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That's Mark Jenkins All Over

By Adriane Quinlan
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Washington is sterile. Dead. "I feel like I live in a tiny train station village."

Local artist Mark Jenkins says that is the problem his work seeks to solve.

Like a child hunched over a make-believe town, playing tricks on tin conductors, Jenkins is laying out his own monuments over the city's, installing sculptures on the street (without authorization) to rejuvenate what he calls "the cemetery." He has popped red clown noses on the bronze big cats guarding the Piney Branch Bridge, floated translucent ducks in gritty gutters and popped oversized lollipop heads onto the stems of parking meters.

He has become best known, though, for the population of men made of tape -- figurative sculptures "cast" from his own form with clear packing tape. He has positioned these "tape men" all over Washington over the past three years, a project that has gained him a measure of international fame.

Jenkins's tape men have appeared in an art book published in Berlin ("Hidden Track: How Visual Culture Is Going Places"), a Korean news Web site ran an interview with him, and a French glossy featured a portfolio of his work. He's popular among artists, as well: A Connecticut teenager and a grad student posted fan-mail requesting permission to work in tape; he has presented on a panel to the "Geek Graffiti" class taught in conjunction with Parsons School of Design; and two art teachers -- one in Long Island, another in Kansas -- led classrooms in an exercise of tape-cast self-portraits.

He has become the "first celebrity 3D street artist," says Marc Schiller, who runs the Wooster Collective, the online hub (http://woostercollective.com/) that showcases digital images of urban installations. In December, Schiller sanctioned 3D street art on his Web site as its own category, and Jenkins is the artist most featured.

"Mark's stuff pulls you out of that zombielike experience that all of us have in the cities," Schiller says.

Last month, when Jenkins planted three-quarters of a man, feet flailing, atop a gray utility box on the wedge of concrete between Columbia Avenue and 16th Street, the sight slowed a bus, caused cars to circle around for a second look and moved passersby to pull out camera phones. That installation was part of his latest project, "Embed," which takes the tape men and dresses them in his own worn castoffs.

Although the thousands who have seen his tape men have literally gazed through Jenkins's figure -- medium build, about 5-foot-10 -- the man in the flesh is shy: "I try to keep a low profile," Jenkins says, acting the part of just another ordinary dude in a navy polo and khakis, buying a cold can of Coke at a street stall on Independence Avenue.

"Maybe I'm not an artist," he says, "but like an amateur psychologist doing amateur field studies using tape men as a medium." Or, he says half-joking, "Maybe I was contacted to clone myself."

The prototype for that cloned population was born in Fairfax and graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in geology -- "An excuse to work outside," says Jenkins, 35, who works as a Web designer for a Washington-based nonprofit group. He left the States to hike the Andes, eventually settling in Rio de Janeiro to teach English.

In 2003, bored after a day in the classroom, he made a ball out of clear tape to toss around. It was a medium he discovered in a grade-school homeroom 20 years before, when he covered a marker in plastic wrap and tape, made an incision and removed the marker. He was so impressed by the near-perfect transparent mold that he wrapped his whole hand before the teacher could scold him for wasting.

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