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JAMES JARVIS

INTERVIEW BY DAN NADEL / PORTRAIT BY GINO SPRIO

IT'S SOMETIMES SAID THAT ONE CAN TELL, NO MATTER HOW DECEPTIVELY SIMPLE THE OBJECT, HOW LONG ITS CREATOR STARED AT SAID OBJECT DURING ITS COMPOSITION. THERE'S A CONCENTRATION INHERENT IN IT, A CONSIDERATION THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO FAKE. IN JAMES JARVIS' DRAWINGS AND OBJECTS EXIST A VESTED SENSE OF HIS OWN PRESENCE, A MEDITATIVE CONSISTENCY IN HIS POTATO-SHAPED BODIES AND AN TIC DRAWINGS THAT DISPLAY AN ATTENTION TO MODERNIST FORMS AND TRADITIONAL METHODS RARE IN THIS MILLENNIUM.

James, nearly 40 years old, lives in suburban London with his wife, Paula, and their two small children. Best known for his vinyl toy designs with the companies Silas and his own, Amos, his vision extends into drawing, animation, comics, and apparel.

In the Jarvis universe work abounds for the Silas clothing company, managed by friends Russell Waterman and Sofia Prantera, who founded Amos with James in 2003. There are digital graphics and illustrations for the late, lamented magazines *The Face* and *Nova*, as well as a *Tintin*-style graphic novel written with Waterman entitled *Vortigern's Machine*. Then there's *Yod*, a toy and concept sprung from Amos along with many, many toys that reimagine twentieth century archetypes—

punks, zombies, motorcycle gangs, hippies—as uniformly designed, smooth-bodied beings. Did I mention the recent animation for Nike? Of course there's more, but here's the thing about James, he used to skateboard and participate in youth culture but he's also a highly trained, resourceful artist, mindful of traditions, both conscious and extremely critical of every aspect of his aesthetic output. Which is to say that he can talk about Richard Hamilton, George Hardie, and Quentin Blake, but also KAWS and Paper Rad. He appreciates draftsmanship and mark making, but the power of a damn good pop graphic as well. Sort of a twentieth century guy with resolutely twenty-first century tools, he's wise in the ways of analog looking and rendering yet shrewd in the worlds of commerce and digital action.

I've long been fascinated by his sensibility that radiates a quizzical soulfulness, as if James is trying to figure out the world by mastering form, line, and mark. His toys exist as little totems of thought, gently hinting at a narrative and engaging the space in and around them. His drawings, some of the best being his recreated album covers and recent, scratchy medieval bird pictures, tease out spaces and ideas with a modest assortment of lines, each chosen to further find the form in his 2-D space. To my mind, James is an heir to the commercial art tradition of Milton Glaser in America or, in England, Barney Bubbles and Alan Aldridge, a highly conceptual drawer who designs as well as he renders, and whose every project bears the mark of his personality.



I conducted this interview via typed chat, after which we stared each other down on Skype.

—Dan Nadel

Dan Nadel: Let's begin at the beginning. Discuss how you were raised. What did your parents do?

James Jarvis: I was lucky to be raised by very cultured parents. My mum studied painting with Richard Hamilton and taught art history and my dad is a very eminent clinical psychologist.

Where did mum teach art history?

At Middlesex Polytechnic. So through her I knew about art school from an early age, and had an idea to do that very early on.

And Richard Hamilton, what an artist! Do you look at his work much?

I did. I was lucky to be exposed to some amazing stuff through my mother. Pop art, of course, but also other movements: the Bauhaus, minimalism, constructivism, and many artists that had a lot of impact like Philip Guston, Paul Klee, and Jean Dubuffet.

Sounds like you had the art school bug early on. How did you find yourself at the University of Brighton, and then the Royal College of Art? What was happening in visual culture at the time? Who did you want to be?

When I was 13, 14, it was Mike McMahon [arguably the best *Judge Dredd* artist]. Then I

discovered *RAW* and wanted to be Mark Beyer or Gary Panter.

And so you figured illustration at Brighton was the way to go?

I ended up at Brighton mainly because the head of illustration there, John Vernon Lord, was someone I admired. I didn't want to go to college in London because then I would be staying at home.

I don't know Lord's work.

He did an amazing kid's book I grew up with, *The Giant Jam Sandwich*. He also did a Deep Purple LP cover. He has a very intense style of crosshatching that had an impact.



Did you learn much at Brighton, or enough so that you wanted to do grad work? I suppose kid's books, illustration, etc, was the path?

A lot, in retrospect. Initially I was just ecstatically happy to be in a studio, drawing all the time. But I was also challenged about what I was doing, and forced to think about how I was approaching drawing. It kicked the Gary Panter out of me—in a good way. I was very much in thrall to him and was told to stop making marks that meant nothing. I ended up going out and drawing car parks and the urban world around me, which was something I was engaged with through skateboarding. It's interesting because that was what led me into drawing characters. I'd been ripping off Panter and as a reaction got into these observational drawings. Then I started

thinking about what kind of things I might populate these landscapes with.

They're damn good, actually. They have the beginnings of your marks and a great sense of space. Did you feel like you needed to add figures to amplify the narrative?

Yes. Because being on an illustration course it made sense to try and add that kind of sense to them. Now I feel they stand up in their own right. Of late I've been wanting to get that kind of space back into what I do.

That space is very much noncharacter-based space. I wondered what a decade of toy design did to your drawing. Did it begin to feel segmented?

I realized that the toy thing somewhat laid waste to my drawing. I ended up drawing everything as though it were going to end up a 3-D object, which totally negates the amazing freedom that drawing in two dimensions gives you, the way things can have their own logic. With 3-D, you're limited to a much more restrictive reality. I'm learning to use drawing anew. I'm discovering the things you can do drawing again. I think about which drawn language I want to use, as it allows for reading things in different ways.

But what about *Vortigern's Machine*? Did that work for you? Or wasn't that drawing proper? Your flat, mark-heavy drawings seem most successful—it seems like you might know that as well—with *Pet Sounds* being one of the

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best. But then, what is it you missed about those kind of 2-D spaces? After all, you didn't linger long. Your comic book, *World of Pain* (2000), and the fashion illustrators plunge pretty quickly into 3-D spaces, no?

Vortigern's Machine, in conception, yes. In execution, no. It ended up very disconnected from drawing, and is more a graphic product, if that makes sense. I think I was drawing the characters and backgrounds with my toy hat on. I was rereading *Asterix* recently, and that was what I wanted to do. But I'm proud of the whole undertaking, publishing and distributing a book independently, and merchandising it ourselves (as Amos). I think that was pretty impressive. But if we do another book I'll draw it differently, a lot looser. As for drawings, the thing I got from doing graduate studies was a very academic approach to drawing that makes me very conscious of mark making and how it can be read and gives artwork different identities. *World of Pain* was trying to draw a very clean reality, and the *Pet Sounds* drawings were a reaction to that. When I drew *Vortigern's Machine* I ended up employing a similar approach to *World of Pain*, but it wasn't fresh anymore, and perhaps that shows. I think the *Pet Sounds*-type stuff is the most unconscious, but when I look with my Bauhaus hat on, I think, what do all these marks actually mean? What do they add? Then I try and do something minimal, but the marks keep

coming back! I always think about where the language comes from. I make these images and then I think about them. I think of it more as a philosophy: the more I do it, the more I become conscious of the decisions I make until I'm so conscious of the image that I can't make it anymore, and then move on. That's the most consistent thing I do, assessing and rejecting and then sometimes reembracing.

Marks are hard to get rid of, but I'm surprised you'd worry about getting rid of them at all. I think of you more in line with someone like Glaser, a recognizable pen or brush line employed in an economic way. It seems like you're more interested in communicating broadly, inserting almost generic cartoon types into recognizable realism. And I mean generic in a good way. All of the forms are unmistakably yours, the curves and proportions are unmistakable but they don't traffic in faux idiosyncratic ornament. They are, in their way, minimal.

Marks are my constant struggle. It's all a bit yin and yang if I think about it: Dubuffet versus Sol Lewitt, Albert Camus versus Tolkien. I don't have a role model anymore for what I do because I'm unsure what kind of artist-illustrator-cartoonist-designer I am, or what exactly I should be doing. I'm interested in communicating. I think that's why I struggle when what I do touches on more abstract or self-referential concerns. I worry they won't communicate. I love both the lushness of someone like Doré and the simplicity of Herriman. I see them as quite contrasting, and yet I would like to reflect both of them in what I do.

Makes sense. Despite the effect on your drawing style, the designing of those figures must have been quite a rigorous process. It seemed like *Yod* (2008) was perhaps a manifesto about that?

With *Yod*, we wanted to make a proper art toy. The whole designer toy thing had taken

on that identity and we thought it was a bit ridiculous so we thought we'd approach a toy with that in mind. *Yod* was very much a joint effort, because the whole manifesto behind him was as important as the figure himself. Russell wrote a lot of that, and worked on the numbers side with his son, a mathematician.

I couldn't tell if the math stuff was tongue in cheek or real or what.

It was both. The idea of using math is quite absurd, and yet I love the idea of the Golden Section, that you can almost quantify aesthetics. The equations are all real; you really can draw a potato head using them. *Yod* was both ridiculous and serious. I think that has a lot to do with Amos' approach to things.

Part of the appeal of vinyl toys has been this idea of characters without stories. The idea of storyless characters seems fairly new. Time was that a cartoon character stood for some mass narrative content behind him. What do you think this new obliqueness means? And what draws you to character creation?

I'd always seen the idea of a character without a story as a bit of a cop-out, but the way you put it sounds quite interesting. I think the new obliqueness is a signifier of a culture that values surface over content. I was drawn to character creation initially as a way of filling those landscapes, so it was the landscapes that gave the characters an identity. I'm unsure what I think about it; I love the idea of character as icon but I'm drawn to stories.

I've just invented a new genre. Finally! "New obliqueness." I always imagined that's what your characters were, in a sense, an implied set of ideas. Why did you have a narrative in mind for all those guys?

The whole toy thing was a bit of a ride into the unknown. We never set out to get into it; we made our first figure (in 1998) almost by accident simply because we could. When

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we started Amos it was because the toys I'd designed for the fashion company Silas were reasonably popular and we thought it would be fun to carry on making them outside the world of fashion. We gave the *In Crowd* (2003) a sort of implied narrative because it helped make sense of them as objects. That kind of narrative suited those characters, but with *Vortigern's* we wanted narrative to drive the characters and do something more.

What do you think about the toys? Now that it seems to be less a fad, the work Amos is producing seems more intent on being multiples than anything else.

We never bought into a culture, and I think that people thinking of it as such kept it very limited. It couldn't grow enough to sustain itself. As another medium an artist can use it's still fun. We always felt the whole limited thing was silly. Everything's limited to some degree. We made what we felt the market could support.

In moving away from that, it seems that your drawing has nicely flattened out in some recent pictures. These skinny figures and expressive marks nicely interacting with geometric forms.

I try to push things in that direction whenever I

can. I'm trying to find new forms different from my usual 3-D forms of the last decade. The new work I'm trying to make is just for 2-D; the drawing is groundbreaking for me because I'm rejecting the particular potato form I've built my name on. It has become a totem, hovering over what I do. These characters, which have given me my name and brought me a living, all come back to this one shape. But then the potato became too easy. And when you draw it again and again, then you can think about what it's being used for. You want to find a new form. And for whatever reason the new form for me right now is the beaked character or the rabbit. With the potato head, there's always a "why" involved, as it had no real identifiable relative. I'm interested in characters that people just accept, the totemic quality of the character. Rabbits are easily accepted.

I'm thinking about what sort of things I should be doing and what I'd like to be doing. The one thing that seems consistent is the unconscious act of drawing, and so I want whatever I do to harness that.

For more information about James Jarvis, contact Studiojarvis.com or Amostoys.com.

