

# SPIRITUAL GANGSTER

After more than a decade in the fast lane, **Anthony James** trades in his bad boy image for a more enlightened sculpture practice—and a new Los Angeles gallery venture with LAXART founder **Lauri Firstenberg**.

**BY MICHAEL SLENSKE   PORTRAIT BY JEFF VESPA**

Anthony James in front of *Absolute Zero*, 2017, at there-there gallery in East Hollywood where his solo show, "Absolute Zero," will open on October 6.



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hen Anthony James was growing up in a family full of East End underworld characters, a Kray Brothers-like crew from the housing estates of Essex, he recalls “a part time thing to do was steal a car, drive it and burn it. You’d see all these burnt out cars on the sides of the motorways.” James says this as we walk past a small fleet of new trucks and vintage convertibles (including a 1981 black and tan Rolls Royce with a vanity plate that reads “DAOISM”)—none of them betraying any telltale scars of pyromania—in the driveway of his Los Feliz live-work space that boasts 360 degree views of Los Angeles. “I used to do some really sketchy shit, and I may have stolen a car,” he admits. “But I never set one on fire.”

That remained true until a decade ago when the now 42-year-old artist made his infamous *KΘ* sculpture. Short for *kalos thanatos* (the Greek translation is “beautiful death”), the piece is anchored by a once-black 355 Ferrari Spyder, which James actually bought “for nothing” from the exotic car club he belonged to at the time. “With those kinds of cars I would drive them to their limit on the off chance that they may come off the road. It wasn’t a suicidal tendency,” he says. “But I wanted to get hold of the car because I just wanted to fucking destroy it. I knew that was inside me.”

After securing the deed to the former rental, James did just that on the outskirts of Kingston, New York, where he poured gasoline over the convertible, set it ablaze, and then proceeded to encapsulate the burnt out carcass inside a Judd-invoking infinity box. While he’s told a few diverging tales over the years about the work’s origin story, the truth behind the narrative is less compelling than the Truths contained within the mirrored box itself.

“It really reflected the time I was living in during 2001 to 2006—9/11 happened, it was the destruction of our greatest things, the stock market crashed, and I enjoyed the hedonistic act of destroying something very materialistic,” James told me in 2010, while insinuating then that his next firebomb conquest would be an F-16 fighter jet. What a difference a decade makes.

After years of hard drinking and drug abuse, James is now three years sober, a unity consciousness-preaching practitioner of kundalini yoga, and just launched a gallery space (with LAXART founder Lauri Firstenberg) in East Hollywood. This is to say nothing of his soulful new work, which has been rating shows from New York to Milan. It all seems light years away from a guy who nearly crashed—and actually burned—his Ferrari at the height of global (and personal) crisis.

“I made loads of myths about it,” James now says of *KΘ*. “I was really into this idea of not knowing what was the story and what was the truth. It’s like a good autobiography, you need to learn to read between the lines.”

Raised to be either a lawyer or a drug-dealing gangster, James honed his storytelling skills (and penchant for mayhem) at a young age, but then took a road less traveled by applying, and getting accepted, to London’s Central Saint Martins. His community college art teacher, actually warned him that he “wouldn’t fit in” but James, thankfully, didn’t understand what she’d meant at the time. “I didn’t really work very hard,” he recalls of his art school days. “I made about one painting a year, mixing pop art with abstraction. I was more into conversation.”

As a student James interned for Victoria Miro, who suggested he go to New York, and before receiving his diploma he landed in SoHo as a fresh-faced twenty-something. “I was planning on staying a week and then I went to some parties, met some people and stayed on for the next 12 years,” he says. His social skills landed him in a diverse crowd of art, music and fashion luminaries that included Lawrence Weiner and Glenn O’Brien (who wrote an essay for his 2014 monograph), Marianne Faithfull and Alexander McQueen (who made his ex-wife’s wedding gown).

Around this time, James began working as a sculptor, his first foray being minimalist steel Tony Smith-like structures—made on Grand Street with Chinatown metalsmiths—that he fitted



PHOTO BY JOSHUA WHITE



with lenses to outwardly project holographic images of the aquariums and living fish contained within. Though he claims a lot of his art is about esoteric concerns, death and rebirth, and a certain spiritual energy, he also argues, “A lot of the art is in the correction of a mistake or maybe it is the mistake. I’m very open to what comes to me. I feel like certain things are serendipitous.”

Such was the case with the Chinese metalworkers. “You don’t have that kind of thing any more, but the whole place was full of weird carpentry and eccentric neon shops back then,” recalls James. “That’s when I got into the idea of working with fabricators to make sculptures.” James ratcheted up his collaborative production efforts shortly after showing KΘ and a series of infinity boxes filled with Beuysian chainsawed birch trees at Patrick Painter’s Bergamot Station galleries in 2008. He’d moved to Los Angeles that year and an artist friend introduced him to her boss, Peter Carlson, the master fabricator behind Jeff Koons’s Balloon Dog sculptures and numerous Ellsworth Kelly works over the past 45 years. “Most artists don’t really want to talk about their fabricators, but Peter really pushed me to make better objects,” admits James.

“When I saw the Ferrari I became stoked to work with him. He just knocked it out of the park, and when I talked to him about the creation of that work it sealed the deal. I just wanted to work with an artist who would do something like that,” says Carlson. “We’ve been working for a long time now and he’s so receptive to technologies that will help him realize his ideas and it’s really a pleasure because it doesn’t always work that way. How we get there is a very important part, a lot of work is in the process, and it evolves as we go along so it’s very rewarding to work with Anthony. He’s tuned in and he’s receptive to possibilities and opportunities for change and is willing to incorporate it into his work and that quality can make for a great piece.”

Just as James was approaching an artistic zenith, the economic downturn forced Carlson, after four decades in the business, to close his doors in 2010. James, too, was about to experience his own crash. After more than decade of addiction, and a divorce, the artist wound up in several rounds of rehab and ultimately found himself in Munich in the spring of 2013. Though he never intended to stay in Germany past a month, or make any art while he was there, the self-imposed “change of environment” lasted two years and inspired some of the most poetic work of his career.

“I was pretty raw, just coming out of rehab, just going with the flow, but I can’t sit around. I just make things, I guess, and that took me on this journey,”

says James, who had begun collecting “high-quality cardboard boxes” from Munich dumpsters during his morning walks. Back at his apartment he flattened them out, fastened them together with wax and then sculpted torn fragments into a series of organic forms. He fitted 21 of these with wax spines—only later did he connect this with his kundalini practice, which considers the spine a conduit of all life energy—and cast the forms in bronze with a local foundry that specialized in tchotchkes. The process immortalized the ashes of this poorest material into a metaphorical Phoenix.

“I heated the casts until the cardboard turned to ash and that’s when I poured the bronze to capture this delicate moment of transition from one form to another, this death and rebirth,” recalls James. “It was an exact reflection of where I was in my life, the fragility of my state, but I wasn’t so on it that I could conceptualize that at the time.”

The works, dubbed *Morphic Fields*, garnered a show at Munich’s Walter Storms Galerie, prompted the titular monograph with Glenn O’Brien, and attracted a number of top collectors like Beth Rudin DeWoody, who considers James a friend and started acquiring his work after Simon Watson introduced her to the artist’s early birch sculptures.

“I’m very proud of him because he was in that fast lane,” says De Woody. “But I think he’s gotten through that now and he’s due for a big show in a good gallery. His work is great.”

Around this time on a recommendation from art advisor Lisa Schiff, LAXART founder Lauri Firstenberg made a fateful visit last year to James’s former studio at the Pacific Design Center. There the artist had an assortment of his birch sculptures, Brancusi-esque bronzes, gold leaf paintings (abstracts and delicate portraits of Hollywood icons with graffiti sprays over their eyes), the *Morphic Fields*, some ebony totems and a new series of steel, copper and bronze shields mimicking magnetic (or aura) fields that James adulterates with gestural marks of spray paint and welding.

“His studio was pretty full with everything he’d ever made and I kind of walked in there and asked him to put everything away and start over,” recalls Firstenberg. “It’s funny because I’m usually very shy and modest, but I just came in and had a lot to say and he was very open to it. I had a very strong physical and emotional reaction. Every time I walked into the studio my heart would be racing and pounding faster and faster. On the material and formal level I respond to the work and it also poses a lot of challenges in terms of how to contextualize it because there’s an atemporality to it.”

While Firstenberg immediately began working with

James, and curated a spring show for him at New York’s Fort Gansevoort, it wasn’t until they began discussing ideas for a brick and mortar space for her consultancy, there-there—and he began searching for a new studio space in East Hollywood—that the notion of a collaboration emerged.

“He was looking for a studio space and when he saw it he realized it should be something more,” say Firstenberg, who opened there-there earlier in September with the premiere of William Leavitt’s first feature film and will open James’s first L.A. solo exhibition in a decade, “Absolute Zero,” on October 6. In many ways the show represents a spiritual and sculptural rebirth for James, who arrived at the opening date and theme (“there’s a lot of triangles and circles”) after speaking with a numerologist. As such, he is showing the titular sculpture of concentric neon circles whose rainbow hues act as a contemporary stained glass church window that casts a white glow over the space. “People believe you can heal with color,” says James, who will also unveil a selection of new aura shields and two icosahedron infinity box sculptures—both made with Carlson, who is back in business. They represent the only platonic solids—“radically open, dynamic, and optimistic tools of exploration”—that he didn’t represent in his illuminating January 2017 exhibition inside Milan’s San Paolo Converso church in collaboration with New York jewelry designer David Yurman. “In this moment of destructive individualism, the ideals of affinity and mutuality that these models represent is a critically hopeful statement,” says James. On a tour through the brick walled space, a former grocery store in the shadows of the periwinkle Church of Scientology HQ where a team of contractors have been working around the clock for months, James shows me the white wall where *Absolute Zero* will hang.

“I don’t really preconceive things, I just do it,” James says. “That’s why I don’t have any sketchbooks. Everything I have ever made is a first time, there’s never a trial and error to get to a certain point. I think it’s almost a form of channeling.” It wasn’t until he let go of his entire conception of himself—and a lot of the “original pain” from his hard knocks childhood—a couple years ago, embraced his yoga practice, and literally stopped making work for a year that his fortunes changed for the better. That hasn’t prevented James, whose career has always been defined by his devil-may-care willingness to invest all of his money back into new work, from betting big on a work-in-progress gallery venture. “I love how L.A. artists are always helping other artists. I have no way of knowing whether this space will make any money or not, but I want to give back in some way,” he says. “At the end of the day I hope it’s a great platform for communication.”

*Transitory Mirror Painting #3, 2014 (on wall)  
and Morphic Field #23, 2014 installed at  
Walter Storms Galerie in Munich.*

