

ANIMAL

ART OF WAR: COBY KENNEDY TURNS BROOKLYN STREET SIGNS INTO POST-APOCALYPTIC WEAPONS

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“Good enough to kill a motherfucker!” artist Coby Kennedy said, as he sharpened his New Lots Avenue street sign into a machete with a metal grinder. “I gotta make them the way they’re going to be made in the narrative — ripped off the street and hacked the fuck up.”

The “narrative” takes place 400 years from now in a post-Apocalyptic Brooklyn. All of Coby Kennedy’s artworks — the hyperrealistic paintings, the machine gun “vending machines,” the giant knife, sword and shield sculptures that double as film props — fit into that vision. In the future, the remaining native residents of Brooklyn defend themselves against invaders and each other. They use gleaned scrap and appropriated street signs to make weapons, the functional and deadly emblems of their heritage — Bedford Ave, Nostrand Ave, Malcolm X Blvd, etc.

“It’s based on a narrative which reflects contemporary situations,” Kennedy told ANIMAL in an interview for *Metro New York*. “A lot of the street signs are from places in Brooklyn that have history and weight, places that are losing that particular culture.” The artist had a lot to say and to show us that didn’t make it into Monday’s paper.

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“Welcome to Bushwick, home of failed artists and trust fund children!” he laughed, walking by his studio/apartment near the Jefferson L stop. He’s has lived in Brooklyn since 1992, but spent six years in Japan designing cars for Honda. He also worked in industrial design in Italy. It’s a lucrative trade, but Kennedy wasn’t creatively satisfied, so he returned home and started making art.

We first saw Kennedy’s *In The Service of a Villain* series in the Superchief Gallery’s show at *Select Fair Miami* last year. “They’re almost acts of desperations in themselves,” he says about the weapons. “They are pieces of twentieth century left-overs that are repurposed for people’s momentary needs.”

He rips a piece off his own curtains and starts wrapping it around the handle. “Purely utilitarian!” he laughs. Then, he drags the sculpture over the concrete floor and stomps on it, distressing the surface, weathering the weapon. “You gotta treat it like shit!” Sometimes, he uses beef blood for articulation. Or his own, if he accidentally injures himself mid-process. The sculptures themselves could hack off an arm. “At least two thirds of the way through,” the artist specifies.

Kennedy’s work is intentionally politicized and provocative, but there’s a sense of satire running through. It adds a wicked whimsy to the fictional concept of Brooklynites slicing off invaders’ heads with homemade machetes.

Kennedy himself is cheerful and charming. During the interview, we geeked out over our mutual love of *Blade Runner* and George Lucas’s early (and best) film *THX 1138*. Those are his biggest science fiction influences, combined with colonial history, the ingestion and regurgitation of media, and the reality of Brooklyn being rapidly and mercilessly gentrified all around him.

“You know that quote in *THX* about creating a new society? It happens so slowly, most people don’t see that anything has changed at all,” he reminds me. “When is the Apocalypse? Ask a Native American, he’ll say, ‘It already happened. All my friends are dead.’ Ask a black man 150 years ago, he’ll say, ‘That was Tuesday. The end of the world is my life right now.’ And what about the Bubonic Plague?”

This is why there is no clear Apocalyptic event in Kennedy’s post-Apocalyptic story; society is always in a flux state of the Apocalypse. Kennedy says he sees the world in camera zooms and pans. In his mind, the film is always rolling. He says he hates most of the art he sees, but everything around him inspires him — the good and the bad. The gentrification of Brooklyn isn’t quite the Bubonic Plague, but clearly, it’s inspiring.

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