

Robert Priseman

Interviews Jade King

RP: Thank you so much for agreeing to answer some questions on your artistic practice for us Jade. I would like to begin by noting that you write on art, produce art and self-publish zines and comics. This must offer you a very unique perspective on what is going on in the arts more broadly today. In your own work you create all kinds of weird and unusual characters who seem to occupy an unusual world all of their own. I have no idea how anyone can come up with such a rich variety of surreal creatures. Perhaps you can tell us a little about where your ideas come from? Do you visualize them before hand, or make them up as you go along? Or, are they already there and you just have to draw what you see in your mind's eye?

JK: Drawing is hard. I have made peace with my own simple style but sometimes envy those people who can mechanically reproduce a face or a cow or a barbarian or something in one fluid motion of the pen.

I don't think of myself as particularly imaginative – more a remixer or borrower – but I am visually oriented. Maybe this is the same for most of us, but my thoughts are flashes of vivid pictures, maybe accompanied by a (nagging) inner voice, usually a to-do list. I find it easy to remember how things looked, or complex layouts of places, which door goes off into which corridor – but I know my partner doesn't have a spatial/visual memory at all, for example, can't remember which door leads where when we're playing video games.

My longest comics series is set in an imagined but 'lazy' ocean world – lazy because I don't stick to the physics of being deep underwater – but it has a rocky cave/seaweed/ruined rural look. It has its own gravity and water, forming pools – I watch a lot of cartoons, and like it in shows like *SpongeBob Squarepants* when the physics of being at the bottom of the ocean are unrealistic, but there might be the odd bubble or drifting bit of seaweed here and there. In my series, the main characters are mermaid sisters, but one is flipped, with a fish head and human lower body. I think it's a trope that has been done lots before. The idea came as a single sketch I did of a fish-headed girl throwing up on the shore while her pretty sister is whisked off by a guy, abandoning her. I've found it easy to play out in my mind what the characters might say or do – many of their humiliations are borrowed from my own life. The situation of one attractive and one ugly sister in this format can act as a backdrop for looking at beauty and desire, what 'society' finds attractive: wouldn't a man be only interested in the human parts? There's a *Futurama* episode where Fry meets his dream mermaid girlfriend. I think there's a scene where they are finally alone... but he looks down at her fish tail, realises their sexual compatibility might be an issue and runs away.

Sorry for bringing such low-brow references to this interview so far! But I am also not sorry! I love pop culture – personally, I gravitate towards the low-brow – but believe everything has equal value, stories of all formats help us interrogate the human condition (it’s great that ‘cartoon’ can refer to both Nickelodeon and Italian Renaissance drawings).

When I try to get down to the bare bones of why I bother doing anything creative, remembering moments when I’ve felt the most inspired, I think of humour and connecting with other people – like making a weird banner for a friends’ wedding or crude sketches to amuse others. Mainly, I think of making the zine, *Weird Canteen*. Creating it mixes up funny/weird stories about art with food and initiates connections with others – I’ve made new friends out of contributors who emailed me their art out of the blue.

RP: I don’t think you need to apologise at all! I love what you do and I’m a big fan of *Weird Canteen*. And like all the best artists, the art you make is essentially a true and pure expression of your personality – the qualities of what makes you who you are. And I think that’s one of the beauties of art in general.

May I ask, did you receive a formal art education and who would you cite as your artistic influences?

JK: As the first person in my family to go to university, I approached it with ‘just pick the subjects you like at school’ as I didn’t know what else to do. I liked art and English and couldn’t decide, so had a naive scheme to find BA courses that split into two. I only got into the swing of it by the final year, getting into non-fiction writing in one module and pinhole photography in another – the human eye, light, optics, colours, the invention of photography via the camera obscura, are strange and magical things.

Much later I did a part-time MA at Goldsmiths in Photography and Urban Cultures while I was working at an arts charity. It trained me to think that to take decent photographs means spending months researching – which might be true, but I need to spend time getting a wage. So I completely stopped photography and went back to drawing/painting.

Getting into comics was so exciting and a revelation – art could be fun! I like art that incorporates humour, an obvious example is David Shrigley, or artists I follow on social media like Cartner Amelia Davis or Bedwyr Williams. I feel really lucky to have fallen into a ‘community’ of indie comics makers from attending fairs. Compared to (my limited experience of) the contemporary arts world, the alt comics world is less pretentious, with funny and friendly people. Of course, it could be even better if arts funding wasn’t in the toilet.

Through my job at an art website, I've absorbed lots of art history – maybe it's given me the warped and cynical view that there is already too much art in the world. Maybe I'm joking. My favourite kinds of art usually have a narrative or capture something strange or unusual from history. For example: you can trace the darkened skies and bleak themes in paintings following the eruption of Mount Tambora in 1815, which coated much of the earth in a dingy ash cloud. It would be hard to create something as interesting as that.

RP: That's so true! I also often feel that there is now too much art in the world – and I love painting! I do tend to think we have reached a point in art history where all the possible permutations have now run their course. And what I'm really interested in now is how creative people are generally not confined to just one medium. Like Derek Jarman who made films, paintings and his amazing garden. Do you find it is the same energy for you, whether you are drawing, writing or taking photographs? Or does each discipline demand something slightly different from you?

JK: Derek Jarman, we were so lucky to have him! and lucky he switched mediums to suit his life and his energy levels. Thank you for mentioning him as it's made me think differently about 'failing' or giving up on mediums. I think I'm a 'Jack of all trades, master of none', trying and failing at each phase. But I would never think that about anybody else, in fact, it's clearly a great thing to work in varied mediums, like Jarman did.

It seems like there is a tension or entwinement with taste and skill. Your taste and skill might be at odds with each other, meaning as you improve, you get frustrated with your skill not catching up. Like with my Photography MA: before I started, I took so many photographs of things that caught my eye when I walked around. My brain was wired to look for things I can't put into words now: a meeting of lines in a car park making a shape or a hand-made sign proclaiming something surreal in a shop. But for the course, I spent ages researching histories, and letting that also feed into the images (for a project on London Zoo and cruel architecture, ways people love to control nature...) I stopped being able to just snap an interesting shape in the clouds, because why? what does it mean? What relation does this have to the world, or trying to improve the world?... then stopped seeing the shapes in the clouds in the first place. This sounds sad, but I don't regret doing the course as I learned so much.

When I did loads of oil painting at college, I remember lying on my bed one day, almost rapturously feasting on the colours my net curtain made in the sun, figuring out how I'd paint it. But I stopped practising painting as soon as my college tutors weren't telling me to.

With comics, I'd store away funny stories or visual jokes in my mind to draw later. I was very prolific for a while but it's getting harder and less fun. To be frank, the timeline of my getting into comics lines up with about a decade of starting SSRI medication and feeling very hyper

for a few years, to slowly the medication becoming less impactful then giving it up altogether, returning to my natural gloomy sluggish state! Picking up art materials feels like a slog at the moment: I turn into a whiney child, fidgeting to get away from the desk. I've stopped seeing so many jokes so wonder what might be next. Maybe I could try a different medium, like writing again, though I don't know how to start.

RP: I'm really interested in something you said the other day, about how all the biggest grossing films of last year were all remakes or new versions of old ideas and that somehow it feels like the future is being slowly cancelled. It resonated with something I've been mulling over, that with the rise of Post-Modernism we have effectively seen the end of all the art movements. And I wonder now if all the interesting artists who are going to emerge in the future are not going to be part of big sweeping trends like 'abstraction,' 'minimalism' or 'expressionism' for example. But instead, will effectively all be what we used to call 'outsider artists.' It strikes me that your work is like this, quirky, different and outside of any movement – yet also very distinctively of now. That your work represents the coming future of artistic practice, and even the way you market your work fits this too. I wonder what your thoughts are on this?

JK: I suppose investing in a known IP – like making a sequel – is less of a risky venture as opposed to choosing a brand new idea: funders want to pick a safer bet to increase their chance of returns. Maybe it's too black-and-white to say 'capitalism and art don't mix' or results in worse art because I guess this has always happened in art history, wealthy patrons would want a certain style – like classical themes in the Renaissance – so the art ends up looking the same.

A big difference now is accessibility – mostly anyone can make art and share it. But I'd say artists are usually always influenced by something – whether that's selling work or thinking about marketability or popularity – unless they truly reject everything and live in a cave in the woods. I'm fascinated by the surreal drawings of Daniel Morphy, I think in part because his role as a monk at Pluscarden means, to me, he might have the great spiritual and mental fortitude to resist being influenced by negative external forces! I'm being patronising and reductive there, but there has to be something to his interesting lifestyle. As you said, his "practice gives his mind the gift of freedom to contemplate and wander, to visit places and people which could not possibly exist in our physical world."

Perhaps outsider artists are people making things purely because they feel the urge, with as little concern for being rich or popular as possible. I don't know if I would consider myself an outsider artist: I'm not rich or popular. My concern with being popular – posting comics on Instagram – I think has caused my art-making to go into a slump: I used to draw for my own amusement and only share printed comics or on a website nobody went on. When I started posting my comics on Instagram, I got the dopamine hit of people liking and commenting on

my drawings, and following other comics makers and enjoying their work. My comics became square format – I expect I started thinking of ideas that would suit the format. However... Instagram is subject to the great ‘enshittening’. I rarely discover comics makers’ posts now, among the great deluge of ads and sponsored content. I also feel less free in the subject matter I share, too embarrassed or ashamed to share vulnerable, personal stories, or things that I thought made me out to be too boring, mean, dumb, predictable, selfish...

I guess the answer is to stop caring what other people think. It’s easier said than done, but there is something to be said for trying to work without influence, following your instincts. Giving yourself time and space and silence, and seeing what comes out as an experiment. I hope I can take my own advice here and get out of my slump! Thank you for allowing ‘time and space and silence’ in the form of asking me, and other artists, these open-ended questions.

RP: It has been a real pleasure Jade, I’ve really enjoyed our conversation. It’s given me a lot of food for thought!

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