

Mass Appeal issue 52, abril de 2013

REAS' MASTERPIECES

ARTIST TODD JAMES WAS ONCE ALL CITY. NOW, HE IS ALL WORLD. MEET THE FELLOW WHO SAYS 'HELLO' VIA BOLD BRUSH STROKES.

Todd James is someone who does what he says he's going to do.

Todd James grew up in New York City, and moved here when he was really young from Detroit. When he was in his wee teens, he decided that he wanted to write his name on subway trains. He didn't write his given name. He favored his alias — "Reas." According to Wikipedia, he is a self-taught, contemporary artist whose works reflect a variety of influences, from pop culture to painters like Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline. I remember his subway paintings vividly; they were always crisp but expressive, playful yet human, emotional but far from sappy. Years later, I came to understand that his graf was truly a reflection

of who he was as a person — which is saying something. Graffiti painting centers largely on the creation of letter forms, and, by default, words. The words James painted on the sides of subterranean steel chariots had balls. And if he painted a skillet, the bacon and eggs that sizzled and popped smiled back at you. Today, James' paintings are respected, shown and collected the world over. His paintings are colorful, aggressive and gentle at the same time, working with the kind of rhythm that a good DJ knows how to produce. Touching on nerves we know we have, but don't quite understand. We just roll with it and throw our hands up.

Mass Appeal: Well, being that you're in New York — a New Yorker who used to run around subway tunnels — it's interesting that you have such a fascination with Somali pirates. Talk about how that interest developed.

They're like portraits of guys at work. I think it's interesting that somebody can do that — and I'm not condoning it. But I view it as a multi-dimensional subject.

Todd James: I don't know. I saw something about them in the news; about how they stuck up, like, whole, tankers with a speedboat, one rocket launcher, and like a few hand-me-down AK-47's. I've done a bunch of paintings on them.

MA: And what's been the feedback on the series?

TJ: People ... like pirates (laughs). You know, Disney makes movies about pirates.

MA: Do you see a connection between your life as a so-called vandal and the lives that these modern-day pirates lead?

or however; I just make stuff. I just shift back and forth. I paint girls, you know? I paint tanks. It just so happens that I'm making a bunch of pirates right now. They're still interesting. For now.

time, too. You can look at as many pictures as you want but if you weren't there, you weren't there. When I talk to older guys who used to do it, I try to listen to them more than be like "I saw that one that you did" because I wasn't there for that.

TJ: You know, I've thought about this a lot and I guess the tie-in is that pirates and writers are reclaiming territory ... but writers are not putting people in that danger. If anything, they're putting themselves in danger.

MA: What's interesting about girls?

MA: What would you say is the aesthetic connection between your subway painting and your works on canvas?

MA: Indeed, indeed. Do you remember when you drew the first pirate?

MA: You seem to fancy them on the thicker side, drawings-wise.

TJ: It depends. If you look at some of my loops, it kind of looks like old-school arrow loops. There are little things, but sometimes it's super subtle.

TJ: Yeah. It was in a sketch in a book, and I put it away, you know? It was just a sketch. Then I needed an image for something, and I was looking through my books for ideas and I came across it and decided to make a painting of it.

TJ: Yeah, but I draw all different kinds. I like all different kinds (laughs).

MA: You were also painting trains at an interesting time — the mid to late '80s — when the trains were phasing out, and the initial boom of that gallery craze was completely dead. Many of the top cats became bike messengers to survive. Did you see a real future in the art, commercially at that point?

MA: Is there like a goal or an endpoint for this series? Where do you see yourself going?

MA: The feeling you get when you're painting a train — do you have a similar feeling when you're painting a canvas? What are the similarities? The differences?

TJ: I'm still going with it. I'm simultaneously doing a whole bunch of new stuff. I've been painting a lot of heads and faces, which are kind of like old graffiti character faces — big paintings of character heads and cartoon faces. I wanted to do something that was just purely fun. I don't plan on how many

TJ: The difference is like ... I knew where they were going to end up. It's like, once you did it they might as well be invisible and disappear 'cause they're not going to last long, but canvases are the opposite and I like that. With subway painting, if somebody didn't get to see it in person they didn't get to see it. And I kind of feel that way about that

TJ: I remember all that. I remember thinking, "Oh, there's a show tonight, and like these guys are going to be there." When you're 14, you're just like, whatever. You don't think about how things change or where things are going to be in five years. I remember going to some show and







getting a Keith Haring signature, and maybe like Futura and some other guys. I lost that black book in school, but I was like, oh, well. I'll go get another one tomorrow.' I wasn't thinking about gallery stuff at all, I was just excited to see some of the people who were doing exciting work on the subways. It was an exciting time, but like most good things, it came to an end.

Everything comes and goes in phases though, right? I'll say at the beginning of the millennium, like right around '98 or something, Barry McGee and Kaws started to do shows and it was a new take on what had happened in the '80s. The whole thing had gone global at that point — it just wasn't just New York anymore. Younger people were stepping up with different ideas. Barry was showing tags, which you and I and other people completely appreciated here, but I don't think galleries in the '80s were interested in showing that.

MA: How do you see things now? To me, it seems people are losing interest in like "traditional graffiti" and losing interest in the people from that pioneering school.

TJ: It's just going to keep going back and forth into little phases. People are always going to be interested in different parts of the history more than others at different times.

MA: True that. I've noticed that, when you occasionally paint or draw letters that you pay tribute, and have a real appreciation for, classic letter forms.

TJ: I actually like stuff I would have not liked when I first started. I like old stuff from the '70s that doesn't look "perfect." When I first got into it, the Sab and Kaze car was brand new; it was the perfect example of super-clean, technical work. I still love it, but there's something about looking at the old stuff—you can keep looking at it 'cause there's like all of these imperfections — I don't even know if that's even the right word — but it's just so raw. There is just something I like about the funkiness of the old stuff.

MA: What about influences before graf?

TJ: I remember really liking like John Byrne — X-Men. I remember looking at Jack Kirby stuff

early on. I knew instinctively there was something good about it; there was something blocky about it which gave it this graf-like feel. Let's put it this way: John Burn is like '80s graffiti, and Jack Kirby is like '70s graffiti.

On the subway there was a whole cartoon style that was pretty much developed by kids. And it was like regional. Regional to the subway system and that was the only place you could see it. You couldn't buy a comic that featured that style of art, and you couldn't see it on TV.

MA: How would you describe old New York vs current-day New York?

TJ: They are so many worlds apart. I mean, they're building buildings now where I just never would have imagined and it's just Look at Times Square. There are cool things that are gone — things that existed because nobody had any money, so there were creative solutions like, alright we're going to throw a party in this abandoned building, and that like turns into this other thing. That is not happening so much these days.



MA: So if you were a kid growing up in New York City today, what do you think your life would be like?

TJ: I really don't know 'cause there's all this technology now. It's like watching *The Little Rascals* and thinking about what kids then did, as opposed to what we did. I don't even know how to make that distinction. I don't know if we got it better or if they got it better.

MA: Over the years, you have done a lot of interesting collaborations and have created loads of cool products — like toys, clothing, books. Drop some science jewels on some of that.

TJ: I made that book *Mascots and Mugs* with Chino ... It's funny because way back when Steve [Powers] was working on his book, *The Art of Getting Over*, he asked me what kind of book would I do if I had the opportunity to do one. And I said, "the history of graffiti characters," 'cause it's something I know a lot about. So that idea was in the back of my mind for a long time. At some point, I decided to do it. It took a long time 'cause I had to track down the right people — like Doze, Tack and

Skeme. We had to track down pictures, old black books — all that stuff was super time-consuming, but I'm glad I did it.

MA: What are your thoughts on hip-hop today? Is there any hip hop that you like?

TJ: To me, Cam'ron is still new. Like, I'm stuck. Whatever he's made, that's what I'm listening to. But lately, I'm into this band called First Aid Kit — they're these two girls from Sweden that sing. They're like Simon and Garfunkel. I've seen them twice this year. So yeah, a little Cam'ron, a little First Aid Kit. R. Kelly, Sam Cooke — I love Sam Cooke. His gospel shit is better than his R&B stuff.

MA: What era of R. Kelly are you talking about?

TJ: Like newer — like mid-range (laughs). Mid-level, not early. At first I didn't like it but at some point it just hit me. I really like Destiny's Child, too. Beyoncé is great. But I was never into Guy or any of that '80s R&B. To me, that stuff was just like, ehrrrrrr.

MA: New Jack Swing ... on these nuts! Bringing

it back to New York. I know you worked at some legendary clubs, right?

TJ: I don't think I ever worked in a club. I was a bus boy for a minute, and actually, when I was bus boy, I think one of the two people whose tables I bussed was Mayor — I didn't know him at the time — Mayor Koch. I think it was around the time Sane and Smith painted the Brooklyn Bridge. I wanted to put a Sane Smith tag on the napkin while I set the table, but I decided against it. And then ummm ... I worked in a sweatshop in Chinatown.

MA: How the hell did you get that job?

TJ: My friend got me the job. Basically, it was me in a room full of Chinese dudes who were smoking all day and listening to American songs sung in Chinese. It was a fabric place, so like, we'd bring up rolls of fabric, and these dudes would cut 'em up on tables on two different floors. My job was to sweep up. I swept and carried stuff.

MA: How did they communicate with you?

TJ: One dude talked, the rest didn't. I don't even

think English was a part of the equation. It was a trippy scene. I remember I needed a job and I was looking in the wanted ads. I had been airbrushing at Unique — which was a big clothing store on Broadway; Wane C.O.D and a bunch of other guys worked there as well — but that gig went belly up. So I saw a job in the paper: "Air artist wanted." So I called up like, "Yeah, I airbrush," and they were like, "Yeah, we're out here in Queens, can you do super detailed work?" And I mean, I wasn't doing like super detailed work, but I was like "Yeah, yeah, what do you need?" They were like, "Can you paint really realistic eyes?" I was like, yeah. They said they needed me to paint life-size religious statues ...

MA: What?!

TJ: Luckily, I got a call from a friend of mine who used to direct videos; he called me to do a huge Nintendo commercial, which I actually was in. We painted this huge building by Peter Luger's steak house in Williamsburg, and the Wu-Tang Clan did the voices. RZA and 'Ol Dirty Bastard did the voice track for it and Prince Paul did the music. It was a Super Nintendo commercial. Which, at that time, was incredible. And apparently too good to be true.

MA: How so?

TJ: A commercial with graffiti and Wu-Tang Clan doing the voices? That wasn't considered marketable back then. They were like what is this? The commercial we had in Japan had children walking over a rainbow and everybody loved it. Even though there were storyboards ... they knew what they were getting into. Either the networks saw it and didn't want to run it, or Nintendo just changed their mind.

It was like '93 or '92 or something like that — like when Wu-Tang came out. But because of that commercial, I didn't have to work as an airbrusher painting religious statues.



