
INTERLOCUTOR

COBY KENNEDY

Deborah Oster Pannell
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“The Legend Of Ajax Jackson And The Talented Tenth”, 2021
Repurposed DOT street signs, Bad Brains t-shirts, steel, Bulletproof ballistic grade Kevlar, resin, cloth 95 x 100in. (241.3 x 254cm)

I first met Coby Kennedy earlier this year, when we were preparing to include his work in our group exhibition at C24 Gallery, *Street Life*. In our preliminary Zoom call, what was supposed to be a short check-in about technical details and background info turned into an hour-long conversation about politics, culture, and psychic survival during the collapse of civilization as we know it — heavy stuff, to be sure, but exhilarating nonetheless to share confidences with someone who shies away from no topic whatsoever.

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Kennedy was born and raised in Washington DC by two working artist parents, and his father was Dean of the Art Department at Howard University. He was brought up in an environment that seamlessly integrated honest inquiry and creative expression into everyday life. It seems that making art and grappling with the harsh realities of the world come to him as naturally as breathing.

Prior to our first meeting, Kennedy had recently suffered a leg injury that required extensive knee surgery. Although it slowed him down, it did not stop him. During a visit to his raw, industrial South Bronx studio space to pick up the street sign machetes and mandala components that comprise his C24 Gallery installation, Kennedy expertly managed his way around on one crutch, despite being in considerable pain. During his subsequent time at the Gallery, he did what he had to do to get the work ready and on the walls in time for the opening. It seems excuses are not in this man's vocabulary. His work ethic is embodied in the rigorous process of grinding metal street signs into weapons, and particularly symbolized through the use of bullet proof Kevlar as a primary artistic medium.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of Kennedy's work is the centering of multiple layers of Black experience, with an unflinching honesty that transcends the current wave of mainstream popularity of art by Black artists, on the heels of the Black Lives Matter movement. It vibrates to its own frequency and demands viewers' complete attention; it will not be relegated to a position of otherness.

Kennedy is not concerned with comfort or reassurance for those unfamiliar with his cultural references. His work is confrontational in the purest sense, inviting inquiry and appreciation while exploring the harshest of truths about the seemingly timeless trauma and violence towards Black people embedded in our culture, forces that shape not only Black lives, but all of our lives, across lines of race, gender and other identifying factors. The combination of the directness of his gaze, the rawness of his materials and the clarity of his voice is refreshingly liberating, offering at least some measure of relief from the relentless bullshit permeating so much of contemporary messaging.

Coby, I've gone back over a decade to look at the evolution of your work through a number of alternate realities that you've created — entire worlds that riff off the manifestation of a fictional entity called Kroger, a multinational power based on a religion of violence. In fact, you have a unique ability to distill the evils of the world into metaphorical characters and symbols that illustrate the gut-wrenching truths of history as it has played out over the modern era.

The inhumanity embedded in the historical treatment of Black people, women, under all the power structures based on the hegemony of Christianity — all of this is on display in the imagined worlds you bring to life. You draw from the aesthetics of surveillance footage, pop culture's fetishizing of guns, and the trickle down of racism into distorted values that have been internalized into the psyche of Black people. Your work carries a unique aesthetic that invites viewers to inhabit an entirely immersive alternate ecosystem. What was your early inspiration for approaching the process of artmaking in this way?

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Wow, that's a BIIIG one. Okay, prepare for the TED Talk answer to that question...

So, this goes straight back to birth. I tell people that pretty much everything I learned about "life, the universe, and everything" came from two places: my mom and the first three seasons of *Miami Vice*. I'm a definite product of 1980s media, tempered and focused by my mom's...progressive (?) perspective on life. She had me thinking alternative to mainstream thought since I was six years old.

We were outside of our house in DC and I asked her if monsters were real, and she said, "Oh, yes." I freaked out like, how could my mom lay some heavy shit on me like that, but then she said, "You know, if you were from a place without horses, then you came here and saw a horse, then you'd think that this horse was a monster."

Mind...blown. In one fell swoop my mom showed me that: 1 - everything is relative, 2 - there are no definitives, and 3 - any semblance of "common sense" that I would EVER have was destroyed. "Common sense" is just all of us agreeing on a single approved way that the world works. But from that point on, the worlds of accepted reality and the realm of imagination were one and the same for me because, according to my mom, "It all depends..."

Since then I've always seen the world through the lens of the fantastical. Having that existential foundation and then being raised from a young age on movies like *Blade Runner*, *THX 1138*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, and *Close Encounters*, I immediately saw the possibilities in our living world that so many others look past. It let me uncover an OCEAN of realities in our every day, that so many others never stopped to question or even consider.

I was eight years old when I realized that capitalism, and all the other "isms" for that matter, were complete bullshit, the world was constantly lying to us, and we were all, (even the millions of Normies out there), living in these actual and OBVIOUS constructed realities. Being an artist since birth (both of my parents being professional visual artists), my work's always naturally dealt with and swam in this world of fantasy reflecting reality back to us and making clear the unseen structures of our own everyday existence.

I was 31 years old before I realized that the rest of society didn't think in this way, and that I had grown up in a big ass bubble of progressive thought. After getting double-dog-dared to be a 24/7 professional artist, I decided that my practice is going to revolve around broadening perspectives of our lived realities through creating these hybrid worlds. I want to get at the truths behind the curtains of popular perception by reflecting our world, playing with genres and aesthetic themes from pop culture in an anachronistic way.

You spent nearly a decade working as an automotive product designer in Japan. It seems this experience has continued to play out in both your *Supply and Demand* and *American Virtue* series. Did you know when you first started doing this work that you would be incorporating these skills and aesthetic into your future work as an artist? I guess this is kind of a chicken and egg kind of question...

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Actually it was Schrödinger's Chicken...the chicken AND the egg were created and existed simultaneously. Even in my first career as a car designer, I was VERY much on the "Artist/Designer" side of the scale, not the "Gear-Head/Designer" end of the spectrum. I'd get most of my inspiration for concept cars from Brancusi sculptures and mid-century-modern abstract art. Rewind to the October 1986 issue of *Automobile Magazine*, with the yellow Ferrari Testarossa on the cover. That gift from my grandmother began my obsession with car design and happened to coincide with my parents taking me to New York to witness first hand the explosion of the mid-80's east coast art scene. So it all meshed together in my reality and there never was any kind of separation at all. Fast forward to my actual art career, post 2010, and you have me smashing my industrial design career with classically recognized fine art themes/aesthetics and seeing what comes out the other end.

Tell me about the development of your body of work, *In the Service of a Villain*, especially The Thuggernaut and Jimmy Crow characters. This whole constellation of Afrofuturist identities lands somewhere between dystopian cautionary tale and cultural critique. Where are you going with all this??

I've gotta go back to '08 for this one. I was in Japan, Asia and Europe for about a decade (I left America when Clinton was in office and came back during Obama's election), so I missed EVERYTHING. I came back, raw, to a COMPLETELY different country than I had left. Subtlety was out the window, racism was blatant and matter-of-fact, mainstream sexism was cool.

The lies we were living under were more obvious than ever, but for some reason the populace was so conditioned by monopolized media, and two solid decades of general 90's nihilism, that nobody gave a fuck. On top of it all, I saw all the races in America seeming to be trying to live up to their imposed racial stereotypes. This is how my first big undertaking happened with making the "Assault Weapon Vending Machines" for my series *Supply And Demand*. I tried to find the most Germano/Anglo colonial-ish name I could find and made a fake international monster-conglomerate and came up with Kroger (had no idea it was already a grocery store, but that works in the narrative too).

In the narrative, they produce these machines that sell weapons, drugs, alcohol and everything you'd need for a weekend of genocide and good old violent American debauchery. Using this fictional company as an archetype for the pungent rotten foundational soul of the American Empire started me down the road of using very literal archetypes to represent realities that the masses religiously overlook. The Thuggernaut and Jimmy Crow came directly out of this kind of archetypal approach, and the larger series, *In The Service Of A Villain* came from my shock at what I recognized as racial/cultural self-genocide, but stepping one layer back and looking at the Anglo/Colonial strings that were actually fueling it.

This particular borough of New York is so dynamically diverse, that we've all called it Planet Brooklyn for decades. *In The Service Of A Villain* uses the microcosm of Brooklyn as the entirety of the known world and plays with aspects of Colorism. Now, being a society where white people have successfully killed themselves off, this narrative looks at the lingering effects of colonialism, anglo-centric mass media, and embedded self-hate in a future culture that's forced to build a new society with only the remnants of our own contemporary early 21st century mass media to draw from.

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So this world mirrors aspects of our own super-problematic popular media. Stereotypes and cultural touchstones coagulate into singular living archetypes that roam the urban sprawl like woolly mammoths, or Kwai Chang Caine from *Kung Fu*, dishing out violent self-defeating behavior (the Thuggernauts), or conversely championing the underdog as a anti-hero guardian devil (Jimmy Crow). I wanted to dive into cultural critique that considers a whole picture, multiple perspectives and the differing viewpoints in order to illuminate the throughlines of ACTUAL truth that all of these individual societal opinions seem to orbit around but never really touch.



"Assault Weapon Vending Machines" from the series *Supply And Demand*

You've talked about the role of gentrification in your work, as a force that impacts entire communities. It shows up in your series of street sign machetes and mandalas, and it has even affected you personally. Can you speak to this?

You know, since gentrification is a hot topic right now, a lot of people assign that theme to much of my work. But in reality the theme of gentrification isn't a jump off point for anything in my studio practice but instead it becomes a side element of the whole further down the line in the narrative. An "effect" more than a "cause." I'm a big history fiend; I love taking the past and juxtaposing it with the present to predict the future. Most of the things I work on are looking at the dynamics of human existence that go back millennia, so gentrification in the contemporary sense has its place in the narrative but it's not the impetus of the themes behind the work. In fact, a lot of the work doesn't want to center on direct elements of whiteness at all. So much of it does look at the internal effects of colonialization and the dynamism of the contemporary state of our world dominated by anglo-European ideology, but I try to avoid something as straightforward as the effect of white affluents moving into Black neighborhoods.

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That being said, I HATE GENTRIFICATION WITH A BIBLICAL PASSION!! But it IS inevitable. It just sucks that in this day and age, information and finance move faster than culture can develop. The outcome is that societal demographic migration changes that took 20 years before, now just take two years, and whole neighborhoods are blitzkrieged.



“Three Machetes,” 2021 Repurposed DOT street signs, Bad Brains t-shirts, steel

Your recent installation at Pioneer Works, “Kalief Browder: The Box” has a decidedly different feel to it than your previous work, in that it sits squarely in the reality of a specific incident that recently took place, namely the unjust incarceration and torture of Kalief Browder for almost three years, that ultimately led to his death by suicide. What was it like doing an installation like this? How was it received by people, and how did their response impact you?

Yeah, this was a really difficult piece for me to do. The piece itself came to me smoothly. I remember doing three sketches and the third sketch immediately embodied so much of what I personally felt about Kalief's story, so I ran with it. The difficult part was that Kalief's experience hit home for me so hard, that at times it was emotionally hard to keep going, impossible at times. Kalief was a kid just like I was, optimistic, kindhearted and cared about his friends and family. Then, literally out of nowhere, he's abducted by the state, tortured for years and then, even when he wins his freedom, he's still persecuted. This had been my greatest fear ever since I was a child.

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It wasn't until I was in undergrad, and had white friends that I really talked to, that I realized that growing up Black in America can be a COMPLETELY different world than growing up white, in that from a young age you are living in a 24/7 horror movie. There's always this feeling of being seen by white people as a different form of human, this constant threat of being persecuted by the police/state, and the specter of this unseen Kafkaesque possibility of losing your whole life as you know it for doing absolutely nothing, always right around the corner.

Working on this piece that is so embedded in the experiences of a real and contemporary person, I knew that I couldn't go the long way around and express it through archetypes and thematic avatars; it had to be direct and literal. In going that direction I knew that there would be some people out there that may not take kindly to seeing a recreated solitary confinement cell in front of them as public art.

I knew that I needed to make sure that my intended themes for this piece were clear, and that's where I decided to sandblast quotes and facts of Kalief directly into the plexiglass sides of the piece. There have been people I've met and know of who were adamantly against this piece ever existing, but all of those people have changed their perspective of the work once they had a chance to see it in person and understand that there are whole sections of society that need to understand the takeaways not only of this piece, but of Kalief's broader story. So many people out there only know his story from headlines or newsbites: a boy is arrested, sent to Riker's and commits suicide. They don't know the real story of how Kalief, in the face of unending, overpowering persecution and torture, stood up for himself and his ideals every time that this animal-like oppression was thrown at him. Whether it was corrections officers beating him down, hordes of inmates trying to stomp him out, prosecutors trying to twist his facts and lie on him, or all the threats and violence he STILL had to encounter after his release, Kalief always pushed back when people tried to use their authority or brute strength to define who he was or put him "in his place." This is the core of the sculpture and the source of one of his strongest quotes, the quote I sandblasted into the plexiglass, "The way I looked at it, if I gotta stay here... just to prove that I'm innocent, then so be it."

It kind of feels like the rapidly devolving power of mythic Whiteness in society is giving rise to a surge in mythic Blackness. Or maybe I'm just sensing a greater passion in people as the truth about our shared history is becoming harder to deny, and people in general, but particularly artists and creators of all kinds are rising! Where do you see yourself in all this, as the very way we talk and think about race is evolving by the second?

There's that reservoir of human self-realization that gets a drop of actual truth added to it every year. We're at a time in history where the genocidal dominant Eurocentric global structure of the past ~1,300 years is finally being openly questioned in some mainstream circles. The reservoir fills slowly though; in the early 20th century it was Black folks being recognized as more-or-less human, later it became a kind of good idea to stop treating women like cattle, way after that it was gay peeps finally not being seen as demonic sexual hellspawn. These are little concessions that are given to placate the masses, but it's much harder for an entire culture to then look at how they themselves have been based on evil, genocide and hubris, foundationally from the BEGINNING.

I think the wave that you talk about witnessing this is a brief moment in time where this global reservoir of human self-image is filled with enough truth that it's becoming hard to ignore that difficult look, especially for the new generation brought up in this little post-90s sliver of enlightenment. Hopefully, Generation Z gains enough power and influence that this small moment can become a tidal shift and not recede back out to sea.

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You know, change and evolution happens so slowly that for the ingrained ills of society to change, it's really just that older generations have to die off. Either that or a catastrophic incident like global thermonuclear war. Humans are dumb, dumb, dumb animals. We think that we're the pinnacle of evolutionary development on this planet but we so often forget that moving forward in evolutionary time doesn't necessarily equate to moving forward in evolutionary quality. Our eyesight SUCKS, our hearing is less than average, our reflexes are garbage, and we have all kinds of organs and body parts that are just useless leftovers from previous iterations of mammal that simply haven't been evolved out of the recipe yet.

Societally, we humans have this unending penchant for destroying ourselves on so many levels. It's hubris that keeps people from taking a hard, truthful look at themselves. I see myself in all of this as a person who needs to provide perspectives that are alternate to the agreed upon, prescribed standard of thought. I don't want to complicate the narrative of reality just for shits and giggles or some kind of shock value; I need to do it because that complicated dynamic is the way that the universe ACTUALLY WORKS. In the attempt to simplify life, create a strong argument, or just to stay sane, humans spend so much time putting things into nicely organized binary boxes that make them feel good about the world.

As the underpinnings of institutionalized racism continue to crumble, all the extremes are coming out! I sense a consciousness in your work that is aware of a lot of these conflicting forces, yet somehow this awareness seems to have focused you. I'm still thinking about the intensity of the Browder work, how powerful it is! Like a sharp diamond that got polished out of your channeling of collective rage and despair at the scale of historical injustice! It mirrors back to us some uncomfortable truths about the state of things, makes transparent (literally) the depths of cruelty and madness that stretch the limits of human endurance. How did you manage to channel that?

Whew, finally one that I think I can answer in less than a paragraph, heheheh...

I've had the luck/misfortune of experiencing multiple sides of society. Rich-poor, Black culture-white culture, American-global. So I've developed a dual mindset that exists within my own experiences of being broke, abused by police, chased by DC street gangs, having AK-47s pointed at me, racing Lamborghinis, sipping White Russians on sandy beaches, being able to jet to Paris on a whim, etc...I both live in these experiences but also observe them all from a third perspective, and it's that ability to detach that keeps me sane while I channel my rage at the shortcomings of human society in the third millennium.

I see the act of making art as essentially hopeful, especially when it embodies challenging narratives. Just the sheer energy the creation of it demands!! It almost precludes the possibility of staying depressed, with those kinds of energy requirements... And your sculptural work is particularly rigorous. Do you find it soothing and/or empowering to create work like this, even if others find it controversial?

Oh, I'm super fucking depressed.

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Real life is scaaaaaary...like for REAL. When you've been chased, threatened, assaulted and persecuted in almost every continent on the planet like I have, the outlook on humanity isn't exactly above the bar, and that's just with MY personal experience; billions of others have it waaaaaay worse, so you can just imagine...I had a lot of hope when Trump got elected that finally we were reaching a critical mass of absolute insane ridiculousness that there would be no choice but to completely re-model the structure of western (now global) late-stage capitalist society. But then he lost the second term and everybody rode this ebbing wave of back-patting self accomplishment right back out to sea, and as you see with the ex-racist septuagenarian and the police proxy token now in control of the ship, we're back to a manageable ass-fucking that most of the world can live with, rather than the brutal reaming that leaves no choice but revolution.

The hopefulness that you talk about, I don't think that I have, because I've been out there and seen a good amount of human realities. And not just self witnessed empirical evidence, but literally, looking at the entire span of known human history makes it obvious that, (barring a MASSIVE global disaster, a sudden freak jump in evolution, or full scale alien invasion), the change we truly want to see will absolutely NOT happen within our lifetime.

My mantra/credo/life purpose since I was seven has been "Make Cool Shit." The act of creation is, in the end, just to make me feel good. I feel good when I escape into these other worlds where the possibility of non-glacial dynamic change is possible; or even where to wallow in the cyberpunk futility of it all can be romantic. I feel even better when I can give these experiences to other people through my work, the way that people like Brâncuși, Syd Mead, Marcello Gandini, Rembrandt and Jada Kiss did for me. It's when dealing in the real world that hope starts to fade.

It's only partially hyperbolic when I say that this last public art project almost killed me. I understand now why people like Michael K. Williams had to get professional help after playing roles that wove so close to stark reality. The horrors of the real world will always out-do anything we can create in our heads, and I have a DEEP admiration for anyone existing in the unpolished corners of humanity who can make it to the next day.

Coby's work in the C24 Gallery exhibition *Street Life* will be on view in the Gallery's Atrium from October 7 through December 24, 2021.

"Kalief Browder: The Box" will be on display in Philadelphia as part of the *Monumental Tour* through January 22, 2022.

Deborah Oster Pannell is a writer, editor, musician, and arts producer. She has curated and performed at KGB Bar, Animamus Art Salon, Shag, Green Oasis Community Garden, Chinatown Soup, The Red Room at KGB, UNDER St. Marks Theater, JCC Harlem, and The Yard: Williamsburg Bridge, where she was the inaugural resident art curator from 2018-2019. She has written numerous online articles and interviews, edited museum catalogs, edited and written introductions for several books, and her essay was featured in the award-winning anthology, *We Got This – Solo Mom Stories of Grit, Heart, and Humor*. She is currently the Gallery Manager at C24 Gallery in Chelsea, where she helps produce and promote a diverse, international curatorial program that champions emerging, underrepresented and marginalized artists.

<https://interlocutorinterviews.com/new-blog/2021/9/28/coby-kennedy-interview-c24-gallery-kalief-browder-the-box-pioneer-works-monumental-tour-philadelphia>