

## Jason LeBlond – Artist Profile

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

Given his name, it's only fitting that **Jason LeBlond** has a thing for fair-haired, flaxen beauties whose blondeness is a prime component of their iconic image. As the man behind the US launch of *Marilyn in Art* – a pop-art book of collected artists' renditions of Marilyn Monroe – LeBlond is currently doing double-duty as curator of the exhibit/book launch, as well as one of its featured artists. The show arrives just in time for what would have been Monroe's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday year, opening August 8, 2006 at the Gershwin Hotel and running throughout the month.

Local New York City artists featured in the book will also be on hand, including Tarantola (whose brush painting appears on the cover of *Marilyn in Art*) and Ron English (whose print "The Golden Age of Glam Art" dominates the bar area of the hotel lobby). Much of the work on view references a bygone era of superficial glamour and underlying darkness (anything dealing with Monroe is automatically imbued with a sense of nostalgia and innocence-lost), and LeBlond attributes our ongoing fascination with her to the tension those extremes create. In his own work "Dark Roots", he strives to convey this difficult dichotomy.

"There are so many beautiful glamorous images of her but she was in reality such a tragic figure and carried so much sadness with her throughout her life... so I wanted to represent that and do something that hadn't been done before," he says. It was also a personal work for LeBlond. "As much as it is a painting about Marilyn it was also a painting about me...prior to completing that painting, let's just say I was in a "blue period", I had gone through a bout of extreme insomnia, hence the sleeping pills... so in essence I was purging myself of all that negative energy....not at Marilyn's expense, but rather I empathized with her own anxiety."

This is Mr. LeBlond's first time curating a show, and as an "independent curator" without any official gallery-backing, it's no small feat. He certainly has a knack for pulling it off, as evidenced by his 2004 event celebrating the release of sister-book *Madonna in Art*. There's also his work as Creative Director of Museum Masters International, where he is accustomed to working on the crux of art and commerce. In a world where art seems to be increasingly devalued, and funding is evaporating quickly under the current administration, LeBlond finds hope and inspiration in the lasting contributions of such artistic legends as Andy Warhol, Keith Haring, Vincent van Gogh, Frida Kahlo, and Rene Magritte.

“On a personal level making art is very cathartic and it's empowering to be able to make something out of nothing,” LeBlond admits. “In a broader sense and as a higher purpose, art can convey very powerful messages and is the most universal way we can communicate with one another.”

Current artists like Mr. English also inspire LeBlond. “I'm honored to have Ron English contributing work to the Marilyn show,” he remarks. “I'd say that Ron and I think alike in the way we make reference to art history through our work. For my Marilyn painting "Dark Roots" I was particularly inspired by the Pop artist Mel Ramos. He's best known for his paintings of pin-up women who are juxtaposed with over-sized products of mass-consumption like candy bars and ketchup bottles... so the idea of having Norma-Jean/Marilyn riding on top of prescription pill bottle....I must say was very much inspired by him! Ramos did a series of "Peek-a-boo Marylins" where we voyeuristically see her through a keyhole - I'm including prints of those in the show.”

When everything is a post-modern reference to something that came before it, and the essence of pop-art is an amalgamation of influences, there is a give-and-take sense of shared inspiration in a collection like *Marilyn in Art*.

“My idea for the show (and the concept of this series of books) is to give exposure to new emerging and unknown talents like myself alongside historical masters and acclaimed modern and contemporary artists... through the unified theme of the icon and the muse,” he explains. It's a genius notion – the coupling of burgeoning artists with established stars – and a symbiotic relationship that finds storied tradition in the realm of pop art.

As for his thing for blondes (even his portrait of Halle Berry features her in the white-blonde wig she sports in *X-Men*), it's nothing more than an appreciation of power and beauty. “There's a whole lineage of female blonde icons that inspire me: Debbie Harry, Madonna, Courtney Love, Cyndi Lauper, Gwen Stefani... most of whom have been subjects in my paintings,” LeBlond explains. In the end it all comes back to Ms. Monroe. “I think these other "demi-blondes" all wish to connect with the archetype of Marilyn, whose image holds so much power and appeal... she's the ultimate Goddess of Beauty manifested on earth.”

That beauty – both dark and hopeful at the same time – forms the spark and fascination that will always render art relevant in this world.