

ArtReview

An interview with Gerasimos Floratos

As his solo opens in Berlin, the artist talks to Ross Simonini about art and pain, myths and reality – and the value of cold emailing

By **Ross Simonini**



Gerasimos Floratos's New York Studio. Photo courtesy the author

At the end of August, Gerasimos Floratos came out to stay with me on Fire Island, where I'd been spending the summer. We'd had similar vacation encounters before – at my home in the California redwoods, and on the Greek island of Kefalonia, where Floratos occasionally lives and works.

While he and I often meet in little paradises, Floratos has spent most of his life in Hell's Kitchen, Manhattan, just a few blocks from the urban jungle of Times Square. He calls it "the centre of the centre", the pounding heart of capitalist society, throbbing with hungry tourists, Broadway musicals, glowing advertisements and candy-coloured chain stores.

Born in 1986, he grew up here, working at his family's deli, making sandwiches and selling Lotto tickets. He continues to live and work in the neighbourhood, in a studio he affectionately calls his "concrete dungeon". Down there, he smokes, blasts trap music and jams his paintings with the frenetic buzz of the city. He attacks his surfaces with his own personal symbology – the rabbit, the sneaker, the cigarette, the skyscraper, the globe – carving his images with fat paint-

sticks and a style that riffs on graffiti and cartoons, brand logos and teenage notebook drawings. To add some extra “personality”, he hangs the canvases loose atop irregular stretchers, giving them a sculptural slouch, not unlike the baggy-eyed slackers who loiter within his paintings.

Floratos also does a bit of curating, and this autumn he put together a group show, *Heavy Sauce*, at Fountain House Gallery, the programme of which features artists living with mental illness. The space is also in Hell’s Kitchen and gave him some of his earliest art-viewing experiences. For the show, he provided artists with a prompt in the form of a Lee Lozano quote, which equally evokes his own work: ‘Every day thousands of pounds of paint are applied to buildings in NYC, signs, benches, etc., which can only mean that the city is getting heavier and heavier’. Last year, Floratos and I curated a show together (*Guerneville* at NIAD in Richmond, California), and we’ve been discussing art for years, long before his first solo exhibition at White Columns in 2016 and a brisk professional ascent that might be attributed to the intensity he brings to his work and to his relentlessly entrepreneurial mind.

He came to the island to take a break from artmaking and the city, where he’d been finishing a new show for Tanya Leighton’s gallery in Berlin. For two days, he forced himself to relax, and we spoke while drawing on the deck, strolling and soaking in the hot tub on a cloudy afternoon. The following interview is his first published conversation.

Ross Simonini *You’ve been pushing pretty hard these last few years.*

Gerasimos Floratos I don’t know any other way to be. I still can’t believe this life is an option. But I don’t ever want to take it for granted. So when I have the opportunity to share what I’ve been working on, it makes me want to go deeper, to give more of my time, of myself.

RS *And yet we often cross paths on vacation spots like this.*

GF There’s the myth of someone who spends every waking minute giving to their craft... But that’ll kill you.

RS *On the other hand, even this talk is a form of work for us both.*

GF Honestly, it’s all the same to me now. My mind is always in the studio, even when I’m not.

RS *Do you think there’s some validity to the myth of the fully obsessive artist?*

GF Sure, but there’s the opposite of that, too, the other myth: the Midas touch. The artist who does very little but everything they touch turns to genius. I also think you can create the illusion of that by showing very little.

RS *Which painters have the Midas touch?*

GF [Antoni] Tàpies. His stuff is real fast. In his paintings, it's like he's really trying to get the fuck out of the room, like he's trying to finish the job as soon as possible.

RS *Do you think these myths are problems for artists?*

GF Personally, I don't subscribe to either. You got to be both. But it's 100 percent all good when other artists identify with one of these myths. It's all performance.

Martial art

RS *But you have a bit of your own myth, right? The Greek-American Deli Boy of Times Square. Your origin story.*

GF It's there. It's both conscious and unconscious. Myths can be perpetuated, sure, but I just try to stay conscious of my position.

RS *Another part of your history is capoeira. You were committed to that for years.*

GF I was very physical as a kid. I did gymnastics and acrobatics and I did capoeira from eight until I was about eighteen. The school I was a part of was called *abadá* capoeira. It was one of the biggest in the world. My teacher was this very small lady who could hold her own against these six-foot jacked men. She taught me everything. She took me under her wing and I got obsessed – it's a whole philosophy, a lifestyle, a music. You have to learn the instruments, how to sing it, how to play the instruments. I had a nickname, *tomate*, because my face would get so red when I practised. I was fully involved. I wanted to spend my life as a capoeirista.

RS *Were you drawing back then?*

GF I was drawing signs for the deli and the capoeira flyers, but I didn't really think about being an artist.

RS *Are you physical with your work now?*

GF I don't think I could do the scale of painting I'm doing without having trained in capoeira. I have friends who can't touch their toes. If I couldn't do that, I couldn't paint like this. I paint on the ground. To do that, and to work on something that's 6 x 8 feet, without stepping all over it, you have to get on the ground and be like this [props himself on his arms, rotating his body over an imaginary painting]. You have to be able to reach over the painting and not ruin the wet part you just painted. There are very few ways to do that. It's hard to get to the middle of the work, unless you create some kind of *Mission Impossible* system. Or I have to be able to sit for mad-long to paint. Like this [gets into a crouch]. I'm a little better at some of that stuff because I'm so flexible. My flexibility is what allowed me to get into capoeira and acrobatics. I didn't have to stretch as much. But being flexible is also how I hurt myself.

RS *What did you hurt?*

GF My shoulder, knee and hip. I was eighteen and my body was breaking down.

RS *Is that why you stopped capoeira?*

GF Partly. I could do these holds, these handstands where your feet hang over your body and you're hyperextending. It's beautiful and amazing, and you spend hours and hours on it, and then one day, something just pops.

RS *Do you ever get pain from painting?*

GF My wrists definitely do. I push hard when I paint. Also some back pain. And my hips get sore from sitting in the studio for hours.

RS *On a couch?*

GF Yeah, and a La-Z-Boy. My problem is, I love to lean over, to hunch on a couch and draw on a coffee table for long periods of time. It's my favourite thing, but it's the worst. Or I'll lean on my side. I'm really starting to notice these bad habits.

A beach beneath the street

RS *So no major studio injuries yet.*

GF Well, I've slipped on paint can lids. I'll fall back on my hands and it kills my wrists. And I get paint all over me. Takes a whole case of baby wipes to get it off. I also pulled my back recently when I had a flood in my studio. I had a bunch of paintings on the ground and I had to get them all up super quick.

RS *What flooded?*

GF I work in the basement and a sewage pipe beneath my stuff got clogged.

RS *How do you address pain like this?*

GF I don't meditate much but sometimes when I have pain, I'll close my eyes and picture my body as an empty shell and there will be this intense colour in the places that are causing me stress or pain. And I'll just picture that flowing out of my fingertips or my head, and it helps. I'll visualise all the tendons and ligaments, and I'll remember that while I'm painting. Sometimes I'm trying to describe that in the paintings.

RS *Do you enjoy working in a basement?*

GF I love it. It's my beach under the sidewalk. It's windowless and the building extends under the sidewalk, so I hear every footstep. I feel connected to every person who walks by. I take a little bit of energy from each of them.

RS *Your studio is right down the street from your family's deli, where you worked for a long time. The family business seems to affect your relationship to the financial side of art.*

GF Yeah, some of my New York instinct comes out around money. I have no problem in role-playing as the person who wants money. When you want to share your work, you have to interact with galleries, so you're going to have to think about this stuff, whether you like it or not. So how I deal with that is when it comes down to the business side of things, I'm business about it.

RS *You're one of the few artists I know willing to dive into that subject, which is refreshing. Most people seem scared of money or refuse to talk about it.*

GF Artists need to protect themselves from being taken advantage of. They need to think about money. I think it's good to have a lack of shame in that department. Not talking about money is how people get taken advantage of. But I think that shame around money comes from the top, not from the bottom. Money is how artists are able to continue working, and I look at it as an essential function of this machine.

Getting real

RS *Another myth: the starving artist.*

GF The myth that all artists are anticapitalist. I think capitalism is built into a lot of Pop art, for instance. But I think wealthy people want to imagine that artists hate money because then they have access to something they are not.

RS *The exotic artist.*

GF But it's a detriment to the artist. It makes artists feel they have to be overly passionate diehard rebels. But guess what? If you're broke, you work for someone. At least in the US. Unless you have your own money. You want to be free, you got to work for it. It's a complex, fucked-up situation. I just don't want to feel owned by any gallerist or collector. So I have to take care of my shit so I don't owe anyone anything. I don't need to buy new Lululemon track trainers every month. I don't want to have to think, should I call that person I don't really know who offered to buy a painting?

RS *And if you're showing in galleries, then money is inherently part of the work, even if you refuse to acknowledge it.*

GF My reality is health insurance and rent. My reality is making work in the face of all my bills. Everyone loves the things that money brings. I don't think money is a path to anything on its own, but surviving is just as important as making the work. If the artist isn't around to make the work, nothing else matters. It's a little cynical, I guess, but ultimately I'd like to fuck off and not have to make money.

RS *You probably experience that when you spend time in Kefalonia.*

GF And I could do that because I was selling paintings. I wasn't showing. I was just working. It's a sensitive subject, even for me, but I did a talk [for the Syllabus programme at Studio Voltaire] on it some years ago, about alternative ways of entering the artworld.

RS *You didn't go to art school, for instance.*

GF I talked a lot about getting involved in communities. I knew if I wanted to show my work I had to be a part of the conversation organically. And once you do that, all those other people – galleries, curators, collectors, museums – they just want to document you. They won't tell you how to paint. They're documentarians. You have to show them your vision.

RS *And how did you do that?*

GF So how I did that is I was cold emailing people when I was younger. That's how I met a lot of people. I'd sincerely write people and say, "Hey, will you have me over? I'm a fan."

RS *That's how we met. You asked to come to my studio.*

GF That's how we met! And it worked. I'm a huge fan of cold emails. You have to be an advocate of your work.

RS *You have a lot of confidence.*

GF It's sickening [laughs]. But it's not based on myself being a great person or being super smart. I just really believe in the paintings. I think they are great. People see that I blindly believe in my work and that makes them confident. I think it's important to express your belief in the work, especially if you are making work that isn't seen so easily. Because if you can't believe in the work, nobody else will. But still, it takes time, which is all I had. Plus I had the ego for it. And that's what I started with. I was working like a dog at the deli and I knew I had to make work about my experience. That's when the work just flowed. During that time – 2015 – I feel like I didn't make enough paintings. I should have made hundreds. I didn't have to think.

RS *Do you ever show work that you're not confident about?*

GF I've done it. Part of the confidence comes out of the fact that I did everything I could to make this thing mine. Whether that's sitting in front of it for two days, two months... It's my connection to the work. But I've made the mistake of letting go of the work without having that feeling. And even if the work is well received, I never get over it.

RS *Do you spend most of your time alone in the studio?*

GF Yeah. I was an only child. Plus I don't have assistants.

RS *Do you want any?*

GF Naw. I don't want people to know my shit. I want to be alone in there. My studio environment feeds my impulses. I want to be able to have a vision and get it on canvas as soon as possible. For me that means not having things in perfect places: blues in this corner, reds in that corner. I don't want any obstructions. My studio is like my bedroom. If you make your space and touch all those items, I feel I might be making a place where I can get some personal magic. Sometimes I use assistants for cleaning or making stretchers, but that's it.

Making mistakes

RS *Are your stretchers still pretty wonky?*

GF The thing is, you can't *try* and make them wonky. That'll look like a shaped canvas. What you have to do is know how shitty things are built and perfect that by making it shittier. You have to enter the mind of a very lazy person who wants to get the job done fast so he can go have a beer.

RS *Are you like that?*

GF I just know from that. I know people like that. Repetition kills it though. It's about innovation. Making mistakes is closer to innovation than repetition. It's quick, economic. I rush through it and glue and nail and staple it together as fast as possible. And if I work with someone, if I'm too lazy to do the work, I'll hover over them like an asshole and scream, "Faster! Faster! What are you doing? Just finish it! Soak it in glue!" and that pressure gets it done right. But don't try to make it wonky or you'll look like Frank Stella.

RS *Are the canvases hanging pretty loose these days?*

GF They get loose because I'm aggressive, not soft. I kick them and slide them and my hands are like jaws that crush the paintings. You can't fake a touch. I want to see it bend. I want character. I think it's silly when it's all tight – unless you're all about the flatness, if that's your thing. Some

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

people are great with that, like Rothko. But for me, I think that imperfection is so much more telling about a mood.

RS *The painting is falling apart.*

GF They are hanging on to survive. It's a joke, almost. But it's also sincere. It's complex.

Gerasimos Floratos: There's a sidewalk inside this gut is on view at Tanya Leighton, Berlin, through 20 December 2019