Never stuck for an idea

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Should you be wandering around the streets of London over the next few weeks and catch sight of a pair of legs sticking out of a dustbin, a parking meter encased inside a giant orange lollipop, a traffic cone with feet or transparent plastic ducks floating serenely by on puddles in the gutter, don't hurry by, rubbing your eyes in disbelief. Stop for a moment, maybe even take a picture, for this is the work of Mark Jenkins, the first celebrity "3D street artist".

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The 36-year old Washington-based artist has been making a name for himself in his home city for some time, with works made out of adhesive tape, which he leaves around the city - a kind of "off- wall", sculptural equivalent of the original non-permission street art, graffiti. For his London debut, Jenkins will exhibit several of his tape sculptures, as well as large black-and-white photographs of his previous street "installations".

It all began in 2003 in Rio de Janeiro. On a gap year teaching English, the geology graduate found that he had "a lot of downtime between classes". In one such quiet moment he decided to make a cast of a tin-foil ball on his desk out of Sellotape, recalling how he had "cast" a pencil in the same way when in third grade. Pleasantly surprised by the result, he proceeded to wrap most of the objects in his apartment -"pots and pans and what-not" - in plastic and clear adhesive tape, eventually undertaking a tape sculpture of his body.

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Although the first attempt was less than successful - "once I got to my upper torso I realised that I lacked the flexibility to get the roll back," he says ruefully. "By that time it was just a big mess and I had to cut myself out, because my body had started going numb" - he has since cast hundreds of personal clones and these days has a girlfriend who helps out.

As his tape sculpting took off, Jenkins began to worry about the adhesive fumes filling his stuffy Rio apartment, and so, prosaically, his street installations began. When he watched a sculpture of his own body in a skip being towed away by a truck, it took on the character of a performance piece. Intrigued by the "out- of-body experience", the artist was hooked.

A DIY guide on Jenkins's website reveals the simplicity of his method: wrap the object in clingfilm, cover it in tape and then cut a slit to remove the object. Jenkins has cast everything from a Honda Civic to a giant toy giraffe and tape sculpting has been keenly adopted by schoolchildren across America as a mess-free alternative to papier-mache.

"It's a really practical way to make casts, a contribution to the sculpture community," says Jenkins, who names Juan Munoz, Andy Goldsworthy and Banksy as influences, while his human sculptures recall ghostly, urban siblings of Antony Gormley's more robust outdoor figures.

Tape casting also has the singular advantage for the street artist of being quick ("I can go out and make a cast of a fire hydrant in about an hour") and fairly unobtrusive. "With a graffiti artist and a can of paint, that's a pretty tell-tale sign that they might be up to something illegal," he says. "With what I'm doing, people don't quite know what to make of it. I can put it up and before they make the decision that I'm doing something wrong, I'm already gone."

Jenkins's works last two to three days. Rain destroys the delicate structures, but their biggest enemy is the city authorities. "When they see my work, they remove it as if it's worse than rubbish.

If you put a bag of trash on the street, it seems to have a longer life than a sculpture." Jenkins's use of the city as a "canvas for installation art" can be unsettling - his figures hailing taxis and perched atop street signs have a haunting, transient quality - but many, including dogs sniffing rubbish bins and giraffes nibbling at tree-tops, are jokey visual surprises. There is a streak of anti-authoritarian cheekiness, too, as Jenkins cheers up the urban landscape with childlike imagery. As well as trapping parking meters inside giant sweets ("the authorities don't enjoy watching people

wrap up their city icons - especially a parking meter"), his latest feat was adding carousel horses to the lamp-posts on a roundabout. "Washington DC spent $6m [[pound]3m] to redevelop Thomas Circle," explains Jenkins. "For $35 it was converted into a merry-go-round."

In 2005, Jenkins launched the Storker project, in which he left transparent babies in precarious locations and encouraged members of the public to take them home and nurture them. "It was a fictitious campaign for the tape people to propagate their race," he explains.

For Embed, Jenkins took to dressing tape casts of his body in his castoff clothes. Legs protrude from dustbins, while one figure stands facing a brick wall, his head disappearing in to it. Jenkins dispatched his girlfriend to take a video of passers-by, and these YouTube gems have added another layer to the pieces.

In most cases people react with shock or amusement, but it was the extraordinary effect of one of his pieces in New York that led Jenkins to the theme of his current work. He had hung a figure from a post on the corner of Lafayette Street, outside Buffa's Deli. At dusk, red lights glowed in the figure's sides, hands and feet. A blogger reports that the staff felt it was blasphemous and that a waitress borrowed a gun to shoot it down, although she restrained herself from pulling the trigger. "They seemed to get very upset and acted irrationally. It made me think about outcasts."

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