

ART

5 Art Stars You Need to Know

by Benjamin Sutton | 04/13/2011



#4 TOM THAYER

Between his installations, performances, videos, sculptures and collages, New Jersey-based Chicagoan [Tom Thayer](#) has been ubiquitous in New York for the past year. He exhibited his rough-hewn yet delicate cardboard heron puppets in the excellent group show [Knight's Move](#) at [SculptureCenter](#) last May, performed his lo-fi multimedia puppet play and live animation *Scenographic Play* at MoMA PS1 in August during *Greater New York* and [at Tracy Williams](#) in January of this year, when he also premiered another hand-crafted stop-motion narrative, *New World Pig* (with [Dave Miko](#)), at The Kitchen and simultaneously had a set of collages drawn from an earlier animation project on view [at Derek Eller Gallery](#).

An earlier and nominally simpler work, 2008's "[Black Fowl Reflection](#)," eloquently brings together Thayer's interests in different media and modes of presentation. A roughly life-sized skeletal puppet of a bird fashioned from construction paper cut to resemble feathers stands over a portable turntable that silently spins a record. The puppet's strings are attached to electronic gears that make it lunge at the vinyl with its record needle-mounted beak, playing scratchy, random fragments of abstract noise. He uses the avian DJ puppet in performances too, and filled the SculptureCenter basement with a flock of similarly strung-up water fowl, while other videos, sculptures and collages have featured still more birds, animals and human figures.

[SLIDESHOW: 20 NYC Art Stars, When They Were Young!](#)

This DIY aesthetic, with hand-crafted puppets, abstract music, distorted video and crude stop-motion, aids in the telling of surreal, rambling, fairy tale-like narratives in Thayer's shorts, which he'll often incorporate into live performances. Though they're interrupted by moments of material breakdown when film cells seem to disintegrate or magnetic tape becomes illegible and glows with over-saturated tones and electronic noise, animations like "[Old Smelly Haircut](#)" (2008) and "Tunnel Jerk" (2010) are playfully, delicately crafted and very funny without being precious. His hybrid practice turns antiquated visual and aural technologies into vehicles for new visions.

How do you start a new piece/project?

Tom Thayer: I'm always experimenting and playing in my studio. I make things, live with them for a while, tear them apart and remake them into other things. It is a cluttered environment that's frequently transformed through this process. When an opportunity to show comes along, the deadline changes the energy of the process. It focuses it. I look around at the residue of all the play and choose something as a departure point for deeper exploration that leads to a resolved work. I have vivid, early memories of kindergarten and preschool in the 1970's. I think I took the curriculum serious and am still interacting with the world in the same way.

Do you have an idea or goal in mind that you work towards?

I don't start with ideas. I know by now, that when I get a good idea, or when I can talk about what I'm doing, that it's a very bad sign. To quote Henri Michaux, "The wolf that understands the lamb is lost, will die of hunger, will not have understood the lamb, will have been wrong about the wolf-and almost everything remains for it to learn about being."

Is there an image or gesture that sparks your process and you follow it through until you're satisfied?

Yes, exactly. What I'm specifically searching for is something real, some genuine gesture. When you start with ideas, you are thinking about the art you will make in the future. Since the future and past are not real, and only exist as abstract ideas, the work is already coming from a shallow, artificial place. I am interested in the act of fantasizing, but not so interested in the resulting fantasies, they become too artificial to mean much to me, I think I am a realist.

I have found that I make my best art when I am present, or tuned in to reality. It's a different type of working, similar to when an athlete is in the zone. There is no voice having a dialog in your head. The work is coming from a much deeper place that taps into what you actually have to say to the world as an individual. It's not an easy place to get to. There are a lot of distractions in the

world and our human minds all share a horrible dysfunction that savors ruining this state for us.

Is there an artist/exhibition/artwork that's had an especially significant impact on your development either recently or at the beginning of your career?

Yes. I grew up in a suburb of Chicago. In 1951, nineteen years before I was born, there was a lecture given by Jean Dubuffet at the Arts Club of Chicago, titled "Anticultural Positions". It played a role in permanently changing that city's art scene, and was still reverberating in the cornfields of Illinois, where I went to school, in the 80s. I had a really great teacher, an artist named Gordon Dorn, who told me my art looked like it was made by someone who was institutionalized and suggested I look into Art Brut. I was blown away by the depth of the personal visions and the use of materials I saw. It gave me the inspiration to look inward on my journey as an artist rather than to look too much at other contemporary art for inspiration.

Is there a show or work you consider pivotal to both your work and your career?

Another artist would be the Kai Althoff survey at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago in 2005. Seeing that show gave me hope at time I needed it. My art has pretty much always been like it is today. I have always been doing the same sort of things. But trends in art go in and out of fashion, like a pendulum swings. I started showing my artwork over 20 years ago and have spent most of that time out of synch with that pendulum. When I first got out of school, the galleries interested in me were showing actual Art Brut. Their collectors focused on naive artists, so I did not fit. And the dealers only wanted to show the objects I made, they were not interested in my video, performance, music or workshop based activities. The contemporary art galleries and independent curators had no interest in me because my work did not look like contemporary to them. I didn't let this faze me though. After eight years of trying, I moved to Nashville Tennessee, a music town with no real art scene and looked even further inward and worked even harder. I spent six years there. I liked the work that I was doing, but it can become a drag having to continually say to yourself, "Yes, I know what I'm doing, keep doing it" when you have almost no form of validation. I'm very thankful for the small group of people during those years that were into my work, they were my tiny audience. One of them once told me I had to fly to Chicago to see the Kai Althoff show at the MCA. And thankfully I did. I felt like I had found a kindred spirit seeing that show. The show had expressive paintings and sculptures and installations and video and he was making music and doing these workshop actions, all these activities that I could really relate to. It gave me a new found hope that I would not be out of step forever.

If you mean a show of mine, it would be a night of performances that Keith Connolly and Jay Sanders curated at Issue Project Room in 2008 with Hair Stylistics / Masaya Nakahara, Hot Garbage, Ei Arakawa / Michiko, and myself. Jay included an installed element from my performance that night at the White Columns Annual he curated later that year. Basically, the artists I know and do things with today were people Jay put in that white columns show. I am very lucky to have met such a great group of people.

Is there another medium or style of work that you'd like to explore, or have started to experiment with?

I have always wanted to do a television show. I think about it all the time. I would really like to do that sometime. There was a time in the 90s when *Twin Peaks* and *Pee-wee's Playhouse* were both on TV and I thought it was so great that this was happening on regular TV and that some committee out there, in some decision-making position, chose these creative shows rather than defaulting to formulas. It was a moment that had so much promise.

How do you describe your work to your parents?

Oh, they have known me for forty-one years now, I don't really have to explain anything. I think they got the gist of me by the time I was four or five. I just do more in the way of describing new projects. My dad recently dug up the family home video game system, a Bally Astrocade from the 70s, and shipped it here for me so it could be used as a synthesizer in the Tracy Williams performance. I'm very lucky that they have always been supportive and took an interest in what I was up to. My mom did some research and found the early college program at the School of The Art Institute of Chicago when I was in high school and they enrolled me in figure drawing classes there in the summers. It was the best experience for a kid. My mom has Alzheimer's and doesn't know who I am any more. I wish I could talk with her and let her know where I am and what I'm doing and thank her!

You work across a huge range of media, from animation, puppetry, performance and music to sculpture, installation and collage; is there one medium that you feel more comfortable in or one that you consider your primary medium, or do you feel that your work depends on its combination of these multiple media?

I feel it depends on a combination. It's a bias that I catch myself putting on my students at City College. I will say "These paintings are good... wouldn't it be nice to see a sculpture or film from this world you're creating too?"

I studied painting in school. I didn't use a computer until after I got out of grad school, never had a video, performance, or sound class or anything like that. Luckily, the painting teacher I worked with was interested in teaching the

process of making a body of artwork, and not in teaching the intricacies of technical painting skills. You can read about how to use paint in a book if you need to. I feel there are other, more important things about making art to be learned in school.

My peers in school were making paintings, but I could bring a painting or a boom box with sounds, or a puppet show to a critique and they would get discussed and critiqued in the same way as the painting. I just apply what I learned in my painting classes about making art, to whatever tools I am playing with.

Your collages and sculptures portraying animals and human figures are often both elegant and slightly monstrous; what attracts you to that balance between elegant and uncanny forms?

Well, I guess all living things have that combination of being elegant and slightly monstrous. In us humans there is that dysfunction our minds share that I mentioned. The voice in our head that replaces reality with labels and causes so much suffering in the world. That often shows up in the mischievous acts or cruel parts of my narratives and it's usually balanced by some innocent quality or action.

I can't say why I am attracted to depicting these qualities other than it is something I have always done. I saw all these old German Expressionist inspired monster movies on TV when I was really little, like Frankenstein and The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, and they had a huge impact on me. There was an easel in Kindergarten and I painted pictures of those monsters all day long and I'm still doing it.