HurryDate Banner Ad

Also in this Issue
Click on the title of any article to jump directly to it.

Features
New Year, New Things to Do
The 'Real'i World
Music
Paper Scissors
Music Picks
Hot Links - The Music Website of the Month
Venue of the Month
Music Notes
Four Play
On Disc
A Piece of Cake: Five Questions with the Quirk-Rock Veterans
New Sounds From the Old Ceremony
On Point
New, Notable, No Longer
New, Notable and No Longer
On Screen
Natasha Richardson and James Ivory Get the Red Carpet Treatment in Silver Spring
On Stage
On Stage – Openings and Events in Theatre
On the Go
Get Ski Ready
On the Menu
Drink of the Month
Sit Back, Relax, Vegetate
On the Rack
New Year = New Gear
On the Vine
Movies and Merlot

Caught On Tape

Inside the Outside Art World of Mark Jenkins



Photo credit: Adam Cuthbert

written by
Adam Cuthbert

The door won't open.

"Shit."

We push, using all four of our not so muscular arms, trying to force open this god-forsaken basement screen door.

It finally opens.

"Wow, worked better than I thought," says **Mark Jenkins** as he picks up a medicine ball covered in tape. He couldn't find his keys that morning so, naturally, he made a tape rope and attached it to the tape-wrapped medicine ball and pulled the door shut with it. Naturally, that is, for a man obsessed with tape.

Tape seems to have taken over Jenkins' life. There are boxes of it scattered around his cramped Columbia Heights flat. Used saran wrap and tape canisters surround the trashcan. Scissors have shards of tape obtruding from their pointed ends. He shares the small space with an average sized man and woman, three dogs and several babies—all made of tape. They are clear and empty, yet heavy and surprisingly sturdy. Tape sculptures are Mark's creative passion. His gallery is the world around him. He places the finished creations in various public spaces for people to react to and interact with, photographing what transpires. Each figure is made via the same basic process: Wrap an object in saran wrap, cover that in clear tape, make a slit in the back to remove the object, then cover the hole with more clear tape. Making a tape baby takes about an hour. As the tape creations have taken over Jenkins' attention, the apartment has turned more work space than living space; an art studio for a decidedly non-studio art.

During the day, he publishes websites for a large non-profit. But in the mornings when he first wakes, during snack machine breaks at work, and after 5 pm when he's on his own time, he is obsessed with his tape art.

"I'm afraid I might wake up one day and be obsessed with something else other than the tape babies," he says while sitting on the floor leaning on his overturned mattress that doubles as a couch-back of sorts. (He isn't the "arty" type—no ticks, stutters or smoke. He keeps eye contact and is serious about his work, even as a tape dog falls over onto his feet.)

"I'm afraid of being like Forrest Gump, when he all of the sudden starts running but then decides one day to just stop and go home. I guess I'm most afraid of my obsessive tendencies

shifting gears on me again. Right now, it's what gets me going in the morning. Before this, I was addicted to climbing volcanoes in Peru."

He throws these foreign country non sequiturs in a lot. "When I was in the Andes," or "When I was in Rio," start a lot of sentences, especially when he talks about tape. He began making tape figures as a kid in Virginia, first covering a pen, then graduating to a cast of his hand, but things stopped there. In high school he put down the tape and started making tapes. He played sax with DC Ska legends The Pietasters and attended school at Virginia Tech. It wasn't until he moved to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil that he picked up the adhesive again.

Mess Becomes Muse

Like most events in art history, historians—and often even the artist—don't know where the inspiration came from. Why did Pollock throw paint on the floor? Why did Warhol fixate on a soup can? Jenkins was put on the path to his particular hobby while hiking in the woods, though he can't explain why his experience resolved itself in the form of tape creations.

"A lot of my memories from the Andes is seeing litter on the trails and I came to really hate clear plastics—bottles, candy wrappers, stuff like that. Some of it comes from the tourists who just toss it because they don't want to pack out their trash, but the rest of it is the people that live there who don't see plastic litter as an eyesore against the natural landscape." He concedes, before I can even ask, that it is indeed ironic that he now dots that same landscape with artwork made of those substances. "Funny the way the brain will resolve things to reach equilibrium," he muses.

A few months after his Andes epiphany, Jenkins sat on the floor in his apartment near a beach in Rio, picked up a ball, and decided to cover it in tape. Then he did the toilet. Next, in what he says was a "really bad idea," he tried to make a door frame. The final adventure was making his first human form. He needed a model for the sculpture so he looked around and used…himself.

"It was a big huge mess," Jenkins laughs. "I did my legs first, then got to my torso and realized I couldn't do my back. By this time my legs were numb and I thought 'Oh shit, I'm going to die.' So I started scissoring myself out as fast as I can. I'm cutting myself and can't feel it because they're new scissors. When I got it all off, there's blood all over the room and all over the tape, so I hung up the bloody tape legs and my friends were either weirded out or thought it was cool." (Today he still uses parts of himself, but also mannequins—and occasionally his girlfriend's legs and torso—to make life size figures.)

In Rio, he started to place tape men throughout the city. He even made a ten-foot sperm out of tape that he sailed along the shore. Returning to D.C. in 2003, he soon met other people involved in the street art movement through websites like **Wooster Collective** (woostercollective.com) and **Flickr** (www.flickr.com).

"I was attracted to the street art community to be around people with the same type of brain as me," he explains, "and also to be inspired."

Those connections have led to collaborations with artists all over the world, including Vancouver, England and Germany. "Before, it was like I was dancing alone out there," Jenkins recalls. "Now, it's cool to know there's people all over the world who think like me."

The community is aided tremendously by the internet. Photos are posted of installations almost immediately after they are put up. The bulletin board responses are akin to the critiques of the old art world. There is sense of purpose and an intense desire to get out and make more art.

"What I'm in is really a movement of artists trying to create a visual equilibrium, or providing 'visual resistance'," Jenkins explains. "There's so much visual information in terms of signage and commercial advertisement out there, bombarding us, that artists putting stuff out there just for people to enjoy or contemplate is kind of a respite. For some street art enthusiasts living in cities where there is more of it, wandering around looking for street art has become a recreation."

D.C Scene is Seldom Seen

In D.C., it's hard to find street art. An 18-year-old graffiti artist who goes by the psuedonym **Borf** received front-page attention from the Washington Post after he was arrested earlier this year. In this town, making art on dumpsters, brick walls, and Constitution Ave. street signs just isn't acceptable. We have bills to pass and power brokers to lobby, no time for art! But for many—for those of us who like to wander the streets looking for something other than memorials and flags—he was a welcomed addition to our landscape. He lightened it up a bit.

"D.C. is a city that sometimes takes itself too seriously," agrees Jenkins. "I mean, even the bridges. It's just a god damn bridge, does it really need to be so dignified?" As a prank, he

bridges. It's just a god damn bridge, does it really need to be so dignified." As a prank, he placed red balls on the noses of the brass lions that guard the 16th St. Bridge. No harm was done to the bridge, it just made the rusty lions look a little more playful and a little less Praetorian.

Jenkins genuinely loves the District. He was born and raised in Fairfax, has lived in Arlington and Adams Morgan, and now makes his home just north of Mt. Pleasant. But like a lot of D.C. residents who have come here from other cities and countries, he desires something a little more creative than what the city deems acceptable when it comes to public art for our streets.

“Everywhere you see pandas and oxidized horses with generals on top of them," he says. "I’m trying to do something to liven this city up a bit.”
Go to certain parts of New York, London, or L.A. and you will see it; today’s new art movement, “street art”, is alive and stirring. Street art differs from graffiti in that the emphasis is less on “tagging” and more about creating art works. Some street artists are ex-graffiti artists, while others dabble in both.

“There’s a little bit of a vertical divide between graffiti and ‘street art,” Jenkins explains. “Some graffiti guys think what street artists do is relatively easy and less risky. But they’re really talking...mostly about stenciling and wheatpasting, not street installations with tape figures, so I don’t take offense.”

The movement of art to the streets came about in the sixties, as all forms of art were being torn apart and reimagined. Theatre went absurd, music went modal, and art went post-modern and back again.

"[Michel] Duchamp collapsed every object into art,” Jenkins says of the artist who put a urinal in a gallery and called it art. “But street art, especially street installations, is kind of like Duchamp in reverse. Instead of migrating found objects to the galleries, it migrates the fine arts back to the public space arena with no special privileges once it's there.” This observation reminds him of one of his favorite installations, created when was when he was living in—yet another foreign reference—Copacabana. He took a tape man and installed it in an open-face dumpster so that it looked like a discarded body. There was no gallery opening with a crowd eating cheese and wine. A trash truck simply came by later to pick it up and take it away.

Just like the destruction of the fourth wall in modern theatre, artists are now discovering that galleries, for some art, are too confining, too sterile, and lack the ability to connect with an audience. Or, as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard (whose theory of our simulated reality of false choices was the basis of the film *The Matrix*) put it, “There is no more radical difference between art and realism.”

“It’s like the god and church thing” Jenkins says, popping open not the first beer of our conversation. He is getting philosophical himself now, but it somehow doesn’t seem cocky or annoyingly intellectual. “You know, sometimes people don’t need the church to get closer to god. Sometimes the church just gets in the way. That’s the way a lot of galleries feel to me. It keeps me from getting to know the art.”

In the movement, on the street, people have gotten to know art pretty well already, either through books, websites, or first hand experience. Perhaps America’s most famous new art practicioner, someone whose work stares at me now as I type this article in Los Angeles, is **Shepard Fairey**, a.k.a. **Obey**. His wheat pastes of a black-and-white silhouette of Andre the Giant popped up all over L.A. in the last decade and today he has converted his street popularity into a gallery space and clothing line, worn by celebrities like Aston Kutcher and his whole crew.

There’s also **Darius Jones** in New York, who, like Mark, uses simple everyday objects for his installation pieces—in his case, bricks. “Bricks are an element that’s taken for granted in any city,” said Jones in an interview with *Time* magazine., “I hope to make an individual out of something of which there is so much abundance.”

The artist Jenkins admires the most goes by the nom de art **Banksy** (www.banksy.co.uk). He's the Michael Jordan of the genre. Based in London, he raids museums, climbs buildings, and is continually pranking the establishment. Jenkins calls him the “apex of street art,” and when you see his stuff, especially in person, you can’t really argue. There’s nothing quite like seeing two London police officers react to a bus stop painting of two male officers making out. Or coming across “Boring…Zookeeper smells” in the elephant pit of a zoo. Banksy is also known for raiding famous art galleries and hanging his own framed work, often without the museum even noticing the interloper.

Street Art Goes Main Street?
Traditional paintings-on-walls art does seem to be getting eclipsed lately by more dynamic forms of expression, but museums aren’t going out without a fight. Instead, they are

forms of expression, but museums aren't going out without a fight. Instead, they are

embracing the artistic future that Jenkins envisions. “The art world continues to migrate more deeply into the commercial world of film and animation where big budgets allow artists to really push boundaries," he say. "Animatronics, for instance, will kick the shit out of anything I could make in a hundred years. The only problem with it is that its really only accessible in its 2-D finished film medium.”

Large museums are paying attention, including the **MOMA**, which is featuring Pixar animation artists in a new show starting December 14th. “I’m not going to compare the work to Matisse and Picasso,” says **Ron Magliozzi**, MOMA’s co-curator in this month’s *Vanity Fair*. “But these people are major artists.”

Our interview concluded, Jenkins gives me a lift home. As he drives, he talks about what this movement has done to regenerate interest in art, other than an occasional chuckle when someone sees an installation or wall work.

“This art appeals to the younger generation," he asserts. "These kids prefer, like me, art with some adrenalin. Someone like Banksy or **Neckface** is an instant hero to them and it’s always a fun waiting game to see what they’ll pull off next.”

As far as seeing Jenkins' art in person, good luck. His first tape man was adopted by homeless men in Dupont Circle. His tape babies are usually adopted within a few days—if they don't meet a more unfortunate fate. And don’t look for a "best of" tour anytime soon. “Once I do something, it’s done," he declares. "I never go back and repeat. I would stack wing nuts if I wanted to repeat myself.” You can, however, view his works online at www.xmarkjenkinsx.com.

While he admits he doesn’t care to entertain people with his art (if that was his goal he would have continued in the music business), he would like to see his creations last a bit longer.

“It’s cool to see something you’ve done last long enough that the elements have a chance to ‘have at it’. A tape man I installed on a rooftop on 7th street this summer is still up there. Its face is turning black and the tape is coming off.”

To Jenkins, in a city that prides itself on marble and stone, having something that is transparent and fleeting is something different, fun, and needed…like a medicine ball covered in tape.

Copyright 2006 • Five O'Clock Publishing, LLC
4238 Wilson Blvd., #3078, Arlington, VA 22203 • tel: 703.465.0500 • fax: 703.465.0400