**Interview with Jakob Zaaiman**

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**Briefly describe the work you do.**

I create digital collages using photographs. I’m trying to bring to life strange and disturbing realms of the imagination, using static visual imagery. The finished works are narratives, like film posters, or advertisements for bizarre products or events, and are designed to take you into their world. Some works are almost standalone and self-contained, and others can be read as part of an ongoing sequence. The worlds I am exploring through art are ominous and unsettling, with a deliberate absence of ‘normality’ and ‘reassurance’. The more peculiar the world revealed, the more successful the art. I combine digitally altered found photographs with many that I’ve taken myself. This is not traditional photomontage as much as digitally manipulated collage.

The works I create are not meant to be decoded or interpreted according to set psychoanalytic-style ‘meanings’; they are meant to be windows into worlds you could not discover any other way. You experience them vicariously – one step removed – so you can enjoy them as a spectacle, even if they repel or disturb you. To ‘get’ the art, you simply have to achieve imaginative congruence with the world it is revealing to you, and then ‘go’ with it. This is the great thing about art: it’s entertainment at its most serious, where you get to contemplate everything interesting, from the most horrific to the most transgressive, in a context which is about imaginative reflection rather than unmediated, visceral reaction. Some artists try to blur the distinction between spectacle and real life, but this just weakens the contemplative, reflective possibilities essential to art itself.

I define ‘art’ as recreational crafting with a specific and distinctive narrative content, namely the ‘strange and disturbing’. All other forms of crafting are about ‘aesthetics’, meaning ‘sensual beauty’. Aesthetic craft aspires to be sensually beautiful; artistic crafting aspires to fascinate and enthral, by means of subtle narratives. So art doesn’t have to be physically attractive, or technically skilled; it simply has to have the power to lead you into its world. It’s important to have a very clear idea of what it is you are trying to do in art, otherwise you succumb to ‘art mysticism’, whereby you think that art is just about psyching yourself into a certain bohemian frame of mind, and that once in it, everything you do and think becomes ‘art’, no matter how vacuous and silly. Many people are rightly suspicious of modern art because they can tell that many artists themselves don’t really know what they’re trying to do. Aesthetic crafting is easier in the sense that your work just has to ‘look good’, whether by classical technical mastery, or happenstance. Art is something else altogether: it’s about narrative.

**Who or what has a lasting influence on your art practice?**

There isn’t any single artist that I would say has been crucial to what I do, but I derive great inspiration and ‘mental support’ from the handful of artists who have really gone out on a limb for their ideas, like **Joseph Beuys, Richard Long, and Gregor Schneider**. It’s disappointing when they compromise – by commercialising - which they invariably do sooner or later. **Henry Darger** is really the way an artist should go, pursuing ideas for a lifetime without the least thought of trying to please an audience. **Paul McCarthy** is another, though he has had a late flowering commercially. Commercialising is not necessarily the worst sin in the world - if you’re in a real fix – and after all, **Warhol** and **Jeff Koons** have shown how you can successfully exploit commercialisation to the fullest degree - but it can often dilute the focus of one’s work quite seriously, so it’s best to hold out if you can, and stick to your singular vision, no matter how unsaleable it seems to be.

**How would you describe the art scene in your area?**

Although I live in inner London, the art scene in my local area is strictly about galleries selling ‘prettiness’ in one form or another: wildlife, landscapes, flowers, colours and shapes. For some sense of ‘art proper’, I have to depend entirely on the internet, which has been a total godsend to me as an artist in every possible way.

**In your opinion what does art mean in contemporary culture?**

As a global society, and as a result of developments in work and lifestyle – there are obviously exceptions – we are all now much more concerned with the quality of life, and how we are best going to fulfil ourselves. ‘Art’ plays a major role in offering us recreational narratives that we can enjoy and explore as part of looking at life from all sorts of different angles. Some people like to think of art as having a spiritual dimension, but this is a mistake: art offers psychological and imaginative experiences, not spirituality, and even the most intense artistic experience is no more spiritual than the effects of a few stiff drinks. Season 3 of **Twin Peaks** sends me into imaginative ecstasy, but it would be ridiculous to think that this somehow spiritually significant. Half a bottle of vodka and a few strong beers would take me there just as well. This also applies to the idea of the politicisation of art: political art – hectoring for social, environmental or political advantage - is not art, it’s politics; and political artworks are just forms of advertisement for an ideology. ‘Art’ has its own purpose – the exploration of narrative realms of the imagination – and doesn’t need politics or spirituality to substantiate it and give it value. Basically, then, art is a form of life enhancing recreational fun, a vicarious way of exploring realms of the imagination, and when it works – on its own terms - it can be immensely enjoyable and rewarding and substantial; but art is enfeebled if it becomes the plaything of politics, or religion, or any other form of ideology: think of how peculiarly lifeless most political art becomes, once its ‘day or two of relevance’ has passed.

**What is the best book you’ve recently read?**

The most interesting art-related book I’ve read recently is the graphic novel ‘**Berlin: City of Smoke’** by **Jason Lutes**; it’s part 2 of a series, and part 1 is just as good. It’s a beautifully realised atmospheric story set in Weimar Germany, leading up to the Nazification of Germany, and Lutes’s clean line realism is perfect. ‘**Clothes, Music, Boys’** by **Viv Albertine** of **The Slits** is serious ‘misdirection by title’ and maybe even ‘misdirection by front cover’, because the whole thing looks and sounds very trivial, but it’s not: I really feel I’ve shared someone’s interesting life, which is not usually the case with biography, which often feels very distant, no matter how absorbing the events depicted. Whether or not we actually get to know the ‘real Viv’ doesn’t much matter: you’ll believe you do. At a more literary level, ‘**The Country Road’**, short stories by **Regina Ullmann** (1884-1961), is entertaining otherness and weirdness. I was alerted to her by a recent article in NYRB.

**Name three artists you admire.**

**Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol, David Lynch**. Beuys for his completely mysterious ‘art existence’, combining the presentation of enigmatic artworks with an unsettling and singular persona; Warhol for teaching us how to love drug-addled nihilism and glitzy emptiness; Lynch the filmmaker (specifically for **Eraserhead, Mulholland Drive**, the first section of **Lost Highway**, **Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me, Blue Velvet**, bits of **Inland Empire**, and **Wild at Heart**; not the others) for brilliant non-linear narratives, full of wondrous imagery and impenetrable meanings.

**What are your future plans ?**

I need to find serious b&m gallery representation, London or New York, as currently my work is completely lost and overlooked by the big art websites, which cater almost exclusively for collectors looking for ‘attractive and interesting’ bits of craft, and certainly not for art. I will continue to explore the possibilities of collage and photography, as I’m always trying to perfect a way of turning static images into something as fascinating and narratively substantial as a film or a novel. I will also be writing many more studies of modern art and artists.