



## Catching up with Visual Artist and Musician James Kirkpatrick

It's hard not to run into **James Kirkpatrick** — perhaps London's most energetic and industrious creator of the moment — somewhere in the world. The Beal Art and Nova Scotia College of Art grad has had recent visual work in shows at **Gibson Gallery** and **Museum London**, and numerous live musical performances under aliases Thesis Sahib or Gym Zsahib. Upcoming is an exhibit at **Parentheses Gallery** in Halifax, and he'll be mentoring and performing with emerging artists June 14 at London's **Nuit Blanche**. Then there's his figurative graffiti on walls and trains on four continents. Now, Kirkpatrick brings together his multimedia talents in a playful, colourful and interactive solo show, **Secret Base By The Lake**, at McIntosh Gallery until June 7. **Vince Cherniak** caught up with the slightly exhausted artist on tour in Japan.

**Tell us about Japan, was your work there more about your musical persona or art or both?**

It was a combination of both. I was first known in Japan for doing some album covers back in the day around 2001. Then my music started getting out more. I had decent distribution back then. So I would sell records there. I had some stuff pressed in Europe – vinyl – that sold there.

I was touring for two weeks with my friends in the band Triune Gods (Scott Da Ros, Bluebird and Sibitt). In each venue we had an exhibition space so there was both visual work and the music performances. We played with Japanese rap acts and experimental sound and dance artists. It was a really big mix of cul-

ture in each different venue and city. It made me feel really good when I would discover that a lot of the experimental artists knew of the Nihilist Spasm Band.

**You seem to identify with the previous generation of Regionalist artists from London. What about today, has the internet changed things fundamentally so that you can collaborate or find an audience anywhere — the whole world is Regionalism?**

There is something special about getting together in a room and making real analog pieces that exist in physical nature. That's the inspiration behind a lot of my art. Not denying at all that the online, worldwide network is bringing artists and fans together, but I'd like to think that I would have met them any-

way without it. A lot of people do like to make music and collaborate through the internet. But I think because I started off not having a good computer and making it before that stuff, I go to France to record with my friends. I prefer to go to the place to collaborate. I have a lot of different collaborators in the U.S. and Europe. I work with a really talented musician in France named Funken (pronounced Foon-ken). We have a band together called Awards, our EP is called *Futuristic Jokes*. It's rap but it crosses genres.

**Since your work finds expression in varied media, how do you focus your creative energy?**

It's a bit of everything. I practice often, I freestyle while washing dishes, and I try to work it into everything. I draw every night; it's a meditation for me. When I am on tour I will bring paint and draw. I will write lyrics on the plane. But also, there's this funny thing that happens when I am drawing: words come, so I will write the words. I hesitate to call it synaesthesia. I love making art but I am having an urge to write and to play shows. The first time this happened I was painting on a wall and words started to come to me. It made me nervous.

**Is it fair to say your work has evolved to implement or merge other disciplines?**

I used to include a lot of text in my work but I stopped because my friends were doing a good job of it. I actually started to get annoyed with it because they did it well. It would almost become like battle rap but I only reserve it for collaborations. I do feel though that I am making marks, with those bigger abstract pieces, that I am making writing. It's similar to the repeating shapes of letters.

For years I tried to keep the art and music separate. I was interested in aspects of hip hop culture like rap, graffiti, breakdancing, and when I was younger I tried to be a renaissance hip hop guy. I quit doing that when I hurt myself breakdancing. But then I started thinking this was cheesy. I was into it but I see other kids from London acting like a guy from New York — some of it is natural, but some of it is not. I don't want to be that guy. I want to be like a rap person from London who speaks about what I know.

**Is recycling of material, and in a broader sense culture, fundamental to your practice?**

I try and be careful because I don't want to insult or re-appropriate, unless it comes to me in a natural way.

**How does your art reference what's around you?**

My work is really influenced by being a kid who would create while watching sci-fi shows, by waking up in the morning and drawing in front of the TV. Or building masks or helmets based on *V* or *Star Wars*. I still play old cartoons in the background. I still wake up excited in the morning to make stuff, thinking of drawing plans and making something.

“ We have this great history of the Regionalists that came before us that have constantly been a source of inspiration to push and make things . . . It's inspiring to see other younger locals keep that same energy alive. People willing to stand up for their art alongside with what they believe is right. ”

I can't deny that when I'm traveling, the culture does rub off on me. I was in Cuba and we were sleeping on the streets because our plans fell through. I got to see a lot of voodoo stuff, voodoo markets, voodoo graffiti. That has been an influence on me for about the last eight years. A lot of that is an influence on the work here today. I am mystified by the culture; I am a bit scared of it, scared to insult it. This is where I got the idea for a piece (*The Secret Base*) with the head and rope and a bucket with candy.

**Is graffiti alive and well? Do you practice, or does it influence your work otherwise these days?**

It really influences me, I like to look at traditional graffiti, or hobo art, around freight trains, but there's a new tradition of workers who do it. I like stuff done

by people on the fringes. Urban voodoo graffiti. I personally don't do graffiti now, not in Canada. I will do some in Japan though. But I am always looking; I am a fan of people doing this around town. A part of me is holding off on having graffiti as a part of what I do. When I started doing this in '93, it was figurative. Other Canadian graffiti writers said

My house and studio is like a secret base. A lot of rappers come through here and stay here. It's right downtown and I hear this insane show every week-end of your future leaders punching the shit out of each other. It's really weird: I am in my secret base observing it all. I also love Lake Huron. And the Thames. So it's also London as this bridge be-



JAMES KIRKPATRICK: Secret Base by the Lake, Installation at the McIntosh Gallery

it wasn't legit, it wasn't real graffiti, but now that's what everybody does.

I was never interested in vandalizing being a part of it for me. I just wanted to make stuff. For a long time I didn't even know it was really not allowed. When I was a kid there was a Rolling Stone logo under a bridge on Wharnclyffe Road someone had spray painted. It was done so well and was there for so long. There were a lot of wonderful free murals done under bridges in town that are now destroyed. Those kinds of spaces seem like an okay place to do that kind of thing.

#### Are there any pieces you had specifically in mind for the McIntosh show?

There's the sound towers, the sculpture where you take a piece off, it starts making a noise, then when you put it on another sculpture and it starts making songs. I have wanted to do that for a long time. But it took me learning how to program these electronics, that was my goal, months and months to learn programming for them.

#### What's the story behind the Secret Base By The Lake title?

tween Detroit and Toronto. There are a lot of artists and musicians who do not even play in this city, but they stop and stay at my house, and sometimes I take them to the lake.

#### Do the various media you work in inevitably blend in and influence one another?

Yes, they influence one another. It's all about the mood. If I am tired on my way to an exhibition, well, I might write really well. Sometimes they get in the way of each other. But that's okay, that's life. I work, meaning I play, all the time. Sometimes I know I have an exhibition coming up, like this one, in two years. I have this period where I know it's over there, so I have time to experiment. But as it gets closer to the date things start solidifying – can I show stuff that's not sellable? How far can I push this or that?

#### You are not too worried about commercial aspects of your work?

Not really, things do sell. I sell a decent amount, but after I do my taxes at the end of the year, I am really surprised at how I get by on so little.

#### Do you accept commissions?

I don't mind that, I enjoy when people enjoy my work. I like having it in other people's environments. I love going to people's houses and they show me where they put it. There's this collector, Ian Tripp, who has a nice collection, him and his wife started it back in the '80s. It was one of the most fun things, they brought me to their house and we had the piece from Gibson Gallery. Gibson by the way has been phenomenal for me. They are really cool with crossing the boundaries from what just a regular painting is. So we hung the piece at Ian's house and talked about how it related to the other pieces in the room. There was a Curnoe across from it, it was a wheel piece, it was such an honour. I love meeting people who are interested in collecting work; they usually have a lot of knowledge about art. I have some awesome collectors, one from Finland, one from Halifax, etc.

#### Is there a particular artist that inspired you the most?

A cross between Robert Rauschenberg and Barry McGee. I like Paul Klee a lot. I was inspired by questions like what are the boundaries of what you can do in a space, combining sculpture and painting, the question of what can you put in an art space or a gallery. Seeing Curnoe's work as a kid was influential.

He was smart, along the same time as Rauschenberg.

#### You travel a lot, but clearly the London community of artists is important and influential?

We have this great history of the Regionalists that came before us that have constantly been a source of inspiration to push and make things. Art Pratten, Murry Favro and John Clement still play here and are also really responsive to what is going on in art in this city now. There are also a lot of other artists that came before like Wyn Geleynse, Jamelie Hassan and Ron Benner that have kept it radical through all of that time.

It's inspiring to see other younger locals keep that same energy alive. People willing to stand up for their art alongside with what they believe is right. People like Paterson Hodgson, Jamie Q and my friends associated with the *Out of Sound* record label. It's inspiring to see them push for what they stand for and in many ways prosper from doing so. Quite like how the Regionalists did. The friends I collaborate or talk art with — Jamie Q, Giles Whitaker, Jason Mclean, Billy Young, Jesse Jacobs and Lucas Stenning to name a few — throw ideas around, they're great sources of inspiration and make me feel like I am in an exciting city.

