

THE FORMER SUNDAY MORNING ARTIST
AND HIS SCULPTED WOODEN ANIMALS

JUXTAPOZ
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A photograph of a brick wall with a window and a pile of autumn leaves in the foreground. The window has a wooden frame and a dark pane. The leaves are scattered on the ground in front of the wall.

AJ FOSIK

INTERVIEW BY WILLIAM BUZZELL

INTRODUCTION BY ALEX LUKAS

PORTRAIT BY DANIELLE SPIRES

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At 5 AM on any given Sunday just past the turn of this last century, AJ Fosik could be found walking around Manhattan, maybe Brooklyn, with a ladder, a shopping cart full of signs, bolts, epoxy, and his buddy William Buzzell along side. Before the towers fell, before Wooster was a collective, and before kids started splashing paint and setting off stink bombs, these two littered New York City's sign poles with their handy work. Before street art became part of the hipster lexicon, these two decided they had said enough.

With a work ethic forged by the Sunday morning shift, Fosik shifted his focus inside, turning a trusty band saw on any unsuspecting piece of wood that tripped his path. His constructions, intricately sculpted wooden animal busts evocative of an unspecified time in our past, have graced gallery walls internationally. A few years and a few thousand miles later, William Buzzell sat down for a poolside conversation with AJ Fosik at the Ramada Inn on Colfax Avenue in Denver, Colorado. —Alex Lukas

Detail of *Beast Study Life Size*

Mixed media
65" x 42" x 28"
2007

William Buzzell: I guess half the reason I'm conducting this interview is because you've apparently been very difficult with past interviewers, and I just thought having someone you know would be easier.

AJ Fosik: I can't stand interviews. I hate doing interviews.

Why is that?

I don't know. I think it detracts from the work. It becomes more about personality instead of the artist's work. It just feels like performance.

Do you ever try to explain your work? Do you ever do artist statements?

Yeah, artist statements are a whole

different kind of shtick, but with interviews, specifically, I always feel like I'm supposed to be doing a song and dance. I'd rather the focus stay on the work. This might be my last one, I'm not sure yet. We'll see how this one goes. We'll see how you do as an interviewer.

I've known you for a while. We met when we were sophomores in the illustration program at Parsons School of Design. Do you feel like you got a lot out of going to art school?

There are all the typical bad things that people say about art school; all the clichés are totally true. It's like anything else; you meet five percent good people and that makes it worthwhile.

Was part of the appeal of going to Parsons the fact that you'd be in NYC?

Absolutely. I sort of felt like I'd done all I could do in Detroit. I needed to go somewhere, and NYC seemed as good a place as any.

It seems that you've moved all over the country. Right now you're living in Denver, before that you lived in San Diego, we lived together in Brooklyn, and you lived in Las Vegas as well, right?

And Detroit and Ann Arbor.
[Author's note: AJ just sold his '93 Toyota pickup with 200,000 miles on it. The money from the vehicle got him from Detroit to New York to San Diego to Denver, and bought a motorcycle.]

A lot of people move to NYC and end up staying there the rest of their lives, but you haven't fit that mold.

Well, I had an idealized version when I moved to NYC, too; that it would be this great artist community and that there would be so much going on. But NYC is a really, really difficult place for an artist to live. I think that whole mythology of being able to live in NYC as an artist isn't really relevant anymore. Everyone I know there works 9-to-5 jobs and pays way too much for an apartment and can't really function creatively.

But you feel that you can function more creatively in places like San Diego or Denver?



I don't really have to have a real job here, so that's a big part of it. It's pretty much the same reason you live in Philly.

But I also started hating NYC towards the end of living there, and not even just in terms of money. I got really burnt out on NYC, and I think you did, too.

Definitely. I go back to NYC now and there's lots of things I love about it, but it's just way too scenestory there. It doesn't feel like any organic art scene really exists.

I kind of feel that all our friends there are turning into the cast of *Sex and the City*. Maybe I shouldn't say that. In regards to art school, I thought one of the most important aspects of Parsons was...

Jordin Isip?

Absolutely.

Jordin was such a great teacher and a great mentor.

I feel that he takes on a mentor role for a lot of his students.

Jordin showed me how you can live as an artist and how to live creatively and do what you need to do.

Aside from that, do you feel that your work and the development of your work benefited from being in the illustration program as opposed to a fine arts major?

There's definitely something worthwhile about having to solve

problems using images. I don't think a lot of fine arts programs give you that.

I see a lot of kids coming out of fine arts programs who are ill equipped at even basic drawing.

They are just adrift with no direction, or imitating conceptual work with no real understanding of what they're doing. I'm not saying the current direction of my work was a result of illustration training, but I learned how to use visual language to convey a message that I think was worthwhile.

When you use imagery in your work, it looks like you're illustrating specific events and places in American history. How much of your work is based on actual

historical events?

I think a lot of my work is informed by historical references and American history, but I don't feel that I create literal representations of events. I'm more interested in exploring the shared language of history, and the boundaries of the uncomfortable versus the familiar.

We both share that interest in history, but I wonder how much traditional American art informs your work visually. Sometimes people describe your sculptures as reminiscent of folk art, but you see your work more in the vein of American craftsmanship.

That's definitely part of it. The process takes on meaning. It's not to look at the past with rose tinted

"EVERYTHING NOW IS DISPOSABLE. NOBODY REPAIRS A TV OR CAN FIX THEIR CAR. PEOPLE ARE TOTALLY INEPT AT BASIC STUFF."

Goodbye Boxes

Enamel on wood
21" x 30"
2007

glasses or use too much nostalgia, but I definitely think there has been a huge loss of craft and pride in what people do. Just the ability to make something or fix something has been lost. Everything now is disposable. Nobody repairs a TV or can fix their car. People are totally inept at basic stuff. They're so dependent on a constant consumption of disposable junk it's kind of pathetic. We live in a total throw-away culture.

I'm impressed by how much construction is involved in making the wooden animal sculptures. Do you allow yourself much leeway in making artistic changes while you build them, or is it all planned out ahead of time?

It's weird because it's very process

oriented and meticulous but simultaneously really loose. I never sit down with a plan of what I'm going to do. I just start building and it develops as I go. There's a direction that I have when I start out, but it's not set in stone or pre-planned, so to speak.

When we were living in NYC, it seems you used the computer a lot in making paintings or drawings, but now you don't seem to use it at all.

At the time I was using a lot of clip art and old imagery and more collage work. I think there is still a lot of that in my work, but now I don't use anybody's pre-existing work anymore.

Do you think basing your work on

old clip art has made it easier for you to draw freshhand in that old etching style?

There was definitely a crossover for me from the process of doing it all digitally to all by hand. It's a lot more satisfying and a lot less tedious, and it ends up conveying a lot more of what I'm trying to get across when I do it myself as opposed to using digital means.

Speaking of process, back in your Detroit days you used to do graffiti, and then you came to NYC and we started teaming up to do sign work on the street. Do you think having a strong work ethic is integral to your process of art making?

We put in tons of work and were super-diligent about it. Every

Sunday morning we walked all over The City putting up work, and that self-sacrifice and commitment helped develop the work ethic I now apply to my sculpture work. There was the aspect of putting in tons of work, and there was also the aspect of breaking out of the box of graffiti and redefining, to me, what it meant to do art in public and testing what you can and can't get away with.

I felt it was healthy to get away from stickers and wheat pasting, and using bolts and chains and locks to affix wood and metal to untraditional street art surfaces.

You had to sit at home working on preparation and construction. When you put it up it had its own kind of power and impact, but was



Chief of Lake Algonquin 138

Mixed media
36" x 30" x 12"

still illicit and fun the way traditional graffiti was.

At a certain point, I think we both became pretty disillusioned with doing work on the street. Why did you lose interest?

I think when street art became a scene it lost its appeal to me. I got burnt out on the act itself, and I got burnt out when there started to become a defined aesthetic. It turned more into a fashion statement and there was a lot more hype attached to it. A lot of kids were clamoring for attention, and a lot of it seemed pretty dishonest. It became about working for gallery attention rather than the work itself. I removed myself from it.

On the other hand, when Anno

Domini gallery in San Jose, California, offered us our first show back in September 2007 it was mainly because the owners liked our street art. I always had mixed feelings about that.

For me street art was never about getting shows. I know that. I don't have any reservations about it at all. I know why I was doing it—and it definitely wasn't to get gallery attention.

I think half the appeal of putting up work outside was just the physical act of exploring.

I think a lot of that is also why I move around so much, that feeling of not knowing where you are and that uncomfortable energy of being in a new place. I think there is a lot

of value in that.

You've been living in Denver for a while. Do you think about moving back East again?

Denver's a good city, but I'm starting to feel the itch; I've probably been here too long. I think the East Coast is going to be where it's at next. Maybe Philly. Not NYC. The "sixth borough," isn't that what they call Philly now?

I called Philadelphia the sixth borough and Andrew Jeffrey Wright threatened to knock my block off. It's been interesting to see the progression of your work from painted panels to the wooden animal structures, because I know building and assembling complex forms has always been in your

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nature. How did you decide to start pursuing that direction art-wise?

I think a lot of it was the natural progression from working with wood and making signs and outdoor installations. It's always been easier for me to work 3D. It almost seems like a chore to work 2D.

I appreciate how your art is constantly evolving, and your resistance to falling back on tried and true methods in favor of taking chances. Where do you think your art is headed?

That's a tough issue, because you start doing something and get recognized for it and it's tempting to continue making crowd-pleasing art. I think it's important to push

forward and try to do something new every time.

What artist do you look up to in terms of developing his or her work and pushing the boundaries?

The guy who immediately comes to mind is Manuel Hung. I really like where he's going. He always seems to push it and explore new territory.

After seeing your full-sized bear sculpture, it seems like you're tending to work bigger and bigger. Do you worry people will be intimidated about buying such big sculptures?

I'm at a point now where that's not really a concern. I just want to keep pushing the work, and if it gets more and more ridiculous and out

of control and huge that's good. People will catch up to it. That's my feeling about art in general.

There's a balance you have to maintain to make money as a working artist.

That becomes a difficult part of the equation. Most of last year my refrigerator was filled more with paint than with food. But it's more about the work than anything else.

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For more information about AJ Fosik, contact Jonathanlevinsgallery.com.