



Opposite page: *Sleeping Beauty*, 2015, 30" x 36".  
This page: *American Burka*, 2003, 68" x 17" x 12".



# COMPOSING ART

Bernie Taupin brings the same passion to his paintings and sculptures as he does to his hit songs

Interview by Jacquelyn Powers Maurice

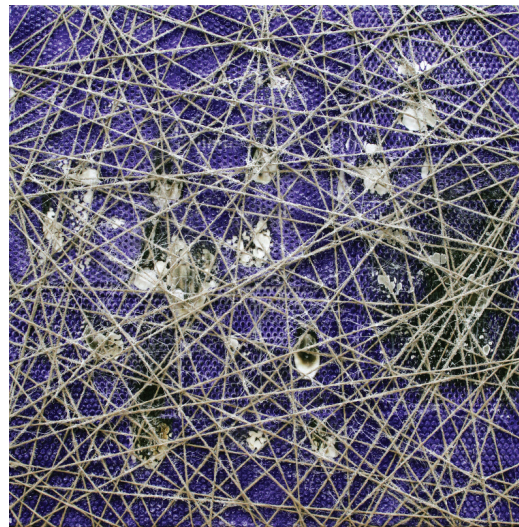
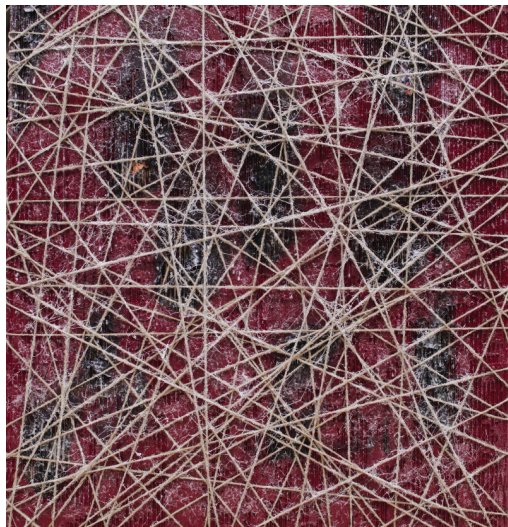
**B**ernie Taupin is an artist who expresses himself via words—creating some of the most popular, enduring songs of all time—and with paint, twine and flags, for a series of provocative paintings and sculptures. In these latter endeavors, however, the aim is authenticity, not fame.

For Taupin, creativity is a solitary process—both in his painting and songwriting. His art is about the communication with the canvas, not the audience. It's up to the viewer to put the finished work in context. Similarly, when Taupin writes lyrics for musicians—including his longtime collaborator, Elton John—he often does so without interacting with the artist. The purpose is for the singer to entertain with the words set to music, not as an end in itself.

His artwork is just as evocative: Taupin incorporates rustic elements, such as found twine and nails, to create canvases and sculptures with a technique he calls web and weave. The American flag is also a recurring theme for the British-born artist, literally woven into his work. And though he has been painting since the mid '90s, Taupin has been hitting up the art circuit in a major way recently, with shows in Dallas, Chicago, Aspen and Southampton.

"Taupin's artwork definitively transcends the line that we use to delineate what makes an artist," says gallerist Mark Borghi, who will be exhibiting Taupin's pieces at Art Miami this year. "The work is grounded in a formality that our eyes are accustomed to and yet seems to reach a new plane of achievement. His originality and use of color and space is a surprise for those unaware that Bernie has expanded his horizons to develop into such a fine artist."





You’ve said, “To me colors are like words...they express emotions.” What colors express happiness for you? Sadness? Anger? Peace? I don’t feel brighter colors necessarily constitute upbeat feelings, although without contradiction they can accomplish the job if the emotion is one of simple joy. However, in much of my work darker colors such as blacks and deep blues might convey the depth of musical genres such as the blues and jazz or old-school folk and country. These musical forms are the blueprint of much of what I create, so it could be said that their emotion and passion, which is exhilarating, brings a deeper style of muted exuberance.

Your music has made billions of people happy across the world. Your painting career, however, seems to be a more personal, private experience, not meant for entertaining per se, but for the art itself. Can you elaborate on this dichotomy? I really don’t see the dichotomy in it. I’ve always been solitary in whatever I’ve created. I’m not by nature an entertainer; if my artwork is appreciated then it’s no different in its own way than any of my other past endeavors.

Which is more fun for you: songwriting or painting? Kandinsky said, ‘Music is the ultimate teacher,’ with which I’m not about to argue. Music and art are impossibly combined. They both come from creative thought: one visual, one sonic. The Blue Rider movement also believed that abstract art is like music, in that so much of it is improvisation.

What music do you listen to while painting? Music is always playing when I’m in my studio. It’s pretty much orchestrated by what I’m working on, but for the most part it’s either jazz or blues with the occasional spin of classic country or world music. Whatever it is, it’s as much part of the creative process as anything else, brain food as a tool.

What artists have influenced you?

Hans Hofmann and Anselm Kiefer were certainly early influences, Hofmann for his fearless use of basic colors and Kiefer for the complexity of his mediums. Having said that, though, I’ve always strived to have an original presence on the canvas, which I believe is something all creative individuals in every area of the arts wish for. I’m also a huge fan of abstract expressionism from the ’40s, ’50s and ’60s, including all the usual suspects. The pop art movement also included some wonderfully imaginative and creative individuals, including Warhol, whom I’ve always admired simply for the fact that no one ever called him a painter: He was always simply an artist.

Your artist’s studio is your former racquetball court. Does working in this kind of a repurposed space give you energy?

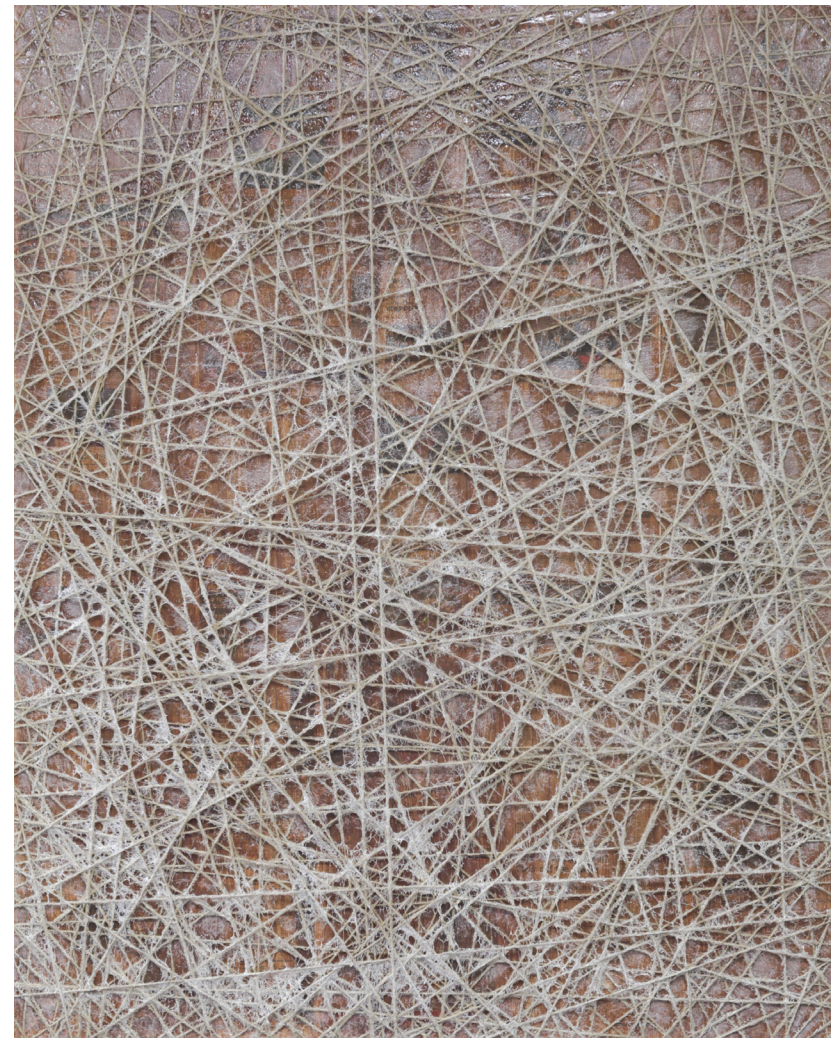
It’s more important that it’s a large space, which is a necessity for someone who needs a lot of swinging room. I believe you put the energy in the room; the room doesn’t put the energy in you.

How has your painting style

evolved since you started in the ’90s?

You strive to find an original style, so I would say that I have gone from purloining elements of my heroes into developing something that is wholly original. My earlier work was certainly of an abstract expressionistic nature, lots of blocks and vertical lines of bright color that have been replaced by large canvases of multimedia found items infused with more rustic and muted elements. Flags are also a theme. What attracts you to them?

Yes, flags are a wonderful medium and are featured heavily in much of my work. The American flag in particular is an inspirational item that I have utilized in all manner of different ways—torn, bruised, burnt and battered. To many it might appear as disrespectful, but for me it simply shows its resilience and its history of rebounding from abject adversity. Be sure of one thing: It is done from a patriotic point of view.



Are there any pieces you won’t part with?

There are pieces I create that I find hard to part with, but I simply look at them and think, Wow! That means it must be good, it needs to be shown and I hope it finds a good home. There is the mentality of comparing it with letting your children go. We have to make that choice early on, and either hoard and not share or put it out there and see who relates. I love seeing my work curated and lit well in a great gallery. It’s liberating and immensely satisfying.


You’ve been very visible in 2015, with shows in the Hamptons, Dallas, Aspen and now Miami.

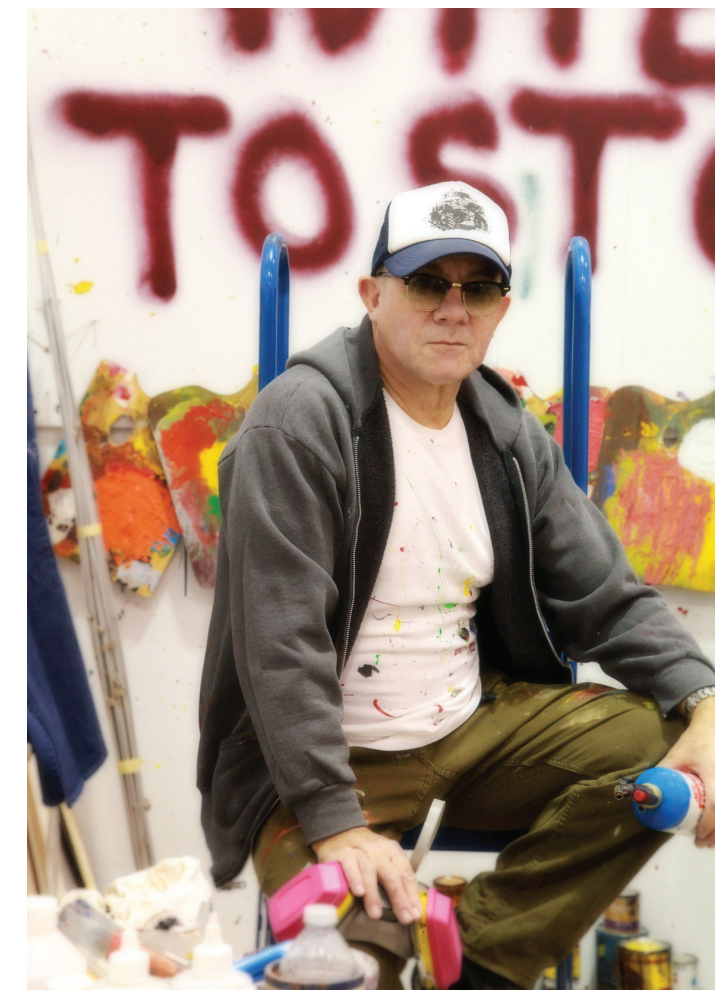
It’s been a busy year and I’ve been able to work with some great people, great fairs and great galleries. I’m deeply indebted to all those involved. The locations haven’t sucked, either!

How do you like interacting with your fans?

I’m an intensely private person, so sometimes the attention is a little overwhelming and there is the temptation to run and hide. I give as much as I can as long as the emphasis is what’s on the wall.

What are you most looking forward to about visiting Miami?

Conch fritters! 



Top: *Red*, 2015, 36" x 36"; *White*, 2015, 36" x 36"; *And Blue*, 2015, 36" x 36".

From the top: *Plain Brown Wrapper*, 2015, 48" x 60"; *Exit and Entry*, 2015, 36" x 36"; Bernie Taupin photographed by Candia Flynn.