Let No Man Scare You

BY **MARK JENKINS** IN **GALLERIES** — 30 MAR 2006

An interview with D.C.-based street artist Mark Jenkins about his playful plastics—lollipops, infants, and dogs—plus a gallery of his work.

Share



Interview by Pitchaya Sudbanthad

Subscribe

One sunny day, not too long ago, a middle-aged man in a black leather jacket walked up to a parking meter and wondered what the hell was going on. Nothing much was unusual about the meter itself—it still had its gray, double-headed body and the coin slots and the two slowly expiring needles—except that the meter was encased inside a translucent, yellow material. A memory might have then returned to the man, a childhood memory he hadn't thought of in a while: those sweet, lemony candies that sat untouched in doctors' waiting rooms until a boy came along and disturbed their peaceful arrangement. That was because the parking meter had taken on the likeness of a giant, yellow lollipop, and it seemed to be saying, "Lick me." The man resisted the licking, but he couldn't help but at least touch it with his finger to see if it was real.

That lollipop was made by Mark Jenkins, an artist known for sculptural installations made of adhesive tape that have appeared in the streets, galleries, and night clubs of Washington, D.C., as well as in more natural, unpopulated settings. His works engage those who happen on them with their playful setup, and, sometimes, with the unnerving quality of their familiar shapes, not unlike the ashen cast of a suddenly petrified life.

I recently had an email conversation with Mark. Read the interview ↓

All images used with permission, © copyright the artist, all rights reserved.































Artist interview

What's your arts background?

I have a pretty strong background in music. I started playing the saxophone in grade school and continued on into college. Later, I quit the symphony and joined a funk band, and then finally found my niche in rap-electronica. While I was at Virginia Tech, the only visual arts course I took was a humanities course on post-1900 art. I graduated with a degree in geology. My interest in installation sculpture came from seeing a Juan Muñoz exhibit at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., in 2001.

You've been putting up sculptural installations in so many places, from D.C. to New York to the woods and beaches. How did these tape pieces come about?

Making tape casts of objects is a trick I figured out when I was a kid. It must have been in second or third grade that I cast a pencil in class. The teacher told me something like "don't waste tape" and I kind of left it at that until 20 or so years later. Right then, I was

teaching English in Rio de Janeiro and had a lot of downtime between classes. One afternoon I'd made a large tinfoil ball, just to have something to play catch with while lying on the sofa. I decided to make a second one out of tape, but there wasn't enough left on the roll to do it. The trick I'd figured out as a kid popped back into my head, and I cast the tinfoil ball with the tape. I was impressed with the results and decided to do a coffee pot. A couple months later, I'd gone through several hundred rolls, casting everything in my flat, including myself. The walls were thin in my apartment building, and my neighbors weren't too thrilled at the sounds of packing tape spinning off the roll all night and day. One annoyed neighbor threw mud at my clothes drying on the window ledge, but I couldn't be stopped.

The house gradually filled up with sculptures and when summertime hit, and it got hot, the fumes coming off the adhesive side got so concentrated that even with an exhaust fan set up in the window, I developed a hypersensitivity to it and felt really lethargic and nauseated all the time. I contacted 3M to see if the stuff was toxic in high concentrations. They said it wasn't, but recommended that I use a cartridge respirator. Ultimately, I moved back to Washington and set up an outdoor workspace.

So when did you first work on street art?

Around 2003, in Rio. I had made a giant sperm out of tape, and it was too large to photograph indoors, so I took it out to the beach in Copacabana. Once I got there, I decided to push it out into the waves and watch it surf in. Some people walking past gave me strange looks, but others were curious and wanted to chat about it. The sperm was waterlogged afterwards and not much good. I stuffed it into a trash can on the beach.

There was something about the experience, though, of putting my art into public space that I really enjoyed. I was back out the following weekend with a couple of tape men, and I installed one lying in a Dumpster. There was a Jewish school beside it and so all these little kids in yarmulkes were checking it out. I ended up leaving the figure installed, and later that night, watched when the garbage truck came and took it away. Since the figure was a self-cast, watching my form get disposed of was really interesting, like a death/rebirth thing for me.

How have people reacted to the pieces in the street?

People are generally curious. Kids, adults, and a police officer have approached with the question “What is that?” Then that’s usually followed by “How many rolls of tape did it take?”

Does street art communicate differently in sculptural form?

Interfacing street sculpture in public space creates an installation environment that turns regular space into art space. Signs and people and everything around a street sculpture—they all become part of it. A two-dimensional work, being confined to surfaces, doesn’t have as much of a capacity.

You’ve created a series called the Storker Project, based on a tape sculpture of a baby. It’s both playful and quite unsettling.

Yeah, it’s both. Babies are wonderful but also fragile, and installing the kids outdoors to fend for themselves like a fresh crop of cicadas hits an unsettling nerve with some people. But I think the Storker Project makes a good analogy to the propagation of life by showing its beauty and vulnerability. Sometimes I install them in playful positions, while other times they’re scavenging or hanging on for life.

One of my favorite experiences was an installation I did in Franklin Park in Washington. The place is sort of a camping ground for the homeless. I was installing some tape babies in a tree and an older homeless guy came up, acting pretty hostile towards me. It was about me being in their space at first, but once he saw the babies, that bothered him even more. I asked him if he’d rather I leave, but he wanted to have a confrontation and so I kept working, answering his questions, trying to keep him on simmer until I could finish and get out. When he found out I didn’t have any kids of my own he concluded I was doing this because I was expressing a need to have a wife and family. I agreed that could be true. He started giving me life advice and said, “The greatest meal a man can have is the meal made by his wife and mother cooking in the same home.”

In the end I got him to focus on the art instead of me by offering the installation up for him to critique. He told me he didn’t like the way I’d put them up—that the babies were disconnected, each on their own. He thought it would be better if they were facing

each other, like brothers helping each other. I repositioned them like he wanted. He was really happy I did it for him and got close to tears talking about the power of brotherhood. We ended up leaving on good terms, handshakes, and even a hug. I offered him a couple bucks but he refused, and leaving, he said, “Let no man scare you from what you love,” and he pointed to the babies.

What with the lollipops and puppies, it seems pretty apparent from your pieces that you’re drawn to icons of childhood. The word “infantile” usually has a bad connotation. I don’t think it does here.

I think the clear tape medium might steer me in this direction sometimes. It has a sort of purity to it that lends itself to more youthful installations. Street installations with lollipops and puppies are a good vein to explore for public art, too, just because it makes a lot of people, including kids, smile.

You’ve also put pieces in what looks like the middle of nowhere: on ice ponds and under trees, plastic in nature.

I’ve explored plastics and nature in a sort of adulterated, Andy Goldsworthy-way, I suppose, but I think modern man makes his mark in the forests by the plastics he leaves behind. I spent a lot of time hiking in the Andes, and, in addition to being exposed to stunning nature, I also took in a lot of plastic litter—wrappers and bottles. I did a “street extracts” series where I made direct casts of city objects like parking meters and fire hydrants and then installed them in suburban parks. I showed plastics in nature as foreshadowing the total “humanization” of the planet. I wouldn’t be surprised if, in years to come, a real fire hydrant replaced the tape one I installed.

There’s some possibility of narrative across your work. Is there a story, however vague, you’re trying to tell with your pieces?

There is an underlying fictitious narrative to my work. The tape men, the propagation movement with the babies, they could be a storyline in a comic book. I half-believe the tape men represent the next evolutionary step for mankind. Maybe aliens had made our race from afar, and their own bodies and entire civilizations were made of plastic. What I’m doing is similar to the way writers and filmmakers create a fictitious reality. My work

isn’t in a theater or a book, though; it comes at you out of nowhere one day when you’re walking down the street.

You’ve also installed your work in galleries and other indoor spaces beyond a purely public setting. Do you think that changes it much?

It does, in a way, because the mystery of its being there is sort of robbed away. Galleries frame my work as art, clubs [use it] as decoration, but outside it could really be anything.

George Segal is probably a name that gets thrown your way quite a bit, but your works are public sculptures unsanctioned. Public sculptures can be seen as institutionally authorized civic art—memorials, monuments, and architectural ornaments. Are you trying to erode this notion?

I am. I think memorials, monuments, and other publicly commissioned sculptures, for the most part, just sit there. It seems to me their purpose is to last and last, forcing the city with them into the past instead of the present or the future. I sometimes interface my pieces with these types of sculptures just to sort of rejuvenate them back to the present. Even work like Segal’s, which does a good job of interfacing with the surrounding environment, soon gets familiar and loses the punch it had at its unveiling. If his installations were in D.C., I’d probably start to get ideas to install my pieces to play off his.

I think my point is that visual outliers are what’s needed to keep the environment stimulating, but unfortunately the only visual content that’s updated with any real frequency are commercial advertising spaces. This is why the ephemeral nature of street art is so essential—because it creates a visual heartbeat in the city by people who are living in it, rather than just marketing to it. But what does the city do with these works? They remove them as quickly as possible and threaten to put the people who make them in jail.

How long do the pieces usually last out there? What happens to them?

This varies greatly. Some pieces that I thought would be gone in hours lasted for weeks, and vice-versa. Some are taken by pedestrians; some by city cleanup crews. If

I can get a piece well out of arm's reach, it can last for quite awhile, and a few of my pieces are still up. I think a plastic bottle takes about a thousand years to decompose. [I'm] not sure what a tape man's outdoor lifespan would be. Probably less.

BROWSE ARCHIVE

The Morning News © 2026