

# ARTFORUM

## SEPTEMBER 21, 2017

### TABBOO!

by Alex Jovanovich



Tabboo!, Self-Portrait, 1982, acrylic on found advertising paper, 27 x 20". Photo: Max Lee.

Painter, theatrical designer, and drag artist Tabboo!, also known as Stephen Tashjian, was an essential figure in New York's early downtown art and club scene. "World of Tabboo! Early & Recent Work" will feature a new batch of his paintings in addition to a suite of pieces he made when he first moved to New York and was living with his friend and collaborator Pat Hearn (who went on to open her own eponymous gallery in 1983). The show is on view at Gordon Robichaux in New York from September 24 to November 19, 2017. Additionally, a selection of Tabboo!'s works will be featured in "Club 57: Film, Performance, and Art in the East Village, 1978–1983" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. That show opens on October 31, 2017 and runs until April 1, 2018. Here, Tabboo! talks about his art, New York, and life with Hearn.

THE FIRST TIME I met Pat was probably around 1977—the year Elvis died—when we were both going to art school in Boston: I was at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, for poor people, and she was at the Museum School. She had a shaved head and crazy eyebrows and makeup, and she wore wild psychedelic clothing. We hooked up immediately and started working together in Boston's performance art scene, which was really small. But we couldn't stay there forever. Pat got me to New York. She said, "Throw everything you've got in a garbage bag and let's move." She was a little more aggressive than I was, which sometimes can be good. But the very first day we got here, we were like, "Oh my God, did we make a mistake? What the fuck are we doing here?! We can't afford the rent!" So we thought, "Well, let's get out and just see the world, let's go to the Kitchen, let's go to

White Columns.” So one day we went to White Columns, and the show there was by somebody who took Barbie dolls, sculpted their hair, xeroxed them, and then put the copies all along the walls. There were people there performing, a boy and a girl, probably the same age. She was singing, and he was beating some drums and wearing a hula skirt. So we walked up to them and start talking. The woman was Ann Craig—a big star of downtown. The guy in the hula skirt was Jean-Michel Basquiat. I was like, “I think we’re home.”

Pat and I had a little No Wave band called Wild and Wonderful—it started in Boston. (It wasn’t my first band, though—Jack Pierson, a bunch of other people, and I were in one called the Fucking Barbies.) We’d do things like slowly play Elvis’s “That’s When Your Heartaches Begin” backwards and sing over it. Pat would usually do the song, and I’d be playing drums. We were part of the scene that was based around Club 57 during the late 1970s and early ’80s. We did shows everywhere: the Mudd Club, CBGB, Club 57, the Pyramid Club. That’s how I met all those queens from Atlanta, like RuPaul and Lady Bunny. The Pyramid queens used to put on these theme nights at the clubs, too, like Old South Night, Trailer Park Trash Night, or Coney Island Baby Night.

Back then, I found my art supplies on the street. I’d scavenge through the trash of shipping and packing companies and find rolls of this disposable packing paper, like craft paper—something you’d wrap dead fish in. I once found all this Pepsodent toothpaste packaging and started painting on it. That stuff is not supposed to last, but I thought the world was going to end in 1984, or turn into something out of George Orwell, so I didn’t care about doing things on 100 percent cotton rag acid-free paper. I was young, dumb, full of cum, whatever. At the time, it was all about the Weimar Republic. That was the zeitgeist. It was coming out of punk, New Wave, and maybe the German stuff too: Kraftwerk, Klaus Nomi. I was inspired by German Expressionism, Neue Sachlichkeit, Otto Dix, all of that. One of my favorite movies is Cabaret—because of Bob Fosse, not just Liza Minnelli! I even met Nomi on my second day in New York. He tried to pick me up. He was a leather queen, alas. I wasn’t into it. But it was such a big deal to meet him.

I’ve done everything: drag, painting, theatrical design, music. I’ve never confined myself artistically. It must have something to do with having been a professional puppeteer as a kid. I was even a card-carrying member of the Puppeteers of America. I was in puppeteering magazines! I made my puppets, I did the voices—both male and female—and created the sets. I was an auteur.

Anyway, what I do now is so different. The kind of work I made back then reflected the life I lived. I mean, I was a professional drag queen for twenty-five years. I didn’t wake up until 4 in the afternoon. I didn’t come home until 5:30 in the morning. I was a woman drinking and doing drugs. That’s how I lived. I made art about what was around me, what I knew. So what do I know now? I know my friends. I know my plants. I know all my tchotchkes, my puppet collection, and New York City. I’ve been around the world, but I don’t travel that much these days. I’m basically a homebody. So that’s my subject matter. I paint with acrylics on linen, realistically with a touch of abstraction. I’m influenced by the old stuff—Matisse, Toulouse-Lautrec. A lot of contemporary art leaves me cold. And I paint from my Alphabet City apartment, which I’ve lived in for about thirty-five years. Here’s my big fancy artist statement: I don’t have one! I just do what I do.

New York is not what it used to be, but I'd rather be here than in Charlottesville, honey. I'm not too sad about it because I accept change. But it can be tough. So many people I came up with died, from drugs, hepatitis C, AIDS. So much has disappeared: all the little bookstores, antique shops, and Polish restaurants. And the art supply stores, too—New York Central, A.I. Friedman—have vanished. Why does NYU buy out everything and turn it into dorms? And what's with all these young college kids? They come here, go shopping, party a little, get their degrees, then go back to wherever the fuck they came from. Why do they dictate everything? All these enormous universities are like kudzu, you know? I mean, I love kudzu, I love its pretty green color, but it sucks the life out of everything. Well, whatever—I'm in a show at the Museum of Modern Art! I'm doing fine.