persuaded Paul Grushkin and Jon Sievert to review my work and they were very generous with my placement.

How do you know when a work is complete, give us a sense of the feeling of reward, and how long before the urge to create returns?

Art is more like a swirling layer of global atmosphere. It is constantly moving and mixing in between all the other thoughts and notions. At rest, it's like a zoetrope shadow dance. What is it? It's a ...? Or it could be just color fields that represent a feeling. Two hands shuffling a deck of



cards, fanning them and then showing a single card face at random. Return the card, reshuffle and show a different card. Repeat. Cocteau is the croupier. Fellini is the pit boss. I know when something is not complete, in most cases. There are exceptions, as when viewing a piece at a later date and seeing it reveal a component that was until that moment invisible. Why had I not thought of that before? My reward has always been other people having a positive reaction to my work. I do pause occasionally, but I never stop "seeing". I always have unfinished work.

In modern art there is a struggle between Message v Quality. Why is it important to you that you don't just communicate but that it's done sublimely?

I can only speak for myself, and speaking has its own inherent dangers. Tastes change and messages quickly become dated (unless you're Ed Ruscha). I choose to remain the boy with the half-dozen German pencils and big eraser. Sublime is a pillow of winds... Does the wind have a message? Compassion?

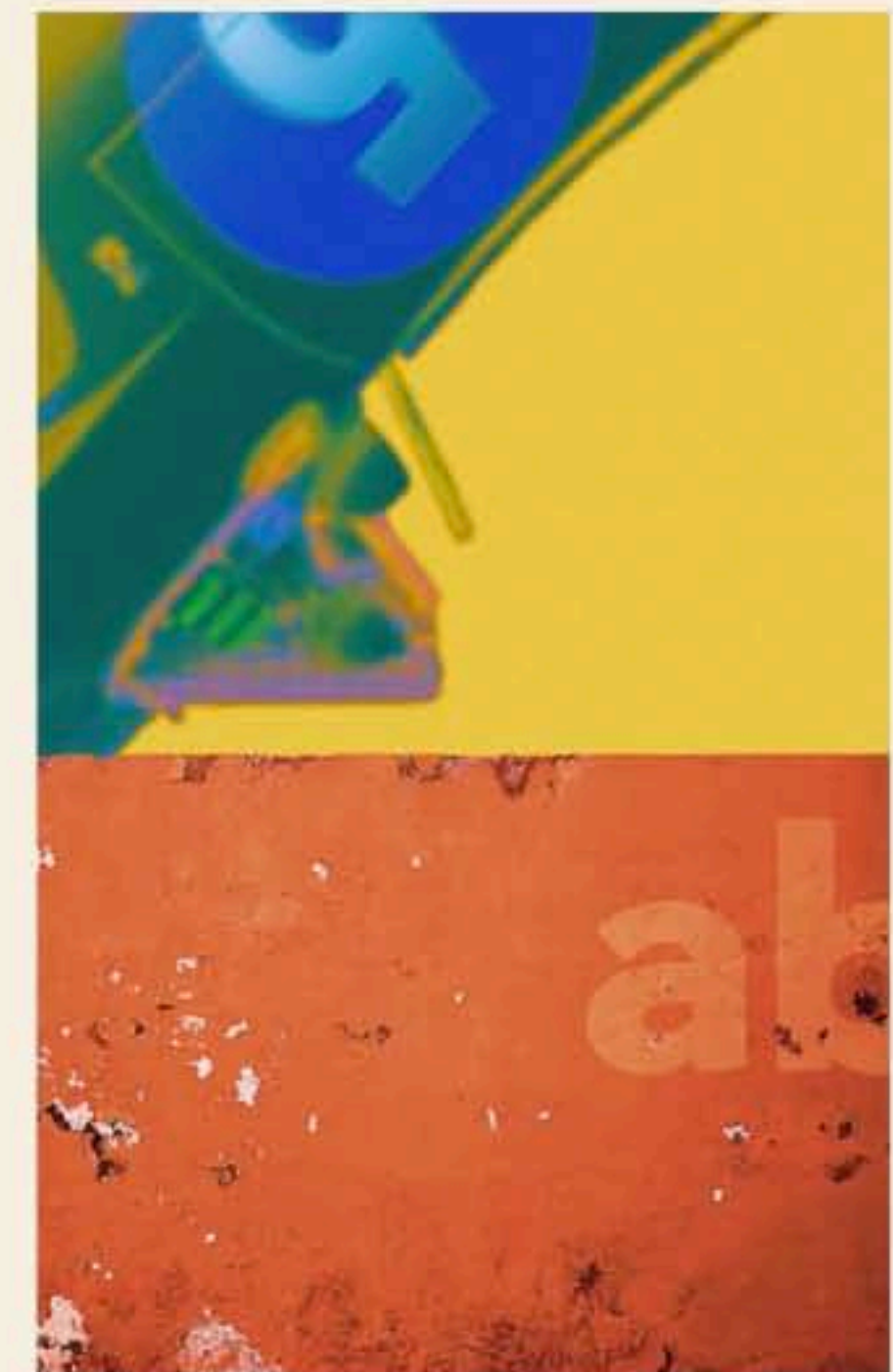
**What directions might we see you exploring next?**

I am blessed with intuition. The world is infinitely new, and old. I never cease to be amazed with what's next. Not being a dedicated follower of fashion, I plan to continue advocating for sublime "gorgeousness and gorgeosity".

**What are you working on at the moment?**

At the moment, my main focus is the completion of a 50" x 38" (127 x 96.5 cm) mixed media piece. It's a series of nine separate images on one canvas. I come back to it when I have the time to allow the missing elements to appear from the other side as David Lynch theorized in a 2014 interview at the Brooklyn Academy of Music: "The Other Room. Over there ... (pointing into the darkness off camera)"

**"My reward has always been other people having a positive reaction to my work."**



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**What role do traditional methods have in your work?**

In spite of being a digital artist, I still use pencil and paper to rough out whatever idea I have while splashing around in a puddle of consciousness. Even though digital applications have become a permanent part of my toolbox, I still rely on hand drawing to put the creative inspiration on paper. There was only monochromatic television with a display slightly larger than a laptop in the mid-twentieth century. Seeing the world and creating interpretively that personal invention was limited to traditional methods. LEGO was still in development. My grandmother showed me how to use a paring knife to sharpen my pencil. I refined the technique later with a lead pointer to sharpen for hardness grade. I learned how to use stumps and tortillons, how to grip a Speedball ink pen and how to rotate the paper for symmetrical geometry. I filled reams of paper with little sketch collections of everything I saw. These skills are never not useful, even if one later develops a more loose, impressionistic or nonrepresentational style (or if the electrical power grid is interrupted).

**What are you proudest of when looking back at your art career?**

Outside driving, I don't believe in checking the rearview mirror.

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