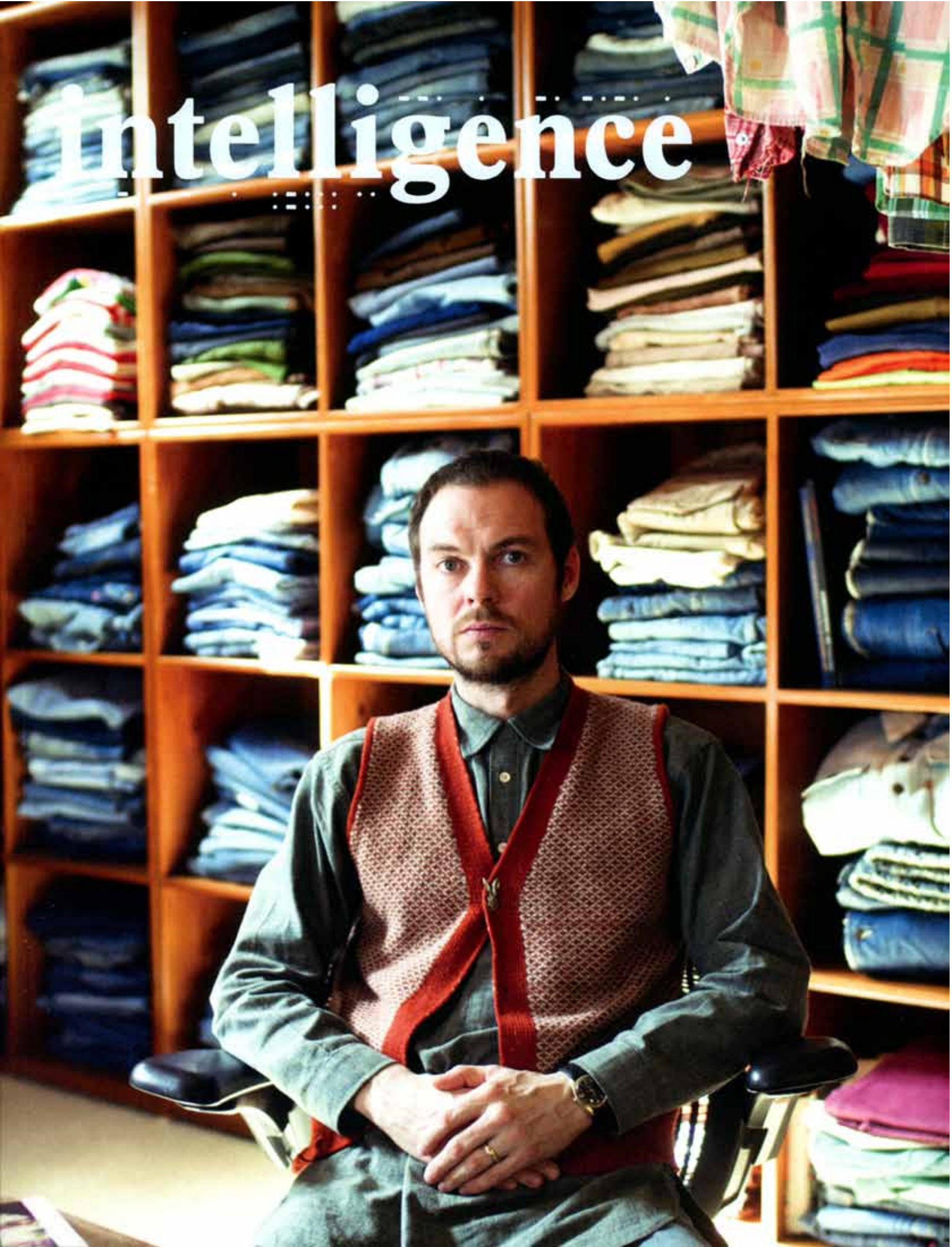


Intelligence



ROSTARR

Interview
Nguyen Le

Photography
Yoann Stoeckel

Freedom from what's familiar is the basic component for any form of new creation. It's not simply a concern for material freedoms or a lack of physical boundaries; it's an inquiry into one's own intellectual, expressive and carnal liberties. It's the rejection of pattern and predictability, of the established and the traditional. It's an inclination towards change, the acceptance of the unknown and for what is new.

Acknowledging that desire at an early age, Romon "Rostarr" Yang has managed to uncover an intriguing path for himself in the realms of graphic design and visual art. Recognized internationally as a creative outlier, his unfaltering dedication to seek out new challenges has taken him to the peripheral edges of innovation within his craft. Having endured close to 2 decades in the industry, Rostarr has established a prominent and equally extensive catalog of styles; fluctuating between bold iconographic patterns, dynamic polymorphic paintings and abstract calligraphic works. These styles thrive on using traditional forms and twisting them, reformatting their basic fundamentals - creating an aesthetic that is distinctly his own.

I met with Rostarr at his studio in Brooklyn, New York on a late January afternoon. Situated on the border of Bed-Stuy and Clinton Hill, the area is a mix of old and new, affluent and impoverished - on the brink of inevitable gentrification. I'm greeted with Ro's humble and friendly demeanor, he offers me a drink and tells me to make myself at home as he attempts to tidy up the cluttered basement suite. It takes me a few minutes to gather my thoughts as my eyes wander through all the ephemera, tools and instruments he's collected over his life and career. Having come up during the hip-hop era dom-

inated by Public Enemy, RUN DMC, Eric B. and Rakim, there's a wise and pragmatic aura to him. William Onyeabor's late '70s track 'Atomic Bomb' streams audibly from his stereo - a disturbing omen in light of political events that had transpired earlier that week. As I skimmed through his vinyl collection I questioned Rostarr on his musical influences.

I listen to just about everything, but I always find myself going back to soul, funk, reggae and the classic hip-hop records. Music is my true love, in a sense that it helped me to navigate through pivotal moments throughout my career. It's been a companion for me when I create and it's always there for me; music is my good friend when I'm by myself working through the night and often times into the early morning. Music is integral and it's played a part in almost every endeavor I've taken on.

He led me through a tour of the studio and pointed out memorable keep-sakes he's managed to hang on to from his early years as an independent artist. I noticed some intriguing photographs pinned to the wall of him posing in familiar B-boy poses. "I discovered breakdancing first through music, and then through whatever I could catch on TV or movies. I recall watching Dick Clark's New Years Eve special in '82 and there was a guy spinning on his hand in Times Square and also seeing Graffiti Rock when it premiered on T.V. I was around 12 years old at the time and remember thinking how awesome that was. It's funny, there are a lot of artists that used to be B-boys too - OSGEMEOS, ESPO (Steve Powers), Futura, Doze and Rammellzee. There were so many that were part of that culture which led them to making art too."





How important was having that creative outlet as a young minority?

It was significant for me as an Asian American kid, especially one growing up in Northern Virginia. At that time I really didn't feel like I belonged anywhere or to a specific ethnic group, and having it (b-boying) as an outlet was sort of an integral piece for me in finding my identity. Thinking back now, if I wasn't a part of that, I wouldn't have realized what my potential would be now; knowing that I had a skill and continued to work at it, as a result I was able to stand out. It was my first real outward expression, which eventually led me to other forms of creativity, ultimately as an artist.

In my film 'Kill the Ego'¹, I was able to combine the two worlds - where I was documented breakdancing and using my body to make paintings on canvas. I was able to make a nice body of work through that style, which brings my first expression and being a painter full circle. After we wrapped up the film, I realized how important b-boying was to me. In a large part, it's what shaped me into who I am now. It took me a while to understand that, but I can acknowledge that one wouldn't have happened without the other, so I really give thanks to that time of my life.

Was it a gateway to exposing you to handstyle and graffiti culture as well?

Even though I never did graffiti, I really respected the handstyles of master writers from NYC. I remember seeing some early work by PHASE II,² he had a way with lettering where he could manipulate and transform words in a dynamic way as if they told a story. I always admired the art form and the people who were able to progress it further.

Did your exposure to it play a role in choosing to study graphic design?

Studying graphic design was kind of by accident. I mean, I've always gravitated towards powerful imagery and as kids my brother and I were obsessed with animation, comic books and the artwork in them. He had the ability to take really detailed illustrations and replicate them with ease. He was actually really talented as a graffiti artist as well, and he motivated me to draw and compete constructively, but I never thought that I had enough talent that would lead to a career in making art.



Was that a goal you wanted to achieve?

Not at first. I just loved drawing, so it wasn't with a particular goal in mind; I just really enjoyed doing it. I would even make my own comic books in elementary school and tried to sell them to the kids in my class (laughs). In a sense, when I look back at that moment I remember thinking it was cool to make something from start to finish. That made a lasting impression on me, like 'this is mine, I made this' and now I'm selling it to someone. So I always thought that was an interesting concept. But to be honest I really didn't see it as a realistic career goal for me.

What happened that changed your mindset?

Well, my brother ended up accepting a scholarship to enroll at F.I.T. with a major in fashion illustration. Since I had similar interests but without any sort of direction - I decided to follow him out here. I always envisioned myself living in NYC and deep down I knew I would end up here eventually, but thank God my brother went first and paved the way for me (laughs).

I really didn't know what I was going to do with my life and career at that time (1989), I just knew I wanted to make a lot of money and be creative while getting it. Advertising design seemed like an interesting path but I ended up really hating it. I disliked the overt commercial aspects of it and it really wasn't something I vibed with. But what I did discover was that I had a genuine love for designing logos, iconography, typography and making bold graphic imagery.

As I started getting more serious about design, I decided to enroll at S.V.A. (School Of Visual Arts). There I studied experimental graphic design, typography, printmaking and some illustration as well. As I became more confident I was pushing myself into different realms of creativity within the design field. I started taking my portfolio around, and I hadn't actually graduated at the time. The first proposal I landed was for a project with Nike (Hoop Heroes project 1994), which was crazy for me! I still have the original silkscreened poster, which I'll show you in a minute, but that experience altered my mindset to entertain the idea that I could possibly have a future as a freelance artist and designer.

Did that lead to other projects while you were still in school?

I had a tee shirt company with friends when I was a sophomore in college, around the time when the first wave of logo biting tees were really popular,

around the rave era 1990-'92. I made a version of the adidas trefoil logo made to look like a pot leaf in a circle with the word Addicted below, which we sold to Union in NY. adidas had caught wind of it and ended up filing a lawsuit against that store! We did graphic tees mostly as a hobby, but I look back thinking it was really fulfilling seeing my artwork and graphics printed on t-shirts and seeing people wear them in clubs and on the streets. In '94 I ended up sharing a studio with Rodney Smith from Zoo York³ when they were first starting up the company, and as a result ended up working on some graphics for them as well. Rodney became a good friend of mine and through him I was exposed to the world of skateboard culture and he actually named me Rostarr, so it's interesting how one thing lead to another.

How did you keep that momentum going post graduation?

Once I graduated all I wanted to do was create art and focus on my own thing but I knew I had to figure out how the industry worked. I tried freelancing as a designer and side hustling as an artist, but eventually settled on a job in the music industry as a designer and art director at Elektra Records for a couple of years. It was a really great experience learning the ins and outs on how to put shoots & packaging together and how a record company runs, but at the end of the day it didn't offer me as much creative freedom as I would have liked. It became clear to me that as you become more of an art director or creative director - you're not really being as creative, you end up as more of a project manager. It's also very disheartening spending your time contributing to someone else's vision, so I realized very quickly that I wanted to place priority on pursuing my own ideas and projects again. I wanted to create the full image from the beginning to the end and handle everything in between like a true control freak (laughs).

So around '96 I returned to doing freelance design gigs and making paintings, I worked aimlessly at developing my art career. And slowly but surely my art started to pick up and garner more interest. This was at a time when there weren't as many artists as there are now, I mean its ridiculous now - I feel like you have to work 10 times harder today in order to stand out. The art universe felt a lot smaller during the '90s.

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¹ Directed by Jim Helton and Ron Patane in 2009, 'Kill The Ego' is a collaborative film featuring Rostarr's visual work and canvas performances with sound, conversation, and song recordings by Soundwalk (Stephan Crasneanski and Dug Winningham) captured throughout New York between 1998 and 2008.

² Lonny Wood aka PHASE II, is one of NYC's most influential graffiti writers. Heavily active throughout the '70s and '80s, he is one of the few artists credited with originating the "bubble letter" style of aerosol art.



Do you feel the arrival of social media had an affect on this?

Yes, but also I feel like the art world and street art scene had its boom too, and people are more accepting now if an artist ventures out and works in different mediums or genres. Back when I started experimenting with mediums and styles, people would say to me "but you're a designer, you don't do that" or "what are you doing making films, you're not a director." It was hard to break through to other genres, but at a certain point I just said "fuck this telling me what I can and can't do, I'm going to do everything. I'm going to break all the barriers of that mindset." It forced me to really focus on my ideas and I experimented with anything and everything that interested me.

You were a member of the art collective - Barnstormers, how did you get involved with them?

I first met David Ellis through his girlfriend Kiku when we worked together at Elektra Records. We started off bringing different groups of our friends together with similar mindsets and common goals in art. This was during the late '90s and a bunch of us, like 30 plus artists from New York and Tokyo started becoming known for our collaborative paintings, murals and films. We made these timelapse videos where we'd relay and paint over one another's work kind of like a cypher. The crew still continued to grow and get more diverse until it ended in 2006. It's interesting now looking back, how I came up with guys like David Ellis, Ryan McGinness, Kami, Madsaki, Doze and José Parlá. It was definitely an interesting time for all of us; all we cared about was painting and creating something fresh and different, out of the conventional norms.

A lot of those artists are still active and have found their own commercial success. That must be gratifying in some respects.

It's great! When I see my friends doing well, I only feel happy and excited for them. Knowing that we share history and that we were in the trenches together and made it out - is a dream not everyone gets to experience. But there's also the downside where a lot of them stopped painting or their careers took a pause and they're not creating as much, and as result they're not successful. Over the years I've realized that in art, or in any craft, you've got to be in it to win it. Even if you're in it and working hard - that doesn't guarantee success. It's not one of those things where if you work hard at



it, you'll get it. The art world is very selective - there are very few slots in the game where they're going to allow you to come in. Having said that, as an artist, it's important to create and paint a lot, the attitude is so important - you can't be sitting around waiting and only producing work when you have something coming up. You have to be ready when opportunities present themselves.

What are your thoughts on this new generation of artists coming up?

I like to think of myself as a nice guy and inspiring to other artists, but it's often been the case where I find they'll end up stealing bits of my style and running with it. I mean, I can't really hate on that; at the end of the day they're like my children in a sense. If I have any advice, I would say this isn't a free-for-all, respect the architects that influenced you, and eventually you'll need to respect yourself if you're going to be a true artist. There'll be a time when hopefully they reach that point where they'll realize they can't be hacking it anymore and have some self respect and really focus on discovering their own voice in what they do.

Did you have any main influences as a young artist?

I didn't study painting or art history but from what I can remember as a college student, Haring, Basquiat, Dali, MC Escher and then Marcel Duchamp were some of my main influences. I'm more drawn to abstract artists and the surrealists to be honest, but as I started to develop my own career I became more aware of contemporary artists. As a child Picasso had a huge influence on me as well, in a way that his attitude towards making art influenced me to acknowledge my own creative voice and to make art with a sense of freedom; and that's always stuck with me. I'm grateful that people have been responsive to what I do, and that I get to maintain this level of freedom where I can create without restrictions, I'm one of the luckier ones I feel.

What would you say has remained a constant in the art industry since the time you were coming up?

Back then, you had to make a lot of noise, having a good style wasn't always enough, and that's still the situation today - maybe even more so. What I realized is that there are so many ways to get to what you may perceive as the top or wherever it is you want to be within your craft. Because I've had

bad times, or times when things weren't going my way, I learned that success doesn't come from just doing well all the time, it's not linear. It comes from failure and adjusting from those failures.

Today I see a lot of people with talent, skill and the work ethic to back it up, but that doesn't guarantee that they'll get noticed. The realization that there are millions of painters out there, and there are so many levels to it that you'll need to keep pushing the envelope. You might reach a plateau and realize that 'oh shit! There's another higher level to achieve if I want it', and it goes on and on. As an individual who wants to "succeed" you'll need to be able to handle all of that pressure that comes with it, also you have to be able to take on that pain as it presents itself.

I feel that in order to reach the next phase or plateau like you said, continually seeking a challenge is necessary. What's your challenge now?

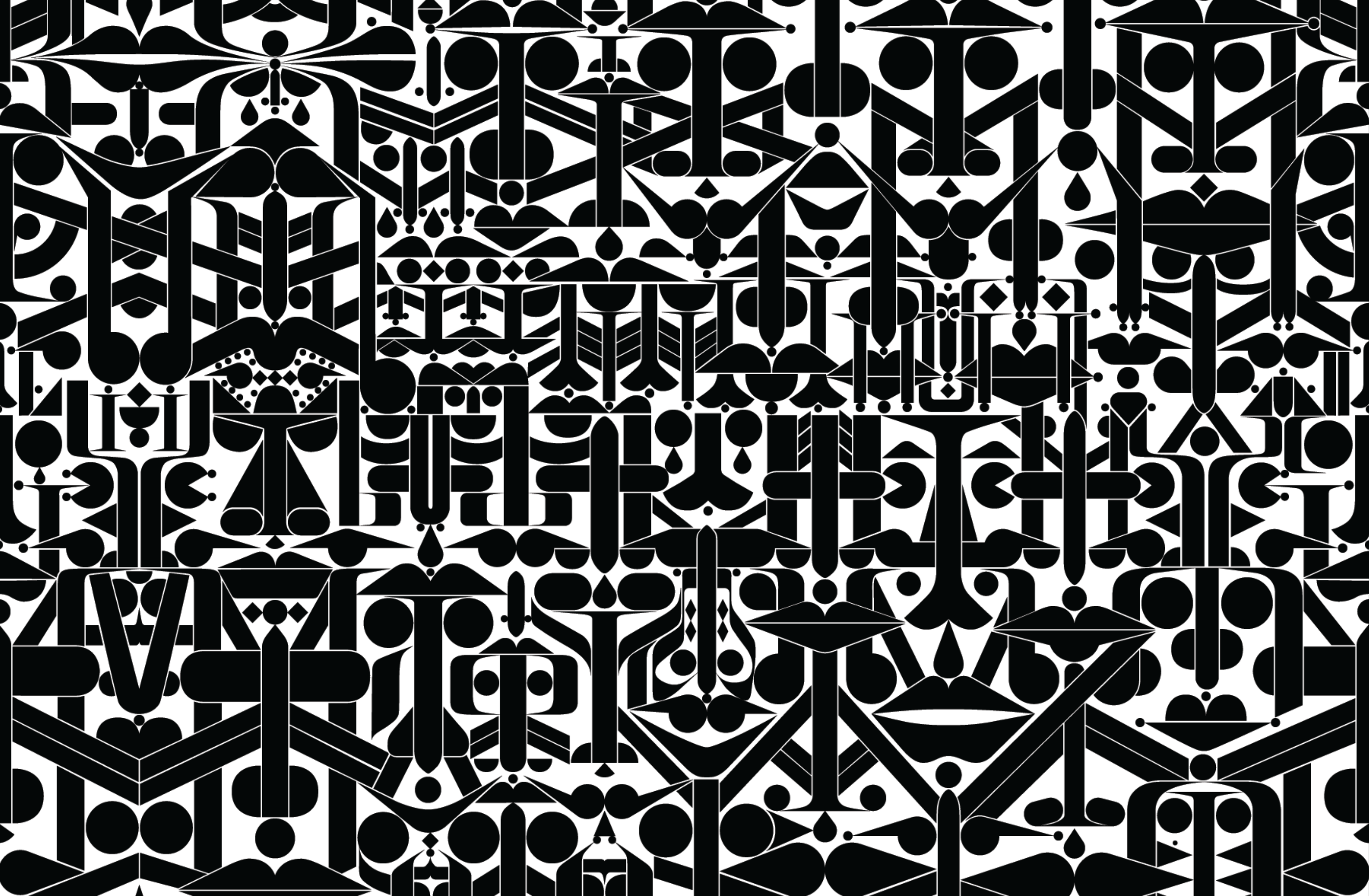
My challenge is to keep getting better at what I do. Getting sharper and taking on bigger challenges, start investing back into my own artwork, for example: having things fabricated, making sculptures for instance. Making components in my work more elevated, and sometimes that takes spending money and hiring assistants. I feel as if painting on canvas is almost limiting now, time is shorter and my ideas are getting bigger and the constraints of conventional art making are becoming more apparent to me; these are things I'm still discovering and adapting to.

Is there a pressure to remain active in one style or medium because of what's expected of you?

That's an old way of thinking - where you have to stick to one style so people will recognize it, so you can sell more work like a factory, I don't care about that. At the end of the day I'm comfortable with taking risks, moving in and around different styles and mediums. I can move on, I mean, I respect tradition but I don't get constrained by its rules. I don't want to be locked down and pigeonholed by just one style. Some people are simple like that though, and can be happy with redundancy. I can't speak for them but I know that won't work for me. Doing the same shit over and over again, because people, the industry, clients and the galleries are expecting that from you - that would be the death of me creatively. I'm very grateful that I have the freedom now to do what I want and not be hindered.

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³ Founded in 1993 by Rodney Smith, Eli Gessner and Adam Schatz, Zoo York was the first major skateboard brand outside of the west coast. It incorporated east coast sentiments, graffiti and NYC hip-hop culture. They would go on to release a series of highly regarded skate videos with its first VHS tape in 1997 titled "The Zoo York Mixtape." It featured skate legends Harold Hunter, Danny Supa and Jeff Pang with outtakes and freestyle performances by ODB, Ghostface Killah and Busta Rhymes from The Stretch Armstrong and Bobbito Show.





It's important to me to keep elevating myself and elevating my craft. I've created numerous styles but calligraphy has probably been the one meditation I've kept up with the longest.

What do you enjoy most about working in the calligraphy style?

I'm constantly learning something new every time I make a calligraphic work and that's refreshing. What I like best about it is - as soon as I can think of a concept, my hand is able to translate it in real time. My lines are moving at the same speed as my thought process; the results are immediate and I find something very gratifying in that. I never sketch but simply start with free-formed lines, shapes and keep building on it, without much thought involved. Other times I'll purposely infuse concepts where the results are more totemic, pattern, icon or character based, but for the most part the process is very spontaneous.

Do you try to stay away from blending styles?

I'm a purist in a way; so I don't try to collide styles. Maybe at some point I'll experiment with collision-ism type works where all my different styles merge or what have you. I don't stay doing the same type of style for long. I listen to my moods and instincts, when I get bored working in one style I'll make a transition. As I keep progressing in my life and moving into different interests and influences, that gets incorporated into my work.

Has having a family and becoming a father influenced your work in any way?

Content wise I can't say that it has. If anything, having kids has changed my work ethic. When I was single I would often be up until 6:00AM every night. Whether I'd be painting or hanging out in my studio, there was very little structure going on. And sure after I got married I had to adjust my lifestyle, but before that I was sitting around and making painting after painting. Now I've realized that time is so important and every moment counts, I have to really decide if a project is worth it or not. So there are a lot of things I turn down now whether the project itself isn't right for me or if it's not worth my time.

You've collaborated on high profile projects with Stüssy, Converse and Nike in the past and most recently Diesel. What do you consider before partnering with such large companies?

I eventually want to work with every company that I respect and admire, but if the collaboration concept is not elevated than its not worth getting into. What I really appreciated about the Diesel project for instance was that it was a true collaboration. They considered all of my ideas on the application of my art on their product, versus "hey here's 500 watches, doodle or paint on them and send them back" or something along those lines - that's what most companies do, but with Diesel it wasn't like that at all. I was approached by the art curator Neville Wakefield, and eventually was commissioned to make a series of paintings measuring 60 ft in total - which in turn would be bonded to the actual watch. There was a lot of back and forth to ensure that the painting details would work on the surface area of the watch. It was nice to work with a company that is respectful and aware of the partners they choose and care enough to take the project to the next level.

Having achieved a comfortable level with your work and career, how do you remain motivated?

I feel like I have so much I want to express and so many more ideas that I want to get out there - this has been my attitude since I started painting. Unless my mind is no longer working or I'm not able to come up with new ideas, I'll continue to work. I know that in my heart that I'm always going to make art.

What's the most important lesson you've realized looking back on your career?

What I've learned is that everyone has their own path, if you try and replicate what someone else has been able to achieve and try and follow in their footsteps, you're just dreaming of being them. It's hard because there are so many ways to come up in any craft, sometimes people are just super lucky or very fortunate and they have someone who is looking out for them or they're the son or daughter of someone rich or influential. My advice is to trust your own way, embrace all of your experiences, the highs and lows because every one of them is uniquely your own. Listen to your instincts and trust that there's much to be learned in not knowing what's going to happen; the beauty is in discovering it for yourself. That's the game.

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