

Interview by Sachin Bhola
Photography by Richmond Lam



Justin R. Saunders

Behind the enigmatic creative director.

A search for “Justin R. Saunders” on the internet is of little avail. The query yields a small handful of interviews and even fewer images. And he likes it that way.

Saunders, 33, is the brain behind JJJJound, a blog, launched in 2006, that was in the vanguard of the public mood board format. The posts consist of images, sans text, ranging from landscapes to interiors to nudes, with the kind of harmony visual artists praise.

The creative class and media got wind soon after its launch—in fact, later that year, the *New York Times* asked him to become a regular men’s fashion contributor, curating favored pieces. Today, in addition to maintaining the blog, he produces and sells JJJJound merchandise on his online store, The Shoppe, and acts as a consulting art director for some of the world’s leading visionaries.

JJJJound’s influence begs the question, “Who is Justin R. Saunders?” It’s no coincidence that to this day he remains hidden from the public eye—or that for his first magazine cover, we chose to conceal his face—because, if there’s anything you should know about him, it’s that he values his privacy.

I spent the day with Saunders in his hometown of Montreal, where he graciously gave me a tour of his home, office, and local hangouts. Here, we discuss his point of view, the relationship between technology and communication, and his advice for creative professionals.

What was JJJJound’s tipping point?

The media started talking about JJJJound not too long after it launched. My content must have been relatable, because it generated conversations about me within the industry pretty quickly. Factor in the fact that the concept of the wordless, curated, scroll-able, public mood board was a new format back then.

It was innovative. What makes a photo worthy of being posted on JJJJound?

I’m assuming I use the same two principles most people do when making decisions: it either triggers something from my childhood or moments past, or projections and inspirations of what I want my future to look and feel like.

Describe your creative process.

I like to dig very deep into concepts and then make them pretty.

How have you evolved personally since launching JJJJound?

I really enjoy the exercise of editing images for the site. I’ve always described it to be therapeutic for me: no sponsors, no partners, no overhead. I suppose it’s similar to making puzzles or editing independent films. It’s almost been a decade since I launched it now. It’s very hard to say the direct impact it has had on my personal evolution, but I would be lying if I didn’t admit it has helped shape

who I am today. I speak things into existence, thanks to this site.

Your work is in the public eye and yet you remain a private person. In fact, this cover mirrors that. How do you balance your public and private life?

I’m not a big fan of attention from people I’ve never met; I shy away from it. It’s not so much a balancing act as it is an instinctual behavior of mine. I’m making efforts to take more selfies.

Your posts on Instagram reveal a very positive, altruistic mindset. Success to you clearly isn’t about the material. How do you define success, and how has that influenced your approach to life?

We need much less than we think we need.

What projects are you currently working on?

I haven’t had time to work on personal projects like the trestle desk in my office, for example. Hopefully, this year, I can dedicate energy to my own projects.

Tell me more about the trestle desk and the other products you produce and sell.

I launched an e-commerce site without a clear mission in mind or actual time to invest in it. I suppose it exists to exercise my love of promotional merchandise, like those found in gift shops at the end of museums, and to feed my obsession with great manufacturing I developed while watching the TV show *How It’s Made* as a child. The trestle desk is dear to me; I got to work with my father, who’s been crafting wood for a living since I can remember. I plan on making a new version of the desk with him soon.

Describe your workspace, where we shot the cover.

My workspace was an art studio previously. I just got the keys a month ago. I haven’t had time to empty boxes or clean it up. I’m excited to build furniture for it, though. Right now, it’s a desk in the middle of an empty room with a wall of old windows; it’s very lit. Come through in a few months for coffee; I’ll have my drip coffee set up.

How has Montreal shaped you and your work, if at all?

Montreal is great for someone like me—I enjoy my routine here. Coffee. Food. Repeat. I’m a creature of habit, and the slow pace gives me the quality of life no other city has so far. Simplifying my life and accepting my limita-





Saunders' trestle desks.



A drawing by Saunders.

“We are a generation who will get to witness unimaginable changes. It’s very exciting.”



Campanelli, a favorite hangout in the Saint-Henri neighborhood of Montreal.



tions has led me to being content here. Perception, bro. Helps that I'm a big fan of the drastic changes in seasonal weather. Love me some seasons.

What's a common misconception people have about working in Montreal, or in a non-major market like New York or Paris?

I guess the trick is to find global clients. Technology has made it very easy to network and work globally. Thankfully, it's getting much easier to cross-pollinate across oceans and borders.

What advice do you have for young creative professionals?

I think the young creative professionals have a super-good handle on things. Creatively, I love where the world is at currently. Keep up the good work and don't be selfish assholes.

Do you think school is necessary?

Education is necessary. Socializing and conversing with like-minded individuals is necessary. Especially in creativity. School, by default, is a great place for creativity. You're not accountable for the financial success of a project as a student. Vibes only. R&D all day. Plus, a special mention for those few great professors who give us meaning and change our lives forever.

On the flip side, in this day and age, anything can be

accomplished without school. Anyone hungry enough can find tools and make it work even as a dropout. It's a great era for this. The world is changing so rapidly, I'm sure a ton of curriculums need to be updated every semester if not month.

What excites you in the world of art and technology today?

I think nanotech-, robotics-, and space-related projects will be fascinating in the next couple of decades. We are a generation who will get to witness unimaginable changes. It's very exciting. I can't wait till we land on a habitable planet we haven't discovered yet.

What has your career thus far taught you about yourself and life?

That I'm a huge nerd with a big heart.

In my lifetime, I've learned not to put all my eggs in one basket. Always have a plan B ready. And enjoy every second of it while it's happening, because projects are over before you know it, and then you miss everyone. □



The view from the Lachine Canal in Montreal.