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Q&A with Colby Bird

New York artist Colby Bird has his detractors — accused by some of being just another perpetrator of “boy art,” a reductionary term reserved for, according to *The Village Voice* “work made by smart, cynical, punk and hip-hop-obsessed young dudes late of MFA programs, who get stoned in their studios and tease ironic meaning out of deliberately downgraded materials in the vacuum of popular culture.” But the New York art world is fickle, and as Colby has come to learn, any press is good press. Having already shown in Chelsea’s prestigious CRG Gallery, his mixed-media pieces (he’s been known to combine 40 ounces and fridges) are going international. *Corduroy* had a chance to sit down with the polarizing photographer-cum-sculptor to talk about the creative process, Bushwick’s best duck confit, and why a microbiologist in Dresden is his most important critic.

1. Tell me about your latest work?

Right now I’m reconfiguring an older work. It’s a jewelry case that I found abandoned outside a shop in Chinatown. It has faux-marble contact paper on the shelves, and is already so tragic and poignant that it has been tough to alter. I feel like I’m disgracing its memory.

2. When did art turn from hobby to career?

It took a long time for me to admit to myself that this is what I want to do. It seemed a very selfish profession until about 3 years ago when it began to occur to me that I had something to say that was helpful.

3. Where do you take inspiration from?

Oddly, a lot of my inspiration comes from my brother’s response to my work. If it elicits any sort of response from him, I know it’s succeeding. He’s a microbiologist in Dresden, Germany, and I feel that if something strikes him, then it has come from an honest place.

4. Take us through a day at your studio.

Coffee, shifting objects, sitting and staring, shifting more objects, Hot 97, cursing quietly to myself, wishing Funk Flex would stop “dropping the bomb” in the middle of “Brooklyn We Go Hard”, wiring, sitting and staring, sandwich, lighting my cigarette with a blowtorch or reading Zizek, nap. I have three places of work: one is in the studio with sculptural work, another is out in the world with a camera, and another is in front of my computer.

5. You work in a lot of different mediums. Which is your favorite? I studied photo, but it was a natural progression into sculpture. Both mediums are just making signs and pointing at things and framing this act of pointing.

6. What are you into as far as music and film are concerned?

I am very much into well-produced hip hop. I don’t care if it’s considered pop or underground, old or new. If it samples Clarence Carter that’s a plus, too. I like space in music. Strategic silence. “Paid Dues” by Eightball and MJG might be my favorite song of all time. The same rules apply with film. My favorite movie of all time is “Trouble Every Day”—very bloody and silent. Let me throw the band “The Thrones” in there. My friend just told me that would impress people.

7. If you could bring one dead artist back to life, who would it be? The answer to that question changes week to week. Today, I just want to talk to Piero Manzoni. I would like know how it feels to know you are doing something truly original. I reckon he didn’t feel that way, but maybe. He was sharp-dressed, too. A “head to toe man” as they say.

8. What do you love about the New York art scene?

I love that after you are entrenched here, you can travel anywhere and know someone or at least feel like you know people.

9. What do you hate about it?

I hate that there is no comeuppance. No one is held accountable for bad behavior or misaligned values. I often wish there was a stern football coach at the helm of this whole thing. Something else that bothers me

is the idea that you can't make art that concerns (blank) without being accused of making (blank) art. I'd like to make art that concerns masculinity and class without making "boy" art. But then again, that sort of pigeonholing can also be very helpful with exposure, when folks can feel that they know your art based on a few words and feel comfortable with it.

10. How do you feel about art criticism and particularly the criticism of your own work? Do you place any stock in it?

The longer you are around (which is admittedly not that long for me) you create your own circle of criticism. That is, you tend to get noticed and written about by your peers. That can be good because your peers know your work, but it can be bad because there is rarely a true objective response. But I guess if you were able to get an objective response your work would be considered non-discursive, no?

11. Could you do what you're doing today if you didn't go to art school?

Me, no. But I don't think art school is necessary for everyone. But it took art school for me to realize what it means to live inside your work and have it mean everything to you.

12. What was your most memorable gallery experience last year?

I would say when I drunkenly accosted this fellow who I thought was trying to tip over a sculpture of mine. He was actually a gallery attendant trying to prevent said tipping.

13. Do you get hangovers?

Recently. Intense, debilitating ones that remind me that I'm not 25 anymore.

14. What's your favorite restaurant in New York?

Northeast Kingdom out by my studio. One time someone who must have just moved to Bushwick said to me, of Northeast Kingdom, "that's where all the white people eat." I thought that was really cute in a "oh you just read a Howard Zinn book, aren't you adorable" sort of way. I hope that person is enjoying their burrito in their live-work space with their six roommates. I'm pretty happy with my wine and duck confit in this warm restaurant with my girlfriend. That sounded snobby... What I mean is that I am too old to worry about getting "authentic" food if "authentic" means it tastes like a bum's crotch.

15. What are your plans for 2009?

I have a piece at Stephen Friedman in London at the end of this month and then a solo show in New York at CRG Gallery. There is also talk of what would be a truly amazing summer show, but I can't divulge anything until I get confirmation about that one. I'm also excited about this collaboration I'm doing with a friend of mine, Dylan Palmer, who is an artist out in LA. I might show it at the next installment of this show series called "apartmentshow." It's a program organized by Denise Kupferschmidt and Joshua Smith that takes as its organizing principle the idea that all galleries in New York are going to shut down and one might as well put art directly in the home and host your own private parties to celebrate it.

16. How do you feel about the artist as celebrity?

Celeb me up, hell. Get at me, Mary-Kate.

-Daniel Barna