The Coolest Art We've Ever Seen From A Ballpoint Pen

How Brooklyn artist Shane McAdams makes dazzling abstract paintings out of ballpoint pens--and why he has to rent a tanning booth to do it.

I know I'm not alone when I say that I hate writing with ballpoint pens--cheap, clumsy, no-good ballpoint pens. They make my signature look like it came from some 7-year-old kid who's just learning cursive. But it turns out that for creating art, they're actually incredibly awesome. Ask Brooklyn artist Shane McAdams. He uses the cruddy old pens to fashion hypnotic abstract paintings that, by my lights, fall somewhere between a Rothko and a Grateful Dead tapestry.

He calls them "Pen Blow" paintings, and not by accident. His method--developed after countless material experiments with everything from coffee to Elmers glue--goes like this: He opens ballpoint pen cartridges, yanks off the tips, then, with his mouth, blows ink through the tubes onto 12-inch-by-12 inch or 24-by-24-inch panels. When the ink flows out, it's saturated with color and so viscous that, "Instead of turning to a mist, it blows out into sticky interconnected strings," McAdams tells Co.Design. That gives the paintings a spider web-like quality.

Then--no joke--he heads to the tanning salon. McAdams explains:

One thing I've figured out is that most pens aren't lightfast, meaning they fade in UV light. As a result I've had to test every type of pen, usually by spreading the ink out, putting tape over half of it and renting out a tanning booth for the day. I also cover the ink in UV resin. When really hot, it will activate the ink and cause it to bleed and streak. Hence, the forms you see in most of this new work.

McAdams tells us that his pen blow technique has evolved into "pen pours, spins, flows and other derivatives" (all of which you can soak up on his website). "The work that you see is the result of hundreds of hours of testing and playing with the material to know what it can do," he says. Forgive the pun here, but my mind is blown.

[Images courtesy of Shane McAdams]