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← Erik Parker and Todd James →

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Erik Parker and Todd James are both American artists. While Parker spent his childhood and youth in Texas, James grew up in New York, surrounded by graffiti. Today, the Big Apple is home to both, with Parker living in Brooklyn and James in Manhattan. And it's not only the bridges that connects them. It's their art, too. While they each have their unique style, their works have one notable trait in common: the color palette. And it's that stylistic device that also links them to Peter Saul and KAWS, who helped introduce the two friends. While there is a no official movement that categorizes this quartet of artists, one could be about to emerge: an increasing number of exhibitions are showcasing their work as a group.

We met Parker and James in Madrid during the opening of *KnockKnock*, an exhibition at Galería Javier López that examines the broad influence of cartoon culture on art. And once again, Peter Saul, KAWS, Erik Parker and Todd James are presented as a group among other artists.

Vertical: You met through KAWS...

Todd James: Yes, I think I went to his place to have lunch with him and that's where we met.

Erik Parker: True. That was already about six years ago. Before that we saw each other at galleries when they had exhibition openings.

TJ: I think I actually saw your work for the first time in a show curated by Peter Saul. It was at Leo Koenig, which is Koenig & Clinton today.



EP: And what did you think?

TJ: I liked it and thought it was cool – very fluorescent, that's what immediately caught my eye. It's funny – I think you, Brian and me do totally separate things, but there is a weird link.

EP: Definitely – the key, is the colors and cartoon language.

TJ: Exactly – being influenced by the same popular culture. When did you see my works for the first time?

EP: I already knew your stuff when you were still writing REAS in the streets. I liked your stuff. But I have to say that I personally don't have any connection to graffiti. I didn't grow up around it at all.

TJ: You are from Texas! You would have been nice cannon fodder if you had been into it.

EP: That's true. Maybe there was a handful of dudes writing graffiti, or some who were at least interested. But it wasn't around at all. How did it start with you?

TJ: I started doing it when I was really little. The people who were into it were teenagers between the ages of 12 to 16. In 1987, I stopped doing graffiti for about a year. Then I did it again for a real strong year in 1988, right before they cleaned everything off all the trains in New York. That is to say that a friend of mine told me that nobody will care about graffiti anymore since they clean it all off anyway. So we took advantage of that for a year and started to really crack when it was clean. And that's the only way they got me to stop. Today, I am just doing a few little walls here and there. But it's all legal things.

EP: Graffiti is more than a hobby. For most people who are actively doing it, it constitutes a way of life. What has it been for you?

TJ: You had your name everywhere in the city. I regarded that as very cool when I was younger. But I was drawing already and interested in art. And graffiti was a good platform to try. There are no barriers. There is nobody telling you that he or she is proof of what you are doing. What I mean is, nobody was promising you anything like, "we will bring you into art. You can work for us." It was just about the spot that you were going to do. And as soon as you had finished it, you were just done with it. That's it. There was no system, only in that there were other people doing it and graffiti certainly is its own community, but it was more like a free-of-charge system that anybody could enter.

EP: Through graffiti you must have gained knowledge about human nature. You just believed your friend who told you that the coast is clear. You have to learn who you can trust and distrust.

TJ: Yes, distrust, mainly.

EP: And it was all very anonymous. You were all using pseudonyms.

TJ: Sometimes you'll see people's work, but you didn't know who they were, what their background was – nothing. And then you find out a little bit or even meet them. That happened to me with Lee Quinones. It's a funny story: when I was 14 years old, Henry Chalfant, who published the photo book, Subway Art, and did the documentary film, Style Wars, had his studio in New York. It was pretty much an open door. You could just go in. So I am in one day and there was a Puerto Rican guy painting something. We started talking – for an hour, at least. Graffiti artist Michael Stewart had just been killed. I asked him if he knew what Stewart used to write. And he answered: "Lee." And I didn't believe it. "That guy was Lee?" I asked. "No, I'm Lee," he said. I couldn't believe that Lee was standing in front of me and that I had talked with him for so long. If I had known, the conversation would have been completely different. And I said, "I am going to run home and bring my black book. Will you still be here? It will take me five minutes." He said yes so I ran home, got my book, came back. He was there and drew some Vietnam helicopter stuff in it. This was in 1983. And then a week later, I was at an opening in Soho. Everybody was there – A1, Basquiat, Ramelzee, Keith Haring – and Lee, too. And when he saw me, he was like, "Yo REAS, what's up my friend." That was cool. At that time, these kind of openings were happening every week. I was just in there.



EP: How old were you at that time?

TJ: 13. And I had my black books everywhere and when I lost them, I was just like, "next week I will get another one." But I don't have any of that stuff today.

EP: That's when you were part of the movement and you didn't realize and appreciate it. And you were only 13. Did these openings, graffiti turned art, influence you to do art, too?

TJ: It was interesting to me when I was 13, but by the time I was 16, I was against it.

EP: And today you have your own openings.

TJ: It kind of happened organically. I kept running into Steve Powers, who was thinking about doing art shows. At that time, all that stuff from the 1980s had ended. Nobody was showing at a gallery, nobody was interested in graffiti on an art level. The only two people who were starting to do them again were Barry McGee and Kaws.

EP: When was that?

TJ: We started to talk about it in 1997 and it came into being in 1998, 1999.

EP: And that was your famous *Street Market* show then?

TJ: Yes, but we actually did another one before that. Have you seen *Street Market*?

EP: Yes, and to be honest, I was jealous when I walked into that show. It was giant. You had little shops up with fake- stuff that you could buy and couldn't. The interesting thing was that it brought back signage.

TJ: The idea came from everything we had done up until that point. It was about graffiti, graphic design. Steve had his magazine, *On the Go*, a hip hop magazine, but a mad one. It was kind of satirical. We were both a lot into comedy and humor. A lot of graffiti that I had done had some point of comedy in it. So *Street Market* was kind of satirical, too. It made fun of graffiti and all the stuff that we were into. So from running into Steve Powers, talking and just doing it, I came to the art world.

EP: It all happens very directly.



TJ: Your career in art started in a similarly way, didn't it?

EP: I got into legal trouble and was on probation in Texas. I dropped out of high school and got offered probation, which was my sentence.

TJ: Why did you have legal problems?

EP: Because of drinking and driving, fighting... there was a bunch of stuff that went down in a two-month period. And my probation officer advised me to do my GED, which is when you finish high school. And so I ended up in a community college to take the probation off. I did the GED test, but to be honest, I could barely read.

TJ: How old were you at that time?

EP: About 18.

TJ: And you couldn't read?

EP: Not that well. But I am good at it now. At school I met some Chicanos. They were into large-scale paintings of low-rider cars and chill lowers, so I got involved in that and just went deep into it.

TJ: So it turned out good.

EP: Yes, and I have a masters degree today.

TJ: So you definitely can read. Peter Saul has been a teacher of yours, right?

EP: Yes, in Austin. And I have to say, my paintings tightened up a lot since I met Peter Saul.



TJ: In what way has he been an influence?

EP: He is a great mentor although he didn't really teach in a straightforward way. The first day in class, he said, "Everyone in here has an A – the best grade you can get. So you don't even have to come." Then he said, "I'll be right back," and just left.

TJ: That's crazy.

EP: He came back an hour later and bounced through a catalogue, did some things. It was very much about doing your own thing. And that's what I like about his work. He styles his very own language. You can't really classify him to any big thing in the art world. It's his own vision.

TJ: An important tool.

EP: In the market sense, it could hurt you but in the long run, I think it's really good.

TJ: If you had to articulate it, what's your subject matter?

EP: Just my life, really, and how I exist in this world. It's just what I do. It's responding to the environment I am surrounded by. How do you put your work?

TJ: I wouldn't say it's a document of my life, it's more how I am seeing things, what entertains me, or what concerns me.

With my work, I am entertaining myself drawing what I am thinking about and find interesting.

WE: Is there somebody who inspires you? People compare you to Dutch artist Willem de Kooning.

TJ: Honestly, I have seen his paintings, but I couldn't really identify with him.

EP: I think more of Matisse when I look at your works, Todd, his cut-outs.

TJ: I don't look at either of these dudes although I like their works. I don't think it's horrible to copy some stylistic devices, but it's not fantastic, either. So I try to do my own thing.

WE: Talking about Matisse, he is also famous for his painting of an open window. Erik, that reminds of your work.

EP: Right. That's true. I like the Matisse feeling. If you walk into a museum and see his works, it's still so good today. For me, the best art is art that always looks good. If you look at American Pop Art, for example - whatever it's about and whatever price tag you put on it - it always looks good. For me, art needs to look good. All other layers are secondary. And it's even harder to make something that looks good and still provides different layers of meaning instead of something that is just about meaning, but not about aesthetics.

