

# MAGIC CARPET RIDE

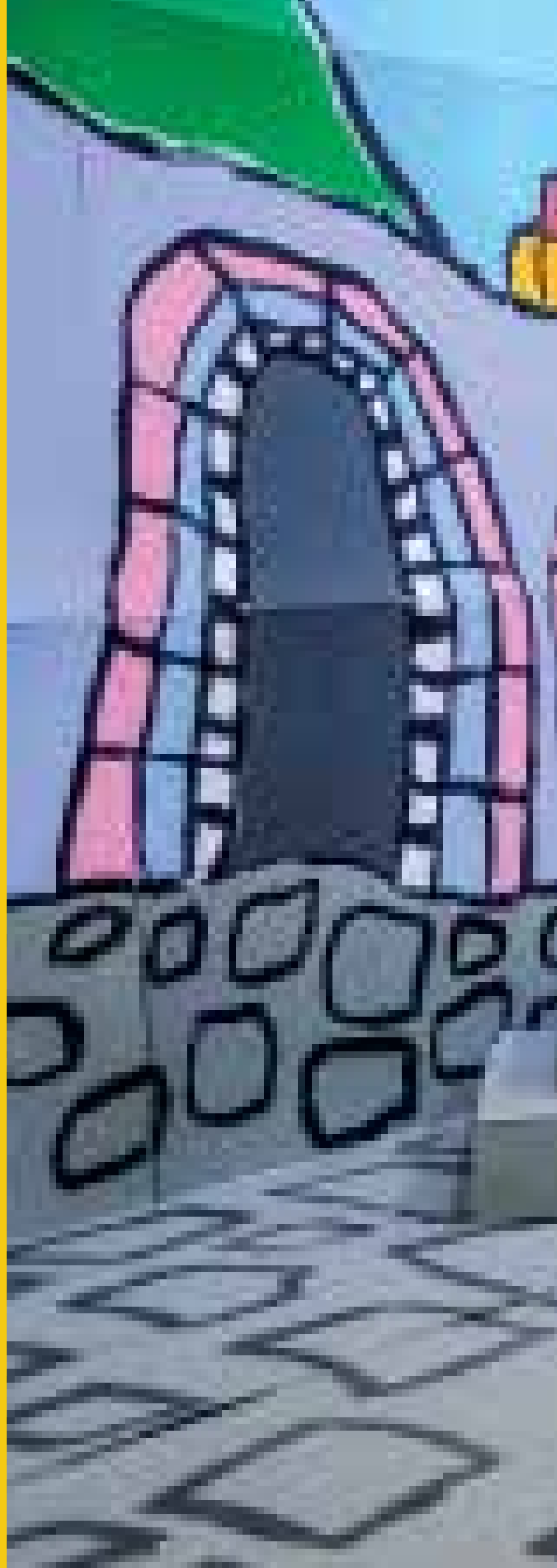
Behind the scenes of Adam Green's debauched *Aladdin* fantasy  
**BY MICHAEL SLENSKE**

“My first wet dream was that I won Super Mario Bros. and they introduced me to the princess, and I ejaculated in my sleep as I won that level. To me, that’s how deeply Nintendo is embedded in my consciousness,” says Adam Green, walking me through his Williamsburg painting studio dressed in bell-bottoms, a striped button-down, and white tennis shoes. While that may not sound like your typical explanation for a sustaining artistic inspiration, to hear the 34-year-old folk rocker tell it, the Japanese video game company’s early eight-bit graphical interfaces have pervaded nearly every facet of his creative life for the past two decades. “I want to excavate that material and transform it into artwork, and I’m almost entitled to do it because this corporation took over my childhood brain.”

When I first met Green three years ago, in his old Gramercy loft studio in Manhattan, he was in the process of doing just that while still coming down from a ketamine-fueled European tour for his 2010 album *Minor Love*. The tour was immortalized in Dima Dubson’s libidinal indie doc *How to Act Bad*, which captures Green’s every smoke, snort, song, spank, and crowd-surf as the artist deep-dived into his darker self with two girlfriends and a pack of groupies riding shotgun. Despite the chaos of his personal life, the musician somehow

managed to make *The Wrong Ferrari*, his 72-minute “screwball tragedy”—starring himself, Macaulay Culkin (who palled around and performed with Green on the tour), Devendra Banhart, *Arrested Development*’s Alia Shawkat, and a slew of other downtown cool kids—which was more or less a hyperbolically fictional slapstick of his road life, shot one scene per week or as fast as the singer-songwriter could pen the script on his then new smartphone (which also served as his video camera).

“I had an insatiable appetite for drugs and sleep deprivation, and I was trying to write as much as I could on ketamine,” says Green, who would hand his actors index cards of dialogue the day of each shoot. “This is also probably where I got obsessed with technology and this iPhone.” After premiering the film in 2011 at the Anthology Film Archives, Green displayed his painted papier-mâché sets (which were made at Culkin’s loft, where numerous scenes were also shot) the following year at an art fair on the Lower East Side. Dealer Kathy Grayson happened to see them and offered Green a solo show that summer at her gallery, the Hole, where he screened the film, exhibited the sets, and unveiled his “Houseface” series of trippy Dubuffet-meets-De Stijl sculptural abstractions of Elmo, Big Bird, and Garfield, which evoke everything from video game graphics and





the jagged lines of Friedensreich Hundertwasser's art and architecture to the design motifs of Persian tapestries.

"I guess I set out to be a noise painter at some point," says Green, whose earliest artistic influences came courtesy of the now-shuttered Exile on Main Street record store in his hometown of Mount Kisco, New York. It was there he met Kimya Dawson, his future bandmate in the Moldy Peaches, and Matt Valentine (of the Tower Recordings), who introduced him to Skip Spence, Pearls Before Swine, the Incredible String Band, the Sea Ensemble, Amon Düül, and the No-Neck Blues Band. "I started taking

"My dad grew up being interested in illustration, and he did a few cards, very casually, for Hallmark," says Green.

"I remember when I was eight years old he drew Superman in this really weird way, almost like somebody who had never seen Superman before, but it was still good and it blew my mind, because I was like, 'Are you allowed to draw Superman like that? He's a copyrighted thing.' There was something discordant about it that was interesting to me." It would appear that the experience is still paying dividends.

In April, Green and Grayson are teaming up again for a second screening-and-set reveal at the Hole to celebrate his new film, *Adam Green's Aladdin*, an 80-minute hypersexualized, techno-futuristic spin on the *Arabian Nights* tale, featuring reality-TV crews, coke orgies, and a transgendered parent.

"I was drawn to the piece because it is so immersive and a total work of art. It takes a lot of creative power to get so many people to join, and to hold it all together is a real feat," says Grayson, who participated in the "dada absurdity" as a ruff-and-tutu-wearing extra during the summer 2014 shoot. "The props were my favorite part," she says. "The movie has so many amazing sculptures in it."

Originally, the idea for the project came from Green's telling a younger friend in passing, "Wouldn't it be funny if I made my own version of *Aladdin*?" he recalls, noting he grew up reading various versions of the Middle Eastern folktale and loving the Disney film. "She said, 'No, don't do that. I grew up not liking *Aladdin* because of the World Trade Center.'" Green was flabbergasted that a younger generation could ever confuse the princely protagonist with a jihadist, so he made a humorous painting depicting Aladdin riding his magic carpet into the Twin Towers.

"I thought it would be an interesting painting, but it has nothing to do with what I ended up making," says Green, who raised \$50,000 on Kickstarter and spent another quarter million dollars (much of it his own money) to finance the Gondryesque opus, which utilizes a bare-

bones "symbolic alphabet" from *Aladdin* (a lamp, a genie, a flying carpet, a princess, and wishes) filtered through the artist's current context. Helping Green realize his vision is Francesco Clemente as the jaded genie; Natasha Lyonne as Aladdin's self-medicating, gold-digging mother; Shawkat playing his documentary-filmmaker twin sister, Emily; Culkin serving as Ralph, the leader of an Occupy-like rebel group called the Magical Americans; Jack Dishel doing double duty as the e-history-erasing, pan-European-accented Sultan and the twins' Uncle Gary; and British It girl blogger-pop singer-fashionista Bip Ling as the promiscuous Princess Barbara.

"I was on an airplane with my wife when we thought of Francesco. He was visually the most genielike person I could imagine," Green recalls. Shawkat, who had interviewed Clemente

**"The more I thought about digitized flesh, the more it seemed like a potent image."**

psychedelics, and I related to all those things deeply," he recalls. "It was the introduction of the concept of noise—noise music, noise in art. I began to see sounds as fibrous textures, and my line evolved as I tried to draw noise. Pressing hard on the paper so that I could feel the tension in my wrist appealed to me as a musician."

He also got some notes on perspective growing up in a modernist house in Westchester. There, he and his brother (who became an astrophysicist at NASA) were raised by a psychiatrist mother and a neurologist father, both atheist Jews. His mother volunteered at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and his father became a headache specialist in order to cure his own migraines. After spending some time with Green, it's easy to see how such an upbringing might form a mind that references *Finnegans Wake*, Noam Chomsky, the Bible, and Nintendo in consecutive breaths (and with equal weight).

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Adam Green as Aladdin and Bip Ling as Princess Barbara go on a drug binge. They are filmed by a camera crew played by Tennessee Thomas and Michael Leviton.

Jack Dishel as Uncle Gary in the mountains, trying to call Aladdin on his mobile phone.





BOTH IMAGES: ADAM GREEN





Ling met Green a few years ago while deejaying for a fashion brand outside the Colosseum in Rome. “I remember Adam told me that evening that he was planning *Aladdin*, and I remember thinking that I wanted to be the princess straightaway but never thought he would ask me to play the role,” she recalls. “When Adam sent me the storyboard, I immediately knew how visual the film would be. The outfits were so super, super cool, too. It was a bonkers, surreal, and very enjoyable experience.”

While casting choices like Clemente and Ling feel inspired, they certainly have to compete for attention onscreen with the 30 hand-painted sets (and hundreds of papier-mâché props) Green created for the film.

“I love surreal landscapes and was amazed by what he came up with for the sets. It was like living in a video game, but one that could fall apart at any minute—and did. I would step through a doorway and almost take the frame off,” says actor-musician-producer Jack Dishel, who played guitar in the Moldy Peaches and who recently launched the wildly popular web series *Dryvors*, starring Culkin. Dishel adds, “Adam’s perspective is really distinct and shines through anything that he’s doing. In this case, it’s writing the screenplay and songs, directing, acting, designing the sets, props, costumes. His hand is in basically every aspect of the process, so the end result is almost like a supervirus made up of all his smaller viruses.”

To accommodate his fragile viral world, Green rented out photographer Charlotte Kidd’s warehouse in Red Hook and worked with set designer Tom McMillan to devise an installation system using 4-by-4-foot Uline cardboard tiles that could be Velcroed to the walls during shoots and then broken down and stored inside an 80-foot-long filing cabinet.

“It was crazy,” says Green, whose video game sets illuminate (via special effects) when touched, while his props elicit smoke signals, Pop-y Lichtenstein-esque graphics, and Nintendo-like sound effects. The filmmaker arrived at his pixelated aesthetic after seeing

# “Nintendo took over my childhood brain.”

Paul Thek’s “Technological Reliquaries,” wax sculptures made to resemble cubes of flesh. “The more I thought about digitized flesh, the more it seemed like a potent image—this pixel that has a skin element. You see it with 3-D printing, people using biological cells to make 3-D grids, and I even think that people who are looking at Internet porn are really just jerking off to cubic mosaics of pornography.”

By combining this notion of “erotic pixel information,” 3-D printing, and the *Aladdin* tale, Green arrived at a plot that centers around the title character—a blues-singing, coke-snorting “upper-middle-class pauper”—who is losing his mojo and is about to be dropped from Zintendo Records, the innovative, medieval company that “invented flesh cubes, flesh rock, faggot rock, houseface.” Having recently spent 30,000 space bucks on cocaine, which he takes only to “go to Brooklyn” and sing the blues, Aladdin (a name he was given by Zintendo for his ninth album) is on the verge of being sent to the sultan’s debtor’s prison when his long-lost Uncle Gary arrives in Regulartown from Africa with money and news that Aladdin’s transgendered, absentee father is dead. Gary later takes Aladdin on a hike through a mining town, where “baseball diamonds” are excavated, to a secret cave (shot atop a snowy Swiss mountain) to find the magical 3-D printing lamp.

“The turning point for me was thinking that the lamp could be a 3-D printer,” says Green, who once had a daydream of making a movie about people who lived in the 1960s and used an analog version of the Internet. “It’s this weird transitional world that never existed. You’d have to go to the post office so they could print out your e-mail

for L.A. MOCA’s YouTube channel, sent Green over to the artist’s massive SoHo studio: “You go up in this elevator and the door opens, and he has these big eyes and he was just being really intense. It felt intimidating because he was not saying a lot and there were all these huge paintings and it was pretty dark. He took me over to this couch and I felt like I was 11 years old. I told him everything about the movie. I showed him the storyboard, we read through each of his lines, and 20 minutes into it he laughed, one time. At one point I was like, ‘I should go.’ So I walk over to the elevator, and as the elevator is going down, he says, ‘I will be your genie.’”

Clemente claims that he relates to Green as a “manual laborer” and appreciates the film’s handmade aesthetic (“There’s no film more hand-made than this one”); he says the experience of filming on the *Aladdin* sets provided “some of the most calm and blissful days of my life.”

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:  
Inside the lamp: Nicole LaLiberte as Ms. President, Green as Aladdin, and Francesco Clemente as the Genie Mustafa.

In *Aladdin*’s hotel room: Green as Aladdin, Mical Klip and Karley Sciortino as hotel-room floozies, and Har Mar Superstar as the British Druggie Guy.



for you. From that idea, I started to think about this equation where you take the Internet, plug it into the 3-D printer, press Go, and it prints out the entire Internet.”

In the hands of Green’s *Aladdin*, a wish-printing machine that allows you to “mainline your dreams” leads to Blakean excess. After suffering a momentary twinge of materialist guilt, the singer is soon turning himself into a prince (with golden laptop dowries), printing luxury goods and piles of cash, indulging in various drug and sex benders (with paid professionals and the princess), even printing himself a baby named Gizmo. Emily sums it up best: “Prints are like martinis; one is fine, two is too many, three is not enough.”

Ultimately, the lamp itself gets reprinted, and before long the Magical Americans are fabricating stacks of guns, the sultan is printing himself a 40-inch cock, while Regulartown folks are printing everything from last year’s haircut to an Immortal Jellyfish Regeneration Algorithm. In other words, *Adam Green’s Aladdin* is a spun-out, neurotic quest narrative grounded on some kind of psychedelic version of Nintendo’s greatest hits—only the high scores refer to how much blow you’ve consumed and the final levels aren’t reserved for winners but for kitschy koans like “The deathbed is a horrible hang” or “Technology is ushering in a neoclassical age... reappropriated ideals that form the basis for a monolithic social sculpture that is greater than the pyramids, the Parthenon, the Colosseum, Disney World, all

man-made wonders combined.”

While Green and his production team are gearing up for the festival circuit, limited theatrical releases, a year-and-a-half-long world tour, and video on demand, the film seems best suited to institutional settings like the Fondation Beyeler in Switzerland, where Green reconstructed two prop-filled sets from scratch—one from the Big Bird–bedazzled “throne” room and a “street” from Regulartown—for two nights in January.

“Similar to Jean Dubuffet, with his ‘Hourloupe cycle,’ Green has invented a wholly individual visual world, where painterly elements evolve into the three-dimensional,” says Raphaël Bouvier, who curated the “Jean Dubuffet—Metamorphoses of Landscape” exhibition, which also opened at Beyeler in January. The museum’s Jan Solberger adds, “Adam’s installation is intended as an interdisciplinary nod to what could be perceived as the influence or heritage of Art Brut within contemporary art.”

Three years ago, when Green was high and scurrying around the Gramercy studio to show me all the paintings, drawings, and sculptures strewn about his two-level live/work space, his present focus would not have been possible. “I remember going around Europe thinking I’m a joke to everyone that’s older or my age because my friends were having kids and I was going around Europe on ketamine,” says Green. He admits that his saving grace came in the form of his wife, Yasmin, whom he married not long after they met, at a brunch, in 2011.

Yasmin helped launch the Google Ideas think tank with Jared Cohen and is now producing *Aladdin* with her husband. “My wife is such an integral part of everything I’m doing. She’s inspiring me to do lots of different things. It’s cool to have a partner in crime,” Green says. “I picture most of my ideas in the future will be something that’s a collaboration with Yasmin.” After the birth of their daughter in the fall of 2014, he’s even pared his partying down to “a few beers.”

While Green doesn’t foresee making another film in the near



future, he would love to make his own video game, and is currently busy with a new series of oil-pastel “Paradise” paintings (a selection of which were exhibited at Mexico City’s Material Art Fair last month) that are inspired by Nicolas Poussin’s bacchanal scenes, gnostic texts, William Blake, and Dante.

“A lot of the early Christian paradises deal with wheels that are turning and jewels,” says Green, pointing to similar motifs in some paneled works on paper scattered about the Williamsburg studio floor. “I was thinking I could use that language to make an ice cream–colored papier-mâché paradise.”

For now, he just hopes to bring *Aladdin* to as many countries and audiences as possible. “You push something out of yourself through your skin, and hopefully it’s exactly how it looks inside you. That’s what being the genie is,” says Green. “Rimbaud says the genie is the prince and the prince is the genie. They’re the same guy. You just have to have a balance with you and your genie.” MP

ABOVE:  
Dishel as Uncle Gary and  
Green as Aladdin.

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP:  
Ling as Princess Barbara,  
driving her Ferrari.

Macaulay Culkin as Ralph,  
the leader of the Magical  
Americans, protesting against  
the Sultan. He’s flanked  
by Benjamin Dubson as  
Fifteen Year Old and Sienna  
Scarritt as Rebel Girl.

