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JUXTAPOZ 56

**WHEN I LEFT YOU, I WAS  
BUT THE LEARNER, NOW  
I AM THE MASTER**

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# TODD JAMES/REAS

INTERVIEW BY DEVIN FLYNN  
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If you bravely followed the progressive early work of Todd James, which began on New York City's subway trains in 1982, and managed to survive the experience, watching his career rise up to gallery shows like *Street Market* at Dietch Projects (where commodified city culture was on display like a stack of Brillo boxes), then maybe you've been lucky enough to glimpse his current onslaught. Multiple scenes of cartoonish, sexual, outlandishly glamorized war crimes and other results of capitalist fuckery cavort on canvas. If you've witnessed any of this, then you know above all his work will force you to pay attention.

"Ha-ha, made ya look!" may be the immediate message, but what he's really saying is "deal with this shit," because the essence of Todd James' work is quite appealing, original, and funny cartooning style seamlessly mixed with some heady and ugly truths. But the greatest strength of his work has always been about the line itself. Watch it describe a hell of a lot, right before your very eyes! His color book series, *Attitude Dancer*, breaks down the idea nicely: each page is a glimmer of the moment before, during, or after some type of heavy scenario.

For example, a kid holds a freshly broken tree branch and says to a sad little birdie, "MINE!" Yes, the world is yours, you selfish bastard. With complete mastery of his craft, James takes the next logical step: Massive Global Mayhem.

His most recent subject matter—grinning aircraft carriers, lounging blondes, sneaky missiles, beleaguered tanks, and skulls wearing sailor suits—has a very direct connection to reality. Because no matter how fantastical or comical the imagery gets it still presents an array of problems that have no immediate solution; situations that you just got to deal with. And judging by how quickly his latest print with Pictures on Walls sold out, it looks like a lot of people are connecting with the

message of these one-man war reports. Fans can get their fix this August when a selection of these new works will open at Lazarides Gallery in London. —*Devin Flynn*

**Devin Flynn: What were your initial impressions coming to New York City from Detroit in 1976?**

*Todd James:* That it was completely different. We moved into Lower Manhattan, right near the World Trade Center and *King Kong* was in theaters and it was surreal having the buildings from the poster and movie right outside my window. My biggest question was, how do you trick or treat here?

**What were your strongest impressions?**

Television was different regionally, so some of the cartoons I watched in Detroit were replaced by what was on here. New York had *Battle of the Planets* and *Star Blazers*, which were the first anime cartoons I was introduced to. It was also the 1970s so I witnessed the tail end of the hippie/stoner culture, and there were also skaters and writers and punk kids that I was seeing hanging out in different places. By junior high in 1982 I was going to school around the corner from the Roxy, and hip-hop was on the radio and things were happening all around me. I was connecting to all this stuff. I had an interest in graffiti but hadn't gone to do trains yet. Halfway through the school year I met Cist and Sek, who took me to the lay-ups at Liberty Avenue on the CC line.

Detail of *Planes*

62" x 55"  
2008

(pages 60–61)

*Wave of Blood*  
63" x 45"  
2007

**How easy was it to enter this world? Were you embraced by it?**

It was easy to enter it but not to be embraced by it. You start out as nothing, and as you get better known you hope to eventually be recognized, which takes a long time.

**What I'm trying to get at is the competitive aspect, which you experienced so early on in your life. Is it something that carries on?**

You know what the thing that carries on is? Having to make something fast, make decisions quickly, and finish something because you've got to get the hell out of there. And that's one of the best things I've walked away with: a lesson in keeping it moving. Not

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everything is going to work, so move on to the next. You need to break some eggs and say fuck it.

#### What was your first commercial work, and how did you get into it?

My friend Dave Scilken, who wrote Shadi, started doing graphic design work around 1987. He liked my graffiti characters and asked me to work with him. I was 17 and had taken a break from writing and was looking to make a transition into some form of adulthood. Dave and I went on to do *The Source* logo together. He was the first person to set me off and kind of believe in me, so it was a huge loss when he passed. I had to regroup and figure the rest out for myself. I kind of learned everything by doing it on the fly.

#### So he knew of you from the work you did as a writer.

Yeah. There was a community, and the market for this type of design was being created by people really into it and who had a bit of a history in it. I wound up doing logos for Mobb Deep, Redman, and the Beastie Boys. But all of this logo work and my ideas about writing were two things I kept separated. Then I got to put them both to use about 10 years later, in 2001, when I did the *Street Market* show with Barry and Espo. The installation was inspired in part by a bodega around the corner from my apartment on Elizabeth Street, and when I saw the gates Espo was painting I thought it would be cool to channel that sensibility into a whole store filled with products

designed by us.

#### You also made the first *Attitude Dancer* that year.

Yes. *Street Market* had some of my drawings in the packaging and signage but was more conceptual and about the installation on a whole. Making *Attitude Dancer* was great for me because it was all about drawings and linework, which is my foundation.

#### What prompted these new war paintings?

They just kind of happened. I started drawing cartoon-looking tanks that were inspired by UPA cartoons and some David Weidman prints I bought at the Fairfax flea market while I was living in Los

Angeles working on *Crank Yankers*. They had treads with lots of gears and big cannons, and were kind of just for fun, for me, with no intention to show them. But I kept finding myself drawing this stuff and the drawings were like the battle scenes I liked to draw as a kid with friends. The kind of drawings that you'd tape more paper to, to extend the battle. And the same thing was happening on the news, in a way. They kept adding to the war, adding to the excuses for it, adding to the lies, coming up with more paper to keep it going.

#### So at a certain point the media coverage of the war began to inform the work?

The news is hard to watch in a believable way, with all the



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intrusive graphics. But aside from the visuals you have the language that gets used to desensitize the public and smooth everything over. It's interesting how both the government and media use phrases like "neutralize the target" or "extraordinary rendition," which is a term used to describe the practice of snatching up suspected terrorists, spiriting them away on a plane, and interrogating, imprisoning, and even torturing them outside the United States. One of my favorite names is for one of the largest privatized armies in the world, called Executive Outcomes, which I think was what Blackwater was modeled after. So a lot is snuck in through language, disguising something horrible with a less threatening phrase. The war paintings play with that

kind of language. I'm also into all the fucked-up symbolism of the military, of how they're always signifying something sinister if you know how to read the iconography.

**Are there any other mediums you'd like to do these in?**

I'm working on an animated video of them for my show at Lazarides this summer, and I've thought of doing them in oil.

**There's a sense to them where there's too much to care about, too much going on at one time to even be worried about. Some of your work presents a problem that can't be solved or a situation that's just completely beyond the scope of rationality.**

Shit can be overwhelming.

**I think a lot of people feel that way when they read the newspaper. So I think the work has a straight connection to reality that way, no matter how out there the imagery is you get a direct contemporary point of view.**

I never think of myself as being political and I try not to be heavy-handed because that can be corny and preachy in a real weak way.

**What were your earliest artistic influences?**

Basically shit that I like. I'll run down a list. First, seeing that Sab Kaze shark car was one of my all-time favorite experiences in art. Watching it pull into the

station—because it was such a new thing. And not just brand new, freshly painted, but it was this completely unique style. You couldn't find anything on that train car that looked like anything else in the world. It was like a secret masterpiece that was only for kids or writers. *Ren and Stimpy* was big deal for me, and of course cartoons in general. Ralph Bakshi's movies were pretty great. R Crumb was a big inspiration for my *Eat Shit* car, which was presented like a cartoon ad. And there was this movie I saw when I was 12 called *Over the Edge* that made a big impression, and *Repo Man* was a personal classic as well. Kiss' *Destroyer* album, Rakim's first 12 inch, "Eric B Is President," Boogie Down Productions' *Criminal Minded*, Metallica's *Ride the Lightning*. Even

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TODD JAMES

though those last things are films and music, all this stuff I consider inspirational and has made its way into what I do creatively.

**Those were things we were vibing on when we met.**

Yeah, you'd meet people and have these common interests. Some of that stuff, like Bakshi's *Street Fight*, was rare to find or have seen so there was an underground aspect to it. You'd seek this stuff out and make friends with people who were into it too. Today it's just a click away or it's a DVD with commentary and it kind of destroys any mystery.

**Any other writing influences?**

One of my early graffiti influences

was Strider, who painted in my neighborhood during the late '70s and early '80s. I gravitated to his name because it was a *Lord of the Rings* reference, and also because he'd have these large pieces hidden in vacant lots. Eventually I met him, and by that time I was on my own path a few years into doing trains. Strider was friends with Ghost, and their work is very loose and bubbly, and both of them have a drippy psychedelic look to their writing, sort of the Peter Saul school of graffiti. When I began painting with Ghost it was at the end of the subways, and we just connected creatively. We would sit around and plan pieces that we thought would be fun and ridiculous to do. Then we'd go risk getting caught to paint these pieces that were kind of absurd. We pushed past

the boundaries of what somebody might consider cool and did stuff for fun—or as a joke.

**So you were recreating the early days of writing, because in your era of graffiti there were so many rules. Once something was established if you went in another direction it was considered wack.**

For a long time I'd been imitating work that I admired, like FBA or TC5, which was very neat and mechanical. But at some point you have to accept yourself and what you do, and a lot of what I was drawing naturally was really loose and it took me a while to accept it. Once I did I understood that it felt right. Later on I saw other artists like King Terry or Gary Panter who were doing really free and crazy

(pages 62–63)  
*Black Planes*  
62" x 55"  
2008

(pages 64–65)  
*Secret Base*  
101" x 60"  
2008

(left)  
*War Party 1*  
18" x 24"  
2007

## “I DO LIKE SITUATIONS WHERE EVERYTHING'S DEGENERATED TO A WEIRD STATE AND KIND OF OUT OF CONTROL. SITUATIONS WHERE THINGS GET IMPERFECT.”

drawings. And you think, “Oh wow, people are going into territory other people might be afraid of,” so that's when you know you're really doing something, because that can be scary creatively.

**It makes you chuckle because it makes you sort of afraid, and that's sort of a thrill.**

That's super important to do. Towards the end of painting trains I began discovering the '70s masters like Blade and Comet, and all the stuff that had been pretty much cleaned from the trains by the time I got involved. In a way it reminds me of being into John Byrne, because he was doing *X-Men* when I was 14. But then I discovered Kirby a bit later—and realized that Kirby is the fucking God.

**From the candy coating to the substance.**

Yeah, less about technique and something polished and just more raw. I liked the way they approached writing. I don't know if it was more spontaneous or imaginative but they weren't dealing with as many rules. They were still making the rules and building the foundations.

**Your output over the years is pretty consistent, but it's always moving and always progressing and going places and you just say what you want to say because you're so comfortable with your drawings. You're well known for doing cartoon characters, like your mention of the *Eat Shit* car from the late '80s that everyone knows.**

**Ever since that kind of humor and grittiness still exists in your work. It's very personalized and specific to you.**

It's hard for me to talk about it, but if you look at these new paintings and you look at my *Frying Pan* car you can see a connection.

**What I see in most of your work, whether it's brutal or funny or lighthearted, is that you're paying close attention to human interaction and people relating to each other or relationships or how kids behave. And you have the ability to focus on the essential details.**

Sometimes adding in a brand of cigarettes or a cassette tape with a band written on it...

**What do we call that? Evidence?**

Yeah, this stuff comes out, but I do like situations where everything's degenerated to a weird state and kind of out of control. Situations where things get imperfect.

**They're also unstoppable, this feeling that there's nothing you're ever going to do to stop these situations. The situation is in full swing.**

Some things are inevitable. I'm just in my own situation room getting situated.

■ ■ ■  
For more information about Todd James, contact [Toddjames.com](http://Toddjames.com).