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Clayton Patterson *Outside In* with Paintings by Elsa Rensaa



His work is concerned with the truth, with facts. He has relentlessly devoted himself to a kind of culture that examines authority. —Ai Weiwei

Art is not a mirror to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it.

New York—**Howl! Happening** is pleased to present Clayton Patterson's *Outside In*. An incubator of talent and a bridge to a new generation interested in the vanishing history and idealism of the East Village/LES, Patterson's exhibition features the full range of his artistic practice, including sculpture, photographs, fashion, and books, as well as paintings by wife and lifelong collaborator, Elsa Rensaa. **Opening reception: Friday, June 19, 2015, 6–8 PM.** The exhibition continues through August 14th, 2015. Howl! Happening, 6 East 1st Street (between 2nd and Bowery). Free live streaming @ howlarts.org.

Before moving to the Lower East Side from Canada in 1979, Patterson studied at the Alberta College of Art and Design, the University of Alberta, and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax, which was an international center of experimental art hosting artists including Sol LeWitt, Claes Oldenburg, Eric Fischl, Joseph Beuys and Vito Acconci.

Patterson, widely known for his immense archive of life on the Lower East Side, intends with his new exhibition to use whatever tools are necessary, whatever medium is at hand, to combine art with activism—to bring the people, the place, “the wild, free, outlaw, utopian, visionary spirit of the Lower East Side” into his singular artistic vision.

“As an artist, you have to use what life offers you,” Patterson says. “Making sculpture, taking photographs, writing, painting—it’s about remaining creative and following that path.” The elegant sculptural cabinets in the show are crafted from artifacts found on the street—a “critique of the critique” about outsider/insider and taste in contemporary art. Toys, teeth, bullets, and scraps of posters, postcards and other urban detritus find their way into these archaeological objects—dazzling metaphorical dioramas—studded, lit, and painted in bright pinball colors.

The *Front Door* portraits on view at the gallery—taken outside his Essex Street digs—are “like the works of Jacob Riis and Weegee before him . . . moments of real life as they’re happening, unglamorized and unromanticized,” says John Strausbaugh (*The Village: 400 Years of Beats and Bohemians, Radicals and Rogues*, Ecco Press, 2014) in his essay for the catalogue. He continues: “They present a kind of mosaic of the neighborhood as it was, one face at a time: tenement kids and homeless people, poets and politicians, drug dealers and drag queens, rabbis and santeros, beat cops, graffiti writers, hookers, junkies, punks, anarchists, squatters, mystics and crackpots.” In these portraits, Patterson captures not only his subjects, but the connections and mutual understanding inherent in this exchange.

Also on view are the distinctive baseball caps he and Rensaa began designing in 1986. In the hands of the artists, this pedestrian accessory became a hallucinatory riot of pattern and decoration. Troy Patterson, in the “The Common Man’s Crown” (*New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 2015), contextualizes the groundbreaking fashion statement this way: “In designing baseball caps with a distinct vocabulary of decoration—the skulls and bones, street-art demons and Pop fragments and quizzical runes embroidered by his wife—Patterson stakes a claim as the creator of the first designer-branded baseball cap. But the caps are emblems of a different sort of grittiness. The anarchic embroidery spills over the front of the crown around to its sides and down the brim to its underside . . . evoking graffiti and merging rebellion and joy.”

In 2015, Patterson and Rensaa loaned their signature stitch imagery to a collaboration with designer [Siki Im](#) for his fall 2015 collection. Their artisanal chain-stitch embroidery method adds eye-popping color to Im’s all-black fashion statement. “This is our folk art,” comments Patterson. “Hands-on craftsmanship, individually made.”

Historian Strausbaugh also notes the couple’s place in the history and narrative of the East Village, when he says, “Patterson [is] what the Germans call a *Kulturträger*, someone who makes the connections that preserve and transmit culture. As the old, outlaw Lower East Side recedes, he has turned from documentarian to historian, organizing and editing indispensable books on the neighborhood’s ‘tragic, glorious, sometimes depressing’ history as remembered and explained by people who lived it and shaped it.”

Captured, Patterson’s film about the Lower East Side as incubator for underground film and avant-garde video; *Resistance*, about the neighborhood’s radical political and social history (both to be screened during the course of the exhibition); and his magnum opus, the three-volume *Jews: A People’s History of the Lower East Side*, speak to this theme.

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Complementing Patterson's solo work, Elsa Rensaa's paintings display her mastery of acrylic paints and a world of subject matter all her own. During the turbulent political period on the LES, Elsa was Patterson's wing woman. As Elsa says in *Captured*, "We are Clayton."

[About Clayton Patterson](#) and Elsa Rensaa
[About Howl! Happening](#)

Photo in release: *Blue and Pink* (detail), Cabinet, 1976. 76 x 48 x 20 inches. Photo: Jason Wyche
Photo attached: Clayton Patterson, *Front Door* series, photograph, 1993

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