



# Light Destroyer:

## Brian Chippendale Tends to His Gardens

Introduction and interview by Dan Nadel

Brian Chippendale makes art like music and music like art. He's one of the few artists I know who physically embodies and inhabits his work on a daily basis. His dense fields of lines and exuberant planes of color vibrate at the same frequencies as his layered barrages of drum rhythms for Lightning Bolt, which he began with Brian Gibson and Hisham Baroocha in 1994. Based in Providence since 1991, Chippendale co-founded Fort Thunder with Mat Brinkman (along with Rob Coggeshal and Freddy Jones) in 1995, from which he and many others produced a torrent of hugely influential posters, images, and vibes (check out the recent Wunderground: Providence 1995 to the Present for more on that). He's self-published numerous comics over the years, including the now rare Maggots 1-4 and Ninja 1-4. As a cartoonist, he is notorious for drawing inside extant books, inking over and incorporating the original text into his narratives. In November, I'm publishing his most recent comic narrative in Ninja (PictureBox), an 11 x 17", 144 page hardcover edition of the Ninja comics including an entirely new chapter of the story, as well as drawings, collages, and visual noise. I'm extremely proud of this book, both because Brian and I have been talking about this and everything else for a few years now, and also because I believe him to be one of most significant artists of the past decade or so. And his comics are simply beyond reproach. He, like Brinkman and a few others, have taken the "trash" influences of video games and superhero comics and proudly transformed them into uniquely personal vehicles. Brian uses comics as a medium like any other, inventing the rules as he needs them. His feel for space and movement is transformative and new, and he is also, sharp, political, funny, and even sexy. Finally, he maintains an active gallery art practice, creating elaborate collages from silkscreened components. The resulting images are explosive, iconic and witty. All of his visual and musical output has the same feeling of unleashed, immediate energy—it leaps off the page or out of the speakers—and Brian is much the same way: a tall, friendly mass of energy. But beyond all of this, his fiercely DIY example (choosing to perform on venues' floors rather than their stages, refusing to sell into chain stores, and his eloquent defenses against the indiscriminate gentrification of his beloved Providence) make him a rare example of grounded, affect-less artistic integrity. Despite being such a busy and constantly active guy, Brian seems to never lose sight of either living in the art or the art of living. We traded emails for this interview, each of us aloft in our respective lairs.



“...throwing a *pinata full of dead animals* at a crowd for a senior show. I decided my major was *troublemaking*, not printmaking.”

**Tell me about your primary artistic influences.**

I remember Thundercats, The Smurfs, Pac-Man, Mario Brothers, Zork (that old text game on my Commodore 64...or maybe it was a 128?) I think Bard's Tale changed my life in 8th grade. My first Daredevil was when DD fought the Vulture, issue 225. Frank Miller was sneaking back on to the title at that point for one of the most intense comic runs ever created, but I had no idea who he was. All I knew was that the story was cool and David Mazzucchelli's drawings were incredible. Going to sleep to ...And Justice For All by Metallica on my yellow Sports Walkman, seeing The Unsane play with their first drummer, before he heroined himself to death. Seeing Phleg Camp (really awesome drummer, did anyone ever listen to this band, or more importantly, see this band?) play on the floor because no one was there at the show. Play on the floor! Hearing Crash Worship records in '91 or '92 and freaking out! I never cared or knew about any art except comics, TV, or video games forever. Legend of Zelda. I actually think the 1999 or 2000 version for the...Playstation or something, was a huge influence. I sat down for a month in Fort Thunder and played it on a borrowed game system. It had mask shops. Going to figure drawing classes every Saturday all through high school in downtown Philly. Playing soccer and baseball growing up. Growing up physical. G.I. Joe comics: my first subscription started with issue 10. Snake Eyes rules! I just tried to get a few issues of the newest series but it sort of looks like garbage. I can't read it, and my standards are pretty low! Building caves out of my stuffed animals for my G.I. Joe guys to hang out in. Hours in my room as a kid. That's it...and ever since I have been building caves for my G.I. Joe guys...and trying to protect the lair.

**What role does Providence play in your art? How important is your environment to you?**

I guess next on the influence list would be coming to Providence: RISD. Doing badly in classes, but meeting so many great people. Getting arrested in a riot after a party in a train tunnel, wrestling with cops and RISD security guards with a drum tied to my...front. Dropping out of school, going back to school, dropping out again after throwing a pinata full of dead animals at a crowd for a senior show. I decided my major was troublemaking, not printmaking. Moving into Fort Thunder, becoming surrounded by geniuses with nothing to do but create. I stayed in Providence because my friends were there, and we found cheap space. Providence. 1991, I arrive. A gang of us spend hours wandering the streets, sneaking into old abandoned and not-so-abandoned buildings, exploring. Amazed by the possibility of ghosts and mysteries. It was all about Providence and its history of spookiness. A city abandoned, frozen in time. Construction that would take eons to develop. 1997. Living in Fort Thunder. Suddenly a whole city block was full of weirdos living for cheap. There were endless buildings, decrepit, full of potential. A kingdom of aural and visual noise could be built here. It was growing. Students were staying after graduating to join the motion. Locals were melding with new people and it was mutating. Still cheap and raging. I had a place to play drums and draw and build things. 2006. What was potential is now realized garbage. Providence, the suburb of Boston. Boston. Never a good city. There will never be a kingdom of noise here, money wins out over the thrill of trading shit and building culture for its own sake. Or for the sake of personal growth. But the weirdos still thrive, hiding in corners, under rocks...condos and the luxury loft virus map out a dead zone miles wide but still I have a place to drum and draw and build things. Geniuses lurk about and people create out of personal need and an interest in sharing. But I am irate now. Politics, both local and worldwide, leak into my art left and right. Like a cataract. Everything is seen through the filter of politics.







**Can you explain your fundamental conflict with the urban trends of Providence? Why does a city need to make room for lower income artists/housing?**

Unfortunately, when a city gets to the saturated level where it has to "make room" for low income and artist housing, you have come to a sad point. The buildings, mostly mills, from the downtown to my building, used to be abandoned or had small businesses and studios in them. Now they are all living, expensive, and sterile. Cookie cutter, but not a good cookie. Generically yuppy. Security guards, gyms in the buildings. New police stations mysteriously pop up on site to protect the new "community." It's here, like every major city across the world. All this newly developed stuff was once ripe with potential. Now it is "realized," but could have been anything! Now it is one thing, and it's that way to stay. You used to look at buildings and say, "That could be the club house; there's the future arcade; that's the school for time travel; this will be the grand tape library (Brinkman vision); here is the 24 hour jam spot; here's a community finger painting center; this will be full of jungle gyms, free local gardens...anything." And suddenly, there isn't space for shit. It changes your perspective on life. Leaving space unrealized - for potential - in cities is so necessary. And financially unreasonable. People should do things that make no financial sense. Providence is strangling itself. All these cities are. This one just happens to be small enough that it can happen fast. Cities are trading slow, organic, local growth for the quick solution, which means replacing the community with a wealthier base. By the time the tax money trickles down to the local school, the kids in poverty will be long gone. Displaced.

**Can you summarize Ninja?**

Not really.

A big pile of unrealized potential! Space unrealized! Hahaha... Ok...let's see. Lots of characters in a city that is expanding population-wise. It started out with drawings I did when I was 11 or so about a ninja. Ninja comics. Then, 18 years later, I continued it. Four years later here we are. I sort of have an underlying story with this Ninja character, but that is maybe 20 of the 80 pages of comics. It is about tangents because that is what life is about. It is about diagonal thinking. Character creation. Some adventures. Some standard comic

book fare. It is a failed standard adventure comic. Half-visionary and half-reactionary. It's about waking up and thinking about something differently than when you went to sleep thinking about it. It touches on the idea of multiple cities existing in the same spot at once...it's loosely a Dune rip-off, though not as overtly as like all of Jodorowsky's stuff. It's a pile of superficial ideas that accumulate a certain depth through density. Deep layers of superficiality.

**Why did you return to Ninja after 18 years? And why are we including those drawings in the book? Do you feel it's all the same impulse in a way?**

I have no idea what the impulse was back then. I drew ninja comics and a bunch of friends drew ninja comics. I bought ninja throwing stars. I drooled over the catalogues at Asian World of Martial Arts, a kung fu store in Philadelphia. I had a ninja suit complete with two-toed shoes. I had a black wooden practice sword and I took karate for a week at the YMCA, but the teacher, a Chuck Norris looking guy, told us about how he threw his son through a wall when he got mad at him. I quit. I never got the climbing claws that fit in your palm, but man, I wanted them. I still sort of want them. I had a big fascination with G.I. Joe, the Marvel comic, and Ninja was really a rip-off of that. I loved the issues where they would revisit a place they had blown up in the past, and it was still in ruins. It was like, "Yeah! It really happened! Here's the proof! It's still blown up!" I stuck that in one of those early Ninja episodes. Anyway, I think it is sort of the same impulse. But now, instead of wholly drawing it for myself, I have like a ten person audience out there who will at least look at the comics (maybe not read), so that is different. But it is important to have the originals in the book. I do refer to them. I built the ending around the beginning. I added in revisionist history. I think it is interesting that I was so wrapped up in this violence worship; I mean ninjas are seen as evil. And I am still curious as to why people are so wrapped up in violence. Why I still am.

**Does Providence figure in Ninja? If so, how?**

It traces some of the things that have happened here. Evictions of gangs or scenesters, evictions of me. Dickheaded developers roaming the streets. The metamorphosis of a ruin of a city into a characterless wonderbread town. The later, most recent comics...most have a lot more of this. I get lost in being pissed off at gentrification. I get lost in being pissed off at lots of stuff. But I try to balance it with some dreamy stuff. I catch myself dwelling on reality as it is and head for what it could be...it gets harder though.



*How has Providence changed in the decade-plus you've been there? Is it still a vital artistic city?*

This place is still vital. It has harder working people than a lot of cities, percentage-wise. A lot of creative people are here, they are just less centralized now. Territory has been lost.

*Do you ever see a conflict between the somewhat simplistic take on the world exemplified by comics like Daredevil and X-Men and your own more complex, nuanced vision in your answers to the above? How do you reconcile the two?*

I am a failed X-Men wannabe. I love the X-Men. I just read the newest issue drawn by Chris Bachalo. I used to love him on Shade the Changing Man (Brendan McCarthy!) but then he got too cartoony and gooey. But I think he is a little tighter now. The new stuff is pretty cool again. You can pretty much tell what is going on. All of mainstream comicdom melted into utter mush in the '90s. Comics lost its mind then. Total garbage. Really shit. At least Marvel. Whoever was in charge through the bulk of the '90s was an idiot. Maybe I love mainstream comics because the people who make them love them too. Writers and artists who worship these characters! Really!! Sure, it's a job and all but I think it is full of love. Especially now. I think Marvel is flying high right now. Some of it. I don't know why, but I need heroes. Generic standard heroes. I need stories. I love drawings. I grew up with these characters and they are still alive. They are friends of mine. It's weird that it works, tapping into this eternalness. But that's not what I make. You hear this statement all the time but it rings true again. I don't need to make those comics—they are being made. My strength lies in digging into my subconscious and pulling things out through the Chippendale filter. Like a metal grater. It all comes out not really together. It's what in my mind separates an artist from, say, a draftsman: allowing a bit of the inner retardations to surface in the work. I am just far from perfect!

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*So, how do you balance music and art? And how does one influence the other?*

I balance it by being stressed and crazy all the time. Well, maybe not. Drumming a few hours a day and stretching, exercising. I sort of have this ritual now. I think it recharges my batteries for the rest of the day. It cleans me out. Then I feel healthy to draw or work or whatever. Tour is different: When I am on tour everything goes out the window and I become a drumming machine complete with zero imagination. But we don't tour that much. We both (Lightning Bolt's Brian and I) prefer home, where we can play and work on other projects. It's a pain to not be able to really focus, but I think it's good to be somewhat well-rounded. These days, my biggest satisfaction comes out of working in my garden. I have arrived at that phase. I have a small garden, but I love it. I made tomato sauce with tomatoes, basil, eggplant, and peppers all from my roof garden today. The garden is thriving this year. Fort Thunder was a garden. It thrived and broke its boundaries. I think it's important to model yourself after plants: head towards the light, drink a lot of water, get dirty each day.







**How did living in the Fort influence you? And how have your two most important "partnerships" (Brinkman and Gibson?) affected your work?**

I was working on my piece for the RISD museum show tonight, a room made of a wooden frame and paper mache'd walls thinking, "This is something I learned in Fort Thunder." I sealed my room with wheat pasted newspaper to keep out the sound and the cold. I remember when Leif's room went down to 25 degrees. Hahaha, we camped for six years in that place. Actually, I am still sort of indoor camping. I love it! The Fort, we formed it, but it formed us. What was it really like? I don't remember, but it was fun. It was wild (more revisionist history). It is still the standard by which I judge fun city activities. City living. It ruled. So many people bringing in so many ideas and images and garbage. It's too much to really go into here, but it blew away school for me. School pales in comparison to what I learned in the Fort, but at the same time, school sort of prepared me for it. Art school, at best, teaches you to take chances. Oh yeah, and, like, how to turn on a video camera. Did I tell you I failed Silkscreen 2?

My partnerships...me and Brian Gibson: Married, no children. Or shitloads of children, depending on how you look at it. Our relationship has outlasted any romantic relationship I have ever had. Lightning Bolt. How it has lasted ten, eleven, almost twelve years is a mystery to me. Really. We just sort of continue on. Why not. We get along, probably better than ever. I used to lash out more, but it's smoother now. Keep the lashing in the music. Is that aging? The ability to compartmentalize? Lightning Bolt still works: I'm a spaz and Gibson is an intense critical thinker, and it balances out. Twelve years later, we can still tour for three weeks, fly 13 hours, get held in Japanese Customs together for 48 hours, be deported, and fly back again for 21 hours and still play a show the next week. We both understand that we have something important to do with Lightning Bolt, so as long as there is still hope for creative output, it's worth it.

Brinkman on the other hand... freshman year roommate in 1991. First glance, lumbering plant-headed Viking. Now he looks like Mike Muir from Suicidal Tendencies. What can I say about him? He rules. There have been times, maybe more some years ago, when I felt I needed to be away from him. His ideas are inclusive, and sometimes you are doing his ideas—Paper Rodeo, putting on shows, CDR compilations, parades—when you really need to focus on your own. But these days it's not a problem. Maybe he is less pushy. Or maybe I am more focused.

Or really, maybe he just doesn't invite me anymore. I should ask—he lives twenty feet away. He is a good moral compass. He is utterly unable to sell out. It's a good point of view to have around. He is a punk, and because of that he is the best artist/designer I know, but most people will never hear of him. Maybe. He may make a move some day. His way. Shit, I stole his, like, blobby noodle font for the Ninja logo on the book cover. I have taken lots and lots from Mat Brinkman. Everyone has, and no one knows how much. I can play drums better than him though.

**Finally, are you ambivalent at all about showing your art? Is it the same as, or different than putting out a record or playing a show?**

I just finished a new CDR, "Black Pus 3." I have been handing them out, selling them at the local record store. I love it (Brinkman has like 20 CDRs out...or completely out). It is really important to me to have things to be able to give to people. People who come through town, or who I meet traveling. I make a collage, sell it to a stranger for 1000 dollars, or I give out 40 CDRs that took days or months to record, hours to silkscreen, ten times as much work as a formal art piece, way more personal. That is way more satisfying. Maybe...I love it all. I need to pay the rent. I need to give things to people. So there. I will balance it out. When I am drawing comics, I'm thinking, "This is it, this is what I should do all the time." Something interrupts me, I get angry and start the new thing, and then a week later that is all I think I should be doing. I do think art shows come in last place on my list, though. For events, I would rather be drumming in a shitty room with some people (or no people) than be at my art opening. Goddamnit, who knows? I have no idea—it's all great. I am doing three art shows, one each month, right now (September, October, November), and if I don't do another for ten months, I will be thrilled. I need to develop. We get evicted at the end of the year, so I need to move. I need to draw new comics. I have like two more CDs of my own stuff, or more, recorded that need to be edited and released. I have a shitload of political posters to make to hang around Providence - some about this city, some about the world. That's important. I rarely do that, but it feels great. Maybe art shows are a luxury and should be treated like one. A Lightning Bolt show costs, like, 6 bucks in a lot of cities and that is as intense as it gets. It is wholly satisfying (unless we suck). It's cheap creation. It's catharsis. If it works, it destroys gallery art shows. Uh, I better go, I have to work on my gallery art. ▲