



ENGLISHMAN IN NEW YORK

JON BURGERMAN



Briefly back in the UK, after a whistle-stop four week tour of Asia, and fresh from picking up his renewed visa to live in the US for another three years, Jon Burgerman took the time to meet for tea and a chat about his upcoming show in Brighton, Button Moon and burgers, amongst other things.

Burgerman grew up in Nottingham and studied towards a degree in Fine Art, before beginning his career creating the vibrant, instantly recognisable world of shapes, colour and monster-like characters which now live on not only walls, but anything from laptop cases to Virgin Atlantic sick bags. But before all that, he was one of your quintessential arty children, coming up with comics, characters and posters for films the characters were going to star in. Describing himself as a "nerd at home, beavering away on imaginary stuff", he even designed the kits and club badges for football teams he and his brothers would invent. Heavily influenced by animated TV and programmes such as Button Moon, Henry's Cat, Mr. Men and The Beano, he grew up wanting to be an animator, and who knows, he still might become one.

He moved to New York a few years ago and the American art scene has welcomed him and his army of characters with open arms. However, Burgerman was happy to be back, albeit briefly, in the UK, embracing the British weather, catching up with old friends and enjoying the luxury of finding his way round without getting lost.

But that's not to say he wasn't ready to get back to his current New York home, where he may stay for a little while longer before upping sticks to explore pastures new. It is often said that London and New York are cut from the same cultural cloth and Burgerman agreed that despite not being able to drink outside at art openings, the ethos of the creative and artistic community

didn't tend to differ much from our own London scene.

"I might go somewhere else in America next, but because of the nature of my job it's hard to predict where I'll be. I don't feel that I'm ready to stay anywhere for a long period of time though. Maybe I'll hurt my knee and be unable to leave somewhere for a while, maybe I'll be held hostage, hopefully on a beach. No not on a beach, I don't really like beaches, in a really swanky hotel with lots of good room service and a fully stocked mini bar. So if you could arrange that for me that would be great.

"When I first moved over to New York, it was odd because I wasn't used to it. Even banal, mundane things like being in a restaurant, as a British person you aren't used to the enthusiasm that comes with serving a sandwich. One of the first times I came back to London from New York, something was wrong with my Oyster Card and I had to speak to a guy working at the station to get it sorted out. He dealt with my defective Oyster Card without saying one word to me, he grunted, sighed, rolled his eyes and didn't say a thing. I found it incredibly rude, which maybe I wouldn't have before going to America. It would be fair to say I've become a little Americanised and I like to say hello to shop staff and make an idiot of myself. It is infectious, if you're nice and smile, it rubs off on people around you. It's good for our wellbeing."

Aside from renewing his visa, one of the reasons Burgerman was back in the UK was for an upcoming show opening in Brighton entitled 'A Failure of

Judgement' at Ink-d Gallery, which coincided with a festival called 'Reasons to be Creative' which he was due to speak at as well, three years on from his first talk there. The show ran from 5 September to 6 October, but prior to its opening, he told me of plans to dress up in a fast food uniform with a paper hat, serving people burgers, to celebrate the fact that adjacent to the exhibition space was a burger restaurant 'Burger Brothers', who had made a one-off Jon Burgerman veggie burger for the occasion. The show itself somewhat reflected Burgerman's own interest in the theme of fast food, fast culture and the cheap, disposable nature of it all which he has developed since moving stateside.

"Fast food is an easy metaphor for our culture, definitely in the West. It's great and convenient but does have bad knock-on effects, from obesity to diabetes. I've found it to be a simple vehicle to put forward ideas within my work. The latest body of work is not entirely centred on fast food, but it has inspired little aspects about consumption in general."

As with any art form, it's always difficult to determine whether the intended message of a piece is accurately conveyed to its audience or not. To tackle this, he has created a mixture of busy pieces and some deliberately very simple ones; these show the viewer a singular piece of a larger puzzle and this, in turn, helps the viewer to recognise the forms in a busier composition.

"Many people will still just appreciate the aesthetics of an image alone and view it at face value as a big pattern. You can listen to a song and enjoy it without knowing that it's really about taking heroin under a bridge. It's difficult to get people to stop and look at anything, so it has to be a catchy image, like a pop song, you can't quite take your eyes away."

Performance has become a big part of Burgerman's practice, with a huge host of lectures

and talks under his belt, he welcomes these opportunities to travel around the world and break out of the usual confines of working in isolation as an artist. Finding it both flattering and nerve-wracking; the challenge of articulating who he is and what his work is about, to an audience of people, is something he embraces as a "giddy thrill, horrible at the time but great when it's over". For him, it's all about being kept on his toes.

some people were able to tell me that on specific slides, she maybe didn't quite get what I was saying. It ends up being their interpretation of what I'm saying. I guess it's not rocket science, though - I'm basically showing crappy little drawings. "

Burgerman's Posca pen cartoon creations have gained him a large following in Asia and his tour of South East Asia, to Bangkok, Manilla, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur

"I studied Fine Art in Nottingham, so I wasn't an illustrator, or designer, or graphic designer, or any of these things. I don't really consider myself those things now but when I was a student I used to make fake products, a mockery of the stuff I would eventually go on to produce. I never imagined that I would make all this stuff. My dad used to be a sales rep for a film company which meant he would go to video shops and say 'these are the new films

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"For my lectures in Asia, I had to slow down how I talk and also tried to make the ideas really clear. I had to take out a lot of cultural gags, language games and wordplay. I did a lecture in Korea and they had a translator, I'd say a sentence and then would have to stop and wait for the translator to translate, which was actually really good, and while she was translating my brain had a bit of a moment to recalibrate what was going on and then had a moment to decide what to say next. So I felt a lot more intelligent! The scariest thing about giving a talk is not talking and there being silence, but having enforced silence was a nice change. I thought, maybe I'll always have a translator regardless of what country I'm in and then it will afford me that gap to think. It's difficult to know how it's being translated as well,

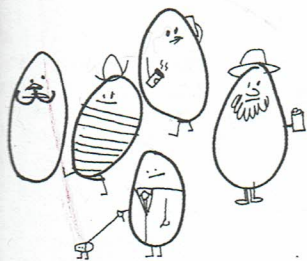
and Korea, was not only a chance to experience these places, but also an opportunity to showcase the performance element of his repertoire, with a jam-packed schedule of live drawing events and workshops.

"Some of the shows sold out which was brilliant and the talks were packed out, all the events we did were over-subscribed, which was better than a half-empty room. It's also a bit special because you're not meant to be there, people love it when foreign people come to visit. In Korea, I did some live painting and it was one of those moments where I thought I was alone or a few people were watching and then I turned around and there was a sea of faces all glued to what I was doing. One girl came and had a big tattoo of my work on her arm, it was all very flattering!"

Step into any quirky gift shop in East London and you're sure to find Burgerman's graphic, bold and busy designs on a vast range of merchandise, from mugs and sticker sheets to backpacks and prints. He's also worked with some of the most influential brands in the world including Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Nike, Sony, Sky, Kidrobot, Puma, Nintendo, MTV and a whole lot more. His style lends itself well to products and the marketability of his art is vast, I wondered whether that may even have been his initial intention.

that are coming out, how many copies of Terminator do you want?' He would have a boat full of merchandise, t-shirts, stickers, posters, etc. I guess everyone likes that stuff as a kid, but from an early age I loved it. I used to make comics too but I would not only make the comic, I would also design all the merchandise. So it's always been there but I never thought 'ah when I'm older I'm going to make a pencil-case'. Thanks to the magical age that we live in, you can put any image onto anything. It's exciting to take your work into different formats, a lot of artists will wonder what their work will look like on a big wall or a skateboard or t-shirt, but I'm lucky enough that my work fits onto most things quite well. I've met people who say they have some of my work and they open their bag to reveal a laptop with a faded sticker from 2003 on there, which I just find amazing, as that sticker has been in their life on a journey for a long time. Maybe I saw making stuff more as a way of infiltrating people's lives."

As much as I'd have loved to avoid the cliché topic, I felt I had to ask about the gimmick of burgers which he has at his disposal. A lot of artists are faced with the task of coming up with a tag or name for themselves that will survive the test of time, but Burgerman was gifted with his name from birth and I wondered if burgers, especially



reagenfried beans



for a vegetarian and self-proclaimed salad enthusiast, had become an irritating association, or something he embraced.

"Well, I am presently embracing it but I must admit that earlier on in my career I don't feel like I particularly exploited it. I'm only really giving into the burger thing now. I just made a burger character toy in the Philippines and we are working with the burger place next to the gallery for my show. My friend Louise bought me some burger socks; Gemma at Lazy Oaf gave me a beautiful yellow burger jumper. I'm not completely sick of it yet. I can't avoid it - that is my name. I went through school being called McDonalds and burger sauce, there is no way to get away from it. Me and my good friend Ben Rosenberg used to have a little gang of the Bergs, you can join actually as an honorary member, we haven't had a new member in 20 years, but welcome to the gang, Elfberg."

With a clearly perfected formula firmly wedged up his sleeve, it would be easy for Burgerman to sit back and continue regurgitating the same characters

and ideas on a seemingly infinite stream of different products, reaping the financial rewards and splurging on Waldorf Salads. But instead, he is eager to keep evolving his style. One recent project which gained quite a cult online following was his Tumblr 'Drawing Girls on Tumblr' where he draws much more figuratively, using girls on Tumblr, as his inspiration. This kind of project allows him to avoid complacency and include these figurative elements into his newer paintings, so his works are becoming a mixture of doodley, colourful stuff with some figures in there as well, which he would never have otherwise done. His live performances, workshops, and unique exhibitions also contribute to this notion of keeping the momentum going in not only his work, but his life as well.

"Some artists know what they are doing and produce similar kinds of imagery wherever they go and that's great and they hone that skill. I'm not one of those people, I like to have a go at different things and see how I can apply myself to different work. It's not about applying my visual style to different things, but instead it's

about bettering myself. Anyone could sit there and copy my style, and people do, my work has been influenced by other works, and my work is part of the food chain which will influence other people's work and so on. What's unique and special, is me as an individual, my interests, personality and decisions. That's what I can offer to people, not just drawing little characters, although that is part of it.

"I like the idea of doing stuff where it's a simple setup but you allow people or something to influence it beyond your control, so you're not entirely sure of the outcome. Having the parameters set but being open for random things to happen, which you can't plan for and then having to improvise or adapt to deal with that. I'll always do drawings and characters but I like the idea of having events where simple interventions can make a difference. I had a show in Williamsburg just before I left called 'Hot Girls and Hotdogs' and I invited people to bring their dogs to the gallery. If they brought the dog I'd draw a free dog portrait for them. The idea was therefore, that the space would be altered for the evening in a way that it wouldn't normally be. The dogs would interact and the humans would interact and it would change the normal dynamic of an exhibition opening when people just stand around drinking free beer and chatting to their friends, as if they are at the pub and then the booze runs out and they leave. So it's a way of shaking it up, just a little bit. Subtle simple things."

With brands battling to work with him, a universe of blank walls and a sea of products just screaming to be Burgerman-ed, he is an artist who will no doubt stand the test of time. He continues to work on a vast array of projects, from interactive real-time drawings projected onto screens halfway across the world from him, to children's books, animations, lectures and workshops, there is no apparent end to what Burgerman can, and will, turn his hand to.