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In Conversation With Johannes DeYoung



Hunter S. Thompson once famously said that in order to really live as a human being, you have to “buy the ticket, take the ride.” If that’s true, New Haven-based artist *Johannes De Young* must’ve stepped up to some warped out carnival counter, bought the ticket and is now taking the ride with his most recent video series *Ego Loser*. Like Freud or Jung on a serious acid trip, *Ego Loser* is a creepy commentary on the human subconscious and an exploration of that painfully fine line between where the body ends and where the mind begins. With a series that’s a little schizophrenic in style and a little bit nasty in nature, Johannes explains his own thought processes, if he happens to be a secret serial killer in disguise, and how a certain Beach Boy’s body of work continues to inspire him throughout his promising career.



Courtney McCarroll: I’m really drawn to the dichotomy between these candy-coated colors and the image of a pretty gruesome hollowed-out human head. The figure repeatedly reiterates “my thoughts are under my control” and it seems as though this particular mantra has been singed into him with obvious physical consequence. Does your work speak to the idea of temptation and the attempt to repress that temptation or urge?

Johannes DeYoung: Candy-coating makes everything palatable! It’s a very alluring and powerful coping mechanism, not too disparate from the language of positive affirmation. I see it in stark contrast to the physical

SEARCH



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condition of the body; there's a sense of cognitive dissonance underlying the work.

The scripts in *Ego Loser* are partially generated from e-mail spam that I've collected for years. I often use it as a starting point when I write. The content runs the gamut, but I'm especially drawn to self-help mantras and positive affirmations. I actually believe deeply in positive affirmation, but taken out of context, it's incredibly absurd. In this case, the language masks the body which is also pretty absurd.

Your question reminds me of Edward Albee's play, *The American Dream*. There's an image of a masturbating baby that's mutilated by its parents. The parents later encounter *The American Dream* as an idyllic stranger who appears at their doorstep, but the stranger is actually the disaffected doppelgänger of Mommy and Daddy's murdered baby: well-mannered and archangel-like, all of his organic urges subdued. The baby is snuffed-out and socially whitewashed behind the mask of *The American Dream*. It's incredibly funny and dark and while I don't necessarily see any literal ties, its themes definitely resonate for me.

Courtney: Whoa. Sounds like my next beach read. But aside from the visuals, the sounds of your videos are especially jarring, as well. It literally sounds dirty. I hear flies hovering around and the sound of a toilet plunger squeezing in and out. I feel like I need a shower or a lobotomy after watching it. What kind of effect or added impression do you think this gives for viewers?

Johannes: I really wanted to create a tactile, organic space with sound. There's often a distancing effect that happens with screen-based media. Video and film images are commonly flattened across a two-dimensional field, so I try to utilize the tools I have to reinforce ideas of depth and tactility that might otherwise be absent on the screen. I record most of my own sounds in the process, but I also sample. Ultimately, I want to create a texture with sound that adds depth to the work. A lot of inspiration for it actually came from Brian Wilson's Smile-era experiments. I'm always striving to channel that zeitgeist.



Courtney: Sorry, I'm still reeling over the masturbating bear. You've mentioned to me before that the characters in your videos are broad extensions of yourself which is really fascinating to me because, in person, you're such a mild-mannered, almost gentle guy. Would you still say that these works are entirely personal reflections and magnifications of your own self or do you think they speak to a bigger truth regarding the underbelly of human nature?

Johannes: A few years ago, I was in Hawaii and there was a swell that made these really big waves. They were the biggest waves I've ever seen—probably about 10-12 feet high (surf people laugh). A bunch of people I didn't know were in the water getting pummeled which seemed like a good idea to me, so I got in the water and got pummeled too. For two days afterward, I felt like someone had shoved a pencil up my nose and that my head was in some kind of anechoic chamber. It's really thrilling to ride the line between control and something much bigger than yourself. There's a deep, sucking undertow that can take you into very strange waters if you let it.

Courtney: Cryptic. With that said, though, I have to know what your childhood was like in order to conceive and produce content like this.

Johannes: I grew up outside of Louisville, KY, which is sort of the South, sort of the Midwest. My relationship with that place is complex. There's a lot of people in Louisville that I care about deeply and I have really fond memories and feelings for the place. It's a very comfortable city, but like anywhere else, it's also a mixed bag. Hunter S. Thompson was from Louisville and I think his piece on the Kentucky Derby really nailed it.

My parents still live in Louisville. They're both extremely creative people and great storytellers. So was my grandmother. I was always especially close to her. We made videos together when I was growing up and she later collaborated with me on a number of projects, including a video called *Dumb Angel* in 2009. She was a local songwriter in Louisville, actually. She wrote songs for decades but only published a few of them late in her life. Most of them were written about her own life, but written from either a man's or child's perspective. Songs like *Singin' Hymns With Whiskey on My Breath* were about her alcoholic husband who died of a brain

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aneurism before I was born. She grew up in La Grange, KY—just down the road from the filmmaker D.W. Griffith who's simultaneously a point of local pride and contempt. They were neighbors, but she never worked up enough nerve to acquaint herself. At any rate, she really loved to perform and she was always an enthusiastic participant in my work. She was one of the biggest enablers of my work on so many levels.

META

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Dumb Angel

from Johannes DeYoung

Courtney: Your grandmother sounds so rad. I would've loved to have met her. To explore the cinematic perspective a little bit more, I have to say that your work reminds me a bit of a cross between David Lynch and Lars von Trier in both composition and themes. If you're familiar with their bodies of work, would you agree? Are there any other film directors or artists (video or otherwise) who inspire your own work?

Johannes: David Lynch's work is indelible; Lars von Trier's work depresses me. That's not necessarily a good or bad thing, it's just a fact. I came to know video art through West Coast artists like Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy and Bruce Nauman, so it would be remiss not to mention them. I think Bjorn Melhus makes fantastic work. He had a couple of terrific shows at Roebling Hall, when it was still around, that were super exciting. A few years ago, a friend turned me on to the Kuchar Brothers' films, which have been blowing my mind ever since.

However, probably more than anything else in the last few years, I find huge inspiration in Brian Wilson's recordings from the mid-to-late 60's. That work is like the perfect amalgamation of Mark Twain, George Gershwin, Peter Blake... and maybe James Ensor for hermetic, visionary good measure.

Courtney: I guess Brian Wilson just wasn't made for these times, then. And given your own extensive body of work and reference points, I'm not sure if you were either. Is there a form you enjoy most or one that feels most organic to you? When conceptualizing and creating new artwork, how do you ultimately decide which particular medium to use?

Johannes: Video is often where my work ends up these days, but I don't necessarily identify myself with any specific medium. Video just happens to be a really synthetic medium and it often ends up being the place where multiple facets of my practice come together. The ways I think about time and space also work well in video. Besides that, I find video to be just as natural as drawing. It always goes back to drawing for me. Outside of a specific action, drawing is the most immediately accessible medium I can think of. It gives me something to do if the lights ever go out.

That said, the process ultimately determines what form the work will take. I might start out with an idea that's moving in one direction, but realize it's better suited in some other form. If I'm not tuned into that, I'll waste a lot of time trying to make things work that shouldn't, or won't. I can only hope that if I'm lucky and keyed into the right channel, I'll see when the stars align and ride the work's momentum through to the end.

Der Alpegeist

from Johannes DeYoung



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