

UrbanFlesh: Bodypainting by Anthony Larissey

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

According to NY-based bodypainter Anthony Larissey, "Every one looks better in paint!"

His canvass is the human body. He paints the skin, with all of its underlying curves, muscles, and pores. His brush caresses the cells of our outer shell, simultaneously hiding and revealing its secrets, releasing its latent beauty, and renewing its age-old palette. His artwork is transient, fleeting, and quintessentially of-the-moment. It cannot last. It is evanescent, elusive, illusory magic. It enchants and casts its ephemeral spells, only to fade with the elements. This is the realm of bodypainting master artist Anthony Larissey.

You may have seen his work in campaigns and ad events for Alize, *HX Magazine*, and the Broadway Bares fundraisers, but his distinctive art is being exhibited in books and on film as well. Most recently, his work appeared on the cover of *Next Magazine*, where he transformed a model into a Mardi Gras-inspired jester of psychedelic colors, sparkles, and intricate design.

"You'd be amazed at the requests I get!" Larissey says regarding the uses of bodypainting. "I work on a lot of photo-shoots. Sometimes I paint a logo for a client like Grey Goose Vodka, or Philadelphia's circuit party, Blue Ball. And sometimes I'll paint a model from head to toe like I just did for Patrick McMullan's book party for *Kiss Kiss*. This summer I worked on a film called *My Name is Nigel Cook*--it's hilarious. I paint a lot of dancers. I love painting at live events too. It's fun to see the reaction of guests. Very often, party-goers will visit me and the models throughout the night to see the progress of the painting. We also get volunteers to be painted as well!"

Bodypainting has been used to great success in the advertising world, where printing a product's name on someone's chest or back has a unique, memorable effect for the viewer. In today's competitive world, just getting your name out there is a measure of success. But it's the artistic side of his work that excites Larissey the most.

"I've painted for as long as I can remember and I've always been interested in working with new and different mediums. I had seen some bodypainting done, and I became fascinated. I loved the idea that the art takes on a new level by being incorporated with a living being. And there's just something incredibly sexy about it! So one day I bought some product, recruited friends who I knew would be willing, and I began to build my portfolio."

Larissey's passion is for beauty and transformation. He transfigures the human body into something otherworldly, something surreal and slightly Picasso-like in its sometimes jarring effect. His work tricks the eye. Demanding double-takes and closer examination is a fundamental sign of artistic relevance, and facets of that tenet have been at work for centuries. There is an animalistic and primal aspect to the process, referencing the tribal body paint of warriors past, the traditional Indian henna applications, or even the intricate Japanese tattoos of today.

Unlike tattoos, however, bodypainting is far from permanent. It is a close relative of performance art, particularly in its temporal limitations. It is not meant to last beyond a few hours – a day at the most – and its extremely short shelf-life adds to its exotic appeal. When asked how it feels to put hours and hours of effort into creating this work of art, then having it leave, literally, after a few moments - its essence only captured by a photo at the most - Larissey is pragmatic.

“That's part of the magic for me,” he explains. Bodypainting is as much about the process as it is the final result. That fleeting moment of when the painting is complete brings an incredible focus to the project because the viewer understands that it's all about that moment. It makes you much more aware.”

Whereas some works of art rely on solitary contemplation, the experience of Larissey's work partly depends on the visceral dynamics of personal interaction. One of the most enjoyable parts of his craft is the collaboration inextricably involved in a bodypainting project - a far cry from his humble solo beginnings.

“When I first started out, I painted my full body. I was so anxious to get into the medium, so I did it literally. Looking back I laugh - it was the most simple application you could imagine, but I thought it was great at the time. I'm proud of the progress I've made!” These days he has the luxury and enjoyment of being able to work with other people when creating his artwork.

“The models bring a vital personality and life to the art,” he explains. “I've had the good fortune of working with some incredibly talented models, photographers, event designers and producers. I'm fortunate to be able to collaborate with such gifted and passionate people.”

The exuberance he displays in working with others comes across in his art, as evidenced by the enjoyment he takes in the execution of a bodypainting project – the scope of which goes far beyond a few simple brushstrokes.

“For me, a successful bodypainting session starts with an original concept,” Larissey explains. He begins by planning and sketching a final vision. Once that is determined, he sets his sight on the more technical aspects of the process.

“I use a variety of products, but everything is designed for the skin,” he says. “Cosmetics and stage make-up paint the body well. Often times I'll make a stencil for creating patterns, and use different sponges, brushes and even airbrushes for application. Then I use a variety of powders and finishes... sometimes I glue jewels and stones on the body for added effect.”

Ideally, models are smooth and shaved. Hair, Larissey claims, is not pretty when mixed with paint. When the planning and prep work are complete, “Then all I need is a canvas and my paints. Some photo-shoots have taken over six hours, but it's worth it. When a painted body makes a statement, or illustrates a vision, or displays intricate detail, or makes an impact on the viewer, it's all worth it.”

He has intense blue eyes, and they see what others often miss - the artistic spark of possibility coupled with a feverish imagination and raw talent. From start to finish, Larissey remains intently focused on each part of the process, and that sort of care and control is an integral component of self-fulfillment.

To date, the work of which he is most proud is his deck of cards, which formed an outlet for a number of his artistic ambitions. “It's a true solo project,” he says with well-deserved pride. “I created all the designs, painted all the bodies and took all the photographs. It's a full representation of my artwork - from the most simple concept, to the most complex and intricate design. But more importantly, it includes over 50 models from all walks of life. The youngest is 19 and the oldest is 57 years old. Every ethnicity you can possibly imagine is represented. I recruited models from my group of friends, online - even on the streets. Some of the guys are professional models and Broadway dancers, but most of them are real guys - lawyers, real estate agents, waiters, writers, management, brokers, designers, athletes, etc.”

The cards may be the closest one can get to capturing this form of art for posterity, and they're a nifty keepsake of the momentary beauty that Larissey creates. For those who have been painted, however, no such keepsake is needed - the memory of the experience is enough.

“The models are always amazed at the transformation of their own bodies,” Larissey says gratefully. “They tell me they actually feel different - almost as if they've gotten into character for a performance. And if they were aware of their own nudity when we started, they tell me the paint makes them forget they're not wearing clothes. They're often surprised at how quickly the session goes, even though we paint for several hours. Plus, everyone looks better in paint, so they love how good their bodies look!”