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Images from the Ether

A Chat with Artist and Wordsmith John Boone

by G. Spencer Berger

Picture this: you're sitting on a beach on a beautiful summer day doing whatever it is that makes it a perfect time for you when out of the corner of your eye you see a small plane cruising along the Connecticut-Rhode Island shoreline pulling a sign that says, "Hey You." How would you react?

John Boone has always been fascinated with advertising and marketing. He explains, "It occurred to me that, What the plane pulling a sign is really saying? It is saying, 'Hey You.' And, so I decided to get a plane and pull the message Hey You. I thought it would actually be a form of waving at people. We made a video of it and interviewed a lot of people. They thought it was an advertisement and were anticipating the punch line which would have had them pay attention to a product or service."

When I describe him as an artist and a wordsmith, Boone replies, "I don't have any allegiance to literary traditions, so I can pretty much do whatever I like with words. I throw the words and letters into a font that I designed about 20 years ago. It's a look. They then have specific meanings for anybody who sees them, and they are also a package of the things that they represent. I was always fascinated with watches and elevator floors that are done in this similar kind of look, technical and precise. I needed a way to graphically do it. All I ever saw was electronic machinery designed to do it. I set up a grid system and figured out what size points I needed. Pretty soon, I had a whole alphabet. I have been working with it ever since"

"Where do the words come from?" I want to know. "They really come from the ether of life," he replies. "That may sound like a bit of a Grand Canyon way of describing it, but it's true. The things that I use come from what we would call common understandings about how words are used, or how phrases are used. So, it's really very media-like. You have commonly understood generic expressions or sets of such expressions, and I adapt and rearrange them. I'm just packaging them"

What is he capturing and conveying? "I'm capturing a moment in time," he tells me, "and I'm also packaging how we think because there is no package for these kinds of thoughts. There is no receptacle, or container, or vehicle for how these things are thought of, except mostly in verbal communication. It is verbal slang, kind of shorthand. So, when I say that it's coming out of the ether, it really is the author-less subtext of life. Particularly in American English we have a whole collection of idiomatic expressions or ways that people communicate that are outside the more formal uses of sentences and paragraphs and that kind of thing. So, in a way I am using these words and phrases to reveal something about ourselves and to offer us a kind of mirror to one's own mind what we already know. With a mirror you can see other things. The predominant pop artists use that, Lichtenstein and Warhol, those were the mirror guys. They have been very influential to me."

"What is your media?" I ask. Boone tells me, "My media in a way is this alphabet that I designed. Because, like a radio or television, it becomes the media. I realized that by having this media I could pretty much say anything I wanted. I could have a variety of subjects, and I could speak on these things and still have my media. It was mine, my little mouthpiece into the world. This was a tremendous realization. So, I have, over the last couple of years, refined the kinds of themes I am interested in using in my work. For example, I take on things like 'Truth,' 'Nudity,' 'Time,' 'Movies.' Things that are really an integral part of our lives."

The size of his work ranges from inches to many feet. One piece, six and a half feet tall, is a fine example of his take on a theme. Entitled "Consensus," it is basically seven ways of saying "Yes." As Boone explains, "Consensus is a forum where everybody agrees on what you are discussing. Having been brought up Quaker-enough to know what this is, this is part of the Quaker way of making decisions when it relates to groups. A friend of mine was in Japan, and he told me that the Japanese have no word for 'No,' but they have a hundred ways of saying 'Yes.' I was fascinated by that. So, I thought I would do the American slang version of how to say 'Yes' and then have a consensus. When 'The Ayes Have It,' that is the punch line"

Boone works with a variety of surfaces, including canvas, paper and cardboard for his gouaches and acrylics. He likes in a way how fake they are. "You take oil paint, for example," he explains. "It's very earthy. It's almost old-world, when we were an agrarian society. With acrylics there is a wonderful artificial man-made quality." "How do you choose your colors, like for your piece 'Throw Some Light On The Subject?'" I ask. "Light is significant," he responds, "and light is gold. It has its religious implications as well as wonderful psychological echoes. I want there to be a level of simplicity in the color."

OK, so just who is this artist guy John Boone? Boone actually started out to be a writer. He relates, "In high school, I did some writing. Poetry and short stories and that sort of thing. I won several contests, and I thought, Oh, I am on my way. I am going to be the next Hemingway kind of thing. I got to college, and I could not write a word. I realized I had so much to learn. So I pretty much fell off of that and fell into let's paint. It was nothing in particular, I had always drawn." Boone went to Earlham College, a Quaker school in Richmond, Indiana. By his own admission, it was not an art hotbed of activity. He did cartooning for the school newspaper

and quickly became a self-described "art geek." It was during this time in the early 1970's that a magic window opened for him. As he describes the moment, "I saw the cover of ArtForum magazine, which had a Robert Ryman painting of white goops on wax paper. I said to myself, 'Wow, you can do that? That becomes interesting. It is so radical. This is a whole new world!'"

Boone interned through his college with a contemporary gallery in New York, where he was apprenticed to a variety of artists. He tells me, "Once I got to New York, I said, this is it. I want more of this. I was fascinated by the whole art world and what the power of art meant. So, I have been more or less at it ever since." Boone maintains two studios, one in Brooklyn, New York, and one in Stonington, Connecticut. His work is in a number of public collections worldwide, including the Museum of Modern Art, Art Metropole Toronto, New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, Centro Comunicazioni, Naples, Italy, Vrije Universiteit, Brussels, Belgium and the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study and Conference Center, Bellagio, Italy. He has had public commissions and solo exhibitions, as well as group exhibitions from Venice to Paris to Brooklyn. Boone has published two books, *The Invisible Guy* and *Workbook*.

Whether conventionally displayed on walls or far less conventionally towed by an airplane, Boone's work is a uniquely fascinating admixture of humor and irony as well as a quiet urgency to educate. "One of the jobs artists are supposed to do," he tells me, "is to change your mind a little bit. It is to give you another window to look through about how you view life. You can take that as heavy or as shallow as you want. That is up to anybody who looks at it. That is why I am not eager to impose a lot of value judgments through my work. I'd rather people have that be their own struggle. It is not my responsibility. I just pose the question and leave."

Like in 1999, when he was invited to participate in an international convention of art and technology, "Art in the Industrial Zone," in Berlin, Germany. He relates, "I was asked to do another flying sign project. I tried to find the right colloquial expression in American English that would be perfect. I realized that Germans have one of the greatest romantic traditions in literature, art and philosophy. So, I thought, 'What would an American doing a flying piece in Berlin say?' So I said, 'Just Wondering.' People loved it."

In 1997, he was awarded the commission to design eight murals for the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail Transit system in Jersey City, New Jersey. The design, a fine example of Boone's sensitivity and humanity as an artist, is comprised of a system of glass blocks. Each 8x8x3 inch block has one child's signature on it, along with the school that they go to and their grade. Boone feels, "It is a very democratic ethnic sampling: Chinese, Spanish, Black, White, whatever, and it is also a way to have a handshake between the railroad and the community. A signature in a way is a form of self-portrait. It is an expression of the person, and in these cases they range from pre-kindergarten through high school, so you see a variety of maturities throughout the signatures. I wanted each block to be sort of self-contained: an expression of one voice, one person."

Boone explains that the translucence thing is really great because the signatures sort of float. "They exist between heaven and earth," he says. "That there is this floating is a notion of all these things that exist in that kind of space. I will say something is really good by having anti-gravity qualities. Like, if I have a good meal, I'll say, 'Oooh, no gravity there.' That means you feel no gravity. You feel like you are going to float up, it is so pleasurable. It is a plane of existence that I find fascinating. Things that live in a non-gravity based world, they just sort of hover and float. It is very media like in the same way that a radio signal or a television signal has a whole separate life in its transmission to your receiving end."

A visit to the world of artist and wordsmith John Boone is a perfect treat. You get to share his clarity, enthusiasm and humor as you look at things from his perspective. It is an insightful, thought provoking and sometimes titillating time that is occasionally punctuated with outright belly laughs. My mind's changed. I got to look through a different window. For Boone, there would appear to be no end to the adventure. For me, I am thankful for a fascinating and fun-filled time. No gravity there.

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