

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

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CHRISTOPHER CHIAPPA: FIGHTING THE DEMONS WITH ART, HUMOR, AND HARD WORK

INTERVIEW WITH ERIK HÜSKEN

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During the research for the Annual Art Edition "Speed," somehow the term fast good got in the mix. Forty came up with a picture of a French fries skull which, after a while, was identified as part of "McMiracles," a photographic diptych by Christopher Chiappa. A closer inspection of his output unfolded that his take on art has some sort of dark humor that is on the same wavelength as ours. Reason enough to hook with him to get further facts. Chiappa was born in 1970 in West Chester, Pennsylvania. He obtained his undergraduate degree from Middlebury College in 1993 and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in 1998. He currently lives and works in Long Island City, NY.

First of all, please tell me about your upbringing and your family.

I grew up outside of Philadelphia. Out in the farmland near Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. It's famous for being the place that George Washington and his troops spent the winter during the revolutionary war. My father is a periodontist and my mother is a psychotherapist. Neither of them are very interested in art but they are and have always been very supportive of me. I became very serious about becoming an artist after having a nervous breakdown in college. I think I wanted to set out on my own and pursue a career that was nothing like either of theirs, but oddly over the last 20 years I have found that there are elements that are strongly related to each. A lot of what I do is nano and tedious like my father's work. I often use dental tools to help make sculpture. Growing up in a house with a psychotherapist for a mother certainly exposed me to diving into myself and I often use that as a starting point for my work. Until recently, most of my work was self portraiture with a heavy bend towards the self-analytical. I was raised Catholic and was a good student and a decent athlete so my childhood was not filled with a lot of angst. My parents were and still are happily married. In fact, I don't think I had any transgressive thoughts until I reached puberty, and that is when the wheels started coming off. The questioning of my reality did not begin until then. I had always been good in drawing and making things and was encouraged to do so, but it was fairly braindead stuff. I didn't need art to be expressive at that time, but as things inside my head started to break out of their cage, art became a necessity for me and has remained so ever since. I also got deeply into skateboarding which showed me a whole different worldview than the cloistered one I had growing up. I believe that the difficulty I have now making sense of the world is exacerbated by the fact that I felt so comfortable and at ease as a child. My expulsion from the eden of my youth was severe and powerful.

What were your first artistic experiences/encounters with art?

The Philadelphia Museum of Art was where I first encountered art. I was in a special class that went to the museum several times a year. At the time I was mostly into medieval armor, they had a suit of armor that had been pierced by a crossbow hundreds of years earlier. I remember being completely fixated on it. The museum houses most of Duchamp's work, although I wasn't a diehard Duchamp fan until it hit me like a truck in college, I can't help but feel that he was quietly worming his way into my brain from first grade on. The museum also has a chapel that is devoted to most of Brancusi's masterpieces, that certainly was and is something that affects me to this day as well. I didn't know any artists growing up so I never really felt like it (art) was actually an option. I think I thought I would end up being a doctor because I was good at math and science and I liked the idea of having a Dr. in front of my name. All that wore off when I got to college and got serious about drugs.

Where did being an artist begin for you, do you remember your first "real" piece?

I, like every other egomaniac artist could always draw, my brothers could not, so I took that ball and ran with it to get attention and individuate. At first my work was solely about showing off (it still is about showing off but hopefully in a more thoughtful way). As I went through puberty and

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my illusions about the world began to fragment, I began to utilize my newly disjointed worldview and self view as the crux of my work. I began burning things and making odd juxtapositions. I even got a rabbit and brought it as a sculpture into class at RISD. Those were still early efforts in trying to rectify the absurdity of the world with the absurdity in my head. The first major piece I made in NYC upon getting a shitty studio in Brooklyn was a casket covered in 5000 band aids. It was prosthetic pink and looked like a strange spaceship holding in its core my existential anxiety and made commentary on the thing that a human being is most irrational about – death. Albeit heavy-handedly, it still did something that at the time I was very proud of...it got people talking. I decided early on as an art history student that I had never seen a piece of artwork that was not a self portrait. So I use myself in my work often and things that are in my life always.

**“I also got deeply into skateboarding which showed me a whole different worldview...”
Can you please explain this a bit more precisely?**

I grew up out in the country. Rural as it was, new ideas, or culture, or anything contemporary came through the television only. I began skating in middle school just as it was beginning to be a phenomenon in the US. At first it was insulated, just me and my friends skating at each others' houses or nearby. As we got more into it, we began going to other towns, to skateparks or ramps or down to Philadelphia and came in contact with other young boys who had completely different upbringings and ideas. The music we got into was harder, the politics more radical, and the entire situation much more energized and unsafe than anything we could find at home. There was an unscripted aspect to it that soccer teams and “normal” high school activities couldn't compete with. It was also “dangerous” which above all was something that every high school boy craves. I was a straight-A student and took school very seriously, but I had a delinquent streak and skateboarding fed into that. Riding a skateboard at the time put you on a collision course with the police because they saw us as gangs of unruly teenagers. That feeling of being an “other” in the eyes of the law was very attractive to me. I didn't want to be part of society on its own terms. As an adult artist I find that 90% of the male artists my age were at one time skaters. I don't think this is an accident – the politics, the anarchy, the creativity, the independence, the ability to turn a seemingly worthless spot into a fantasy (the alchemy), and the ‘fuck you’ nature of skating is irresistible to me and many other artists.

You mentioned that you run a small company, what are you doing exactly there?

I run a company that does design and installation work for many of the known “design” companies – Herman Miller, Droog, Vitsoe, Swarovski, Ingo Maurer, Maharam et cetera. This all began about 15 years ago when I quit working for Jeff Koons (my first job in NYC) and began to work as an art handler/carpenter and got a call from Murray Moss to hang a chandelier in his infamous little design store in Soho. My business partner and I went completely overboard for Mr. Moss and kept the jobsite neat and clean while cantilevered over a glass cube 10 feet in the air and showed him that we could match his obsessive compulsiveness. Needless to say that Moss became out #1 client and we oversaw the installation of everything in the store and everything in the Moss empire. We became indentured servants, it was and is an incredible education. My ex-wife is a designer and was really into “design” but it came late to me. Working with Moss allowed me to work alongside Hella Jongerious, Marcel Wanders, the Campanas, Maarten Baas, Gaetano Pesce, everyone in that industry. We were right in the heart of the design community, mostly by accident, but as people became aware of our special skills the client base has expanded to include many design-oriented companies and private clients. I think it's worth mentioning because I think a lot of artists either try not to have dayjobs or do jobs that don't necessarily influence their work. For me my day job is extremely crucial to what I make and how I make it. I began making furniture soon after I began my work with Murray and have had an intense discourse with Murray and the group of artists that make up my company about both art and design and the intersection of the two. Murray is the single most influential person I have met in NYC and has been a strong supporter of mine for a long time.

What other persons besides Murray Moss are influential to you? Any particular artists?

I didn't know artists or identify with artists until very late in the game. Like I said earlier, I always thought I'd end up being a doctor or something like that, so even the teachers who pushed me

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into art always seemed to be pushing me towards design or advertising, which I could not abide at the time. I went to RISD for one semester and found it both less intimidating than I suspected and also full of insecure 18 year-old artists being demonstrative and obvious and dying their hair a new color every week. So artist role models did not appear to me until after I finished college. After my nervous breakdown I had a studio in my parents' basement and began working in earnest on sculptural reliefs that I thought at the time would help me get into graduate school. I visited New York City to see a friend and I happened upon the Bruce Nauman retrospective at MOMA in 1994. I sadly had barely heard of Nauman at the time, my art history courses only led me up to Johns and Warhol, and I was ignorant and naïve about the contemporary art world. Needless to say the Bruce Nauman show hit me like a sledgehammer, nothing had ever hit me like that, it changed everything for me. It made me identify as an artist for the first time in my life. Whatever Nauman was, that's what I wanted to be. I still to this day think of him when I think of what kind of artist I want to be. When I first moved to the city I worked for Jeff Koons for a stint, that too was hugely influential because I immediately had access to some "center" of the art world upon entering New York. It humanized the whole thing, it went from being stories about people (history) to having drinks with Jeff and seeing that it (a career as an artist) could be done. Jeff Koons as a man did not intrigue me. He is pathological and a dud and really of no interest to me intellectually. Although I do love his work, but as a force in the art world it helped me visualize myself as an artist.

Besides what you describe as diving into yourself – what other inspirations play a role?

The Guinness Book of World Records was a huge influence on me as a child and as I began to work in earnest as an artist. Both my mother and my brother are psychotherapists so that language and the thinking as both a patient and a critic of other people's psychological inner lives is a huge influence. My first show had a smiling photograph of me in between my mom and dad. A classic family photo except that I had the words 'I want to fuck my mother and kill my father' written on my t-shirt. Iconic thing from my childhood also serve as both a springboard and actual materials in my work – i.e. weber grills, hermit crabs, corn on the cob, Speed Stick deodorant, Volvo headrests, lay-z boy chairs, et cetera. I think that I knew that there was something conceptually and perhaps sculpturally powerful about those things when I was young and that's why I began to be fascinated by them then. As an adult artist I try to dig into them and find out why I am still fixated. Most importantly, life is a struggle for me and as far as I can tell for everyone I've ever known, this struggle is not minor, it hits me everyday in multiple ways and it's what led me to my post-college psychological space shuttle explosion. My difficulty making sense of things or having a "positive outlook" was and has been described as and diagnosed as depression. An affliction I share with my father. I cannot underestimate the power or the influence this struggle has had on my artwork – its my guiding dark.

"I want to fuck my mother and kill my father" has this anything to do with the infamous lines in "The End" by The Doors?

I think Jim Morrison understood the power of taking the Freudian notion of what the base subconscious will wants and turning it into a song. His theatricality was slightly different than mine. He identified as a poet, which I believe is tantamount to admitting to a huge ego and no sense of humor. I wanted to use that same power and bring it back to earth, to my life, to my parents. To the mother I supposedly want to fuck and the father that I supposedly want to kill. When reading Freud or studying psychology it's very easy to get behind these concepts as one looks through the lens of "the general" or the specific other. I agree with Freud that a man's simplest and deepest desire is to replace his father. The father is the thing that young man constantly nashes it's teeth on. I also agree that the women you fuck and/or marry are heavily informed by your relationship to you mother. So I thought that taking that concept and making it personal and intimate it would make for a ludicrous photograph and vibrate between funny and sick and sad and scary and true, which is where all the good stuff is, as far as I know.

You're talking about "...difficulty I have making sense of the world..." and "...post college psychological space shuttle explosion..." which was diagnosed as depression. Do you have an idea what you would do if you weren't creative?

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I'm quite sure that the two things are intricately interlaced. My way out of my hell hole was a bed sheet made of my own desire to make things and be part of the "art conversation." My crisis and subsequent nervous breakdown was a chemical affair, but it took on the identity issues I was struggling with as a boy who was terrified of becoming a man. I saw no place for myself in the world and so I had a very difficult time understanding who or what I was. I felt useless in the most obvious and painful sense of the word. My identity as a student had run its course and I had nothing but drugs to replace it with. I had no answer and my psyche went into convulsions. When I was in the hospital a very acclaimed and "helpful" psychiatrist told me that I might be able to have a job at a post office if I made progress. Needless to say that scared the shit out of me and my suicidal specter gained a little more momentum, which at the time was a huge wet snowball rolling downhill. The thing that turned it around for me was the studio in my parent's basement. It gave me focus, direction, and the early sketches of an adult identity.

To me there is a good portion of irony, and, not to underestimate, humor in your sculptures. Am I on the totally wrong path with that supposition?

I've always believed in the power of humor. I am acutely aware of the different ways people communicate and have always been drawn to the way comedy can deliver bitter pills. Humor has a way of breaking it down. I want my artwork to be well-designed, well-articulated, and deliver a punch. The humor aspect softens the viewers' defenses so that the message can blaze through. Humans create a narrative of the world to help them, make sense of it, that's where religion comes in and all sorts of other fantasy-oriented shit. I like to point out that the constructed narratives are just that – constructed. The world is fucking wild and unruly and no one has any real control. My favorite joke of all time is "What did the deaf dumb and blind boy get for Christmas?.....cancer!" If my artwork does what that joke does to me, I would be so pleased.

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