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### EVERYTHING HERE IS TABBOO!

by Guy Trebay



A maximalist in all things, Stephen Tashjian, whose drag and art pseudonym is Tabboo!, posed at home in a zebra print shirt from Junya Watanabe and trousers made from vintage textiles by Emily Bode. Credit Christopher Lee for The New York Times.

Four decades into his art career, the painter Stephen Tashjian, a.k.a. Tabboo!, a downtown drag personage, has suddenly found success at an age when many are collecting Social Security.

So much has changed and so radically about New York over the 40 years since the artist Stephen Tashjian — best known by his drag moniker, Tabboo! — first took occupancy on his light-filled walk-up in a stolid apartment house called the Mildred that it is hard to believe that, back in 1982, his was one of just three buildings standing on his stretch of East Fifth Street.

Alphabet City was mostly rubble lots back then. Stumbling home from the bars or from one of the many gigs — doorman, line cook, florist, dishwasher, go-go dancer — he took to patch together a livelihood, Mr. Tashjian routinely passed boarded-up buildings with holes hammered through the walls to create shooting galleries. He tiptoed in his heels through vacant lots littered with glassine envelopes stamped with the names of whatever heroin hit the market that morning.

Yet however forlorn and grubby it was, Manhattan as seen through the eyes of a 23-year-old from a one-stoplight town in central Massachusetts and fresh out of art school was more resplendent than the Emerald City. “I was, like, ‘Take me to Oz!’” Mr. Tashjian said one afternoon this week, referring not just to a city he has made home for decades but to a place that has proved to be his enduring subject.

“I’m giving you that ‘I Love New York City’ feeling, in Technicolor and with beautiful lighting,” he said of the luminous and dreamy cityscapes that have unexpectedly made him, as one of his dealers, Sam Gordon, said this week, “a hot new emerging artist.”

The irony is by no means lost on Mr. Tashjian that, while just seven years ago he was collecting disability food stamps, the art world has suddenly discovered him hidden in plain sight at age 63. Two exhibitions of his works, at the galleries Karma and Gordon Robichaux, run concurrently, and a cadre of collectors has emerged eager to acquire one of his paintings. “I’m pushing the work harder than ever,” he said.

“I’m living,” he added, suddenly tearful, “for all the people who couldn’t.”

By that he meant countless members of his generation lost to the AIDS epidemic. “Everything before digital, there’s now a push to erase,” he said. “And I am insistent on not being erased.”

Erasure seems an unlikely fate for a character as vivid as Tabboo!, one who embodies a nearly extinct breed of artist whose daily existence seems to be an organic part of his practice. New York when Mr. Tashjian was young was hardly a place where creative strivers arrived with five-year career plans. For those like him and his artist friends Jack Pierson and Nan Goldin, the purpose of being here at all was to experience existence as something “beautiful, gay, intense, colorful and magic.”

Considered in that light, his varied stints add up to more than an assortment of random day (and night) jobs. And across the years his résumé was wonderfully motley. He worked as a drag go-go dancer at the Pyramid Club, sang a self-penned queer anthem in the 1995 documentary “Wigstock: The Movie,” drew album covers, invented the type font used by the dance band Deee-Lite, and appeared on Donald Trump’s “Celebrity Apprentice” with Joan Rivers. He was in drag as Cher. (“Ivanka Trump was on, too,” Mr. Tashjian said. “She asked me if I was Marilyn Manson.”)

In recent years he has collaborated on designs for a Marc Jacobs collection and begun posting lip sync videos to his irresistibly loopy Instagram account (@tabboonyc). “I love quirky,” he said.

He was seated on a sofa draped in a malachite-patterned cashmere throw in what had originally been the dining room of his fifth-floor apartment. The room was reached down a hallway and through a one-time parlor that also serves as his painting studio. The walls were painted canary yellow with hot pink and turquoise sequined saris hung as portières. A tarnished tuba sat angled in a corner. Bessarabian rugs lay densely overlapping on the floor. The overall

aesthetic was one of creative scavenging and profusion; in no sense can Tabboo! be considered a minimalist.

“Everything is a rescue,” he said of potted plants received as gifts, a tuxedo cat, Lili, that arrived as a stray, a wall of puppets and masks randomly amassed beginning when Mr. Tashjian was a teenage puppetry prodigy hiring himself out for parties.

“This one is Lamb Chop,” he said, cradling a brittle rubber head that is all that remained of a hand puppet that was the television ventriloquist Shari Lewis’s sidekick. “These are Bil Baird’s,” he added of marionettes representing biblical figures carved by the puppeteer best known for “The Lonely Goatherd” sequence created for the film version of “The Sound of Music.” There were “weird” puppets and “pretty” puppets and “scary” puppets, and the assembly gave the three-room apartment a sense of being super-populated with inanimate beings awaiting a sorcerer.

For decades this apartment and its cast of dummy characters largely described the arc of Mr. Tashjian’s compass, as he explained, because until recently he earned too little to stray far from home. Now that his paintings sell for the price of an E-Class Mercedes, he has begun to see the world, making recent trips to Paris and London, the beaches of Oaxaca, and to Los Angeles for an art fair. And he has unabashedly indulged an appetite for fashion, he explained, as he displayed finery from a wardrobe that runs heavily to Dries Van Noten, bespoke Martin Keehn suits and seemingly every floral extravagance Alessandro Michele ever came up with at Gucci.

“My look is well-dressed gentleman,” said Mr. Tashjian, who wore Gucci loafers, chalk-striped Comme des Garçons trousers and a Bottega Veneta sweater. It is unquestionably true that he cuts an impressive, almost courtly figure in public, as he did last week when receiving guests at his Gordon Robichaux gallery opening dressed in a graphic suit that transformed him into an animated piece of Op Art.

“I’ve been into fashion ever since grade school, when I dressed up as a Pilgrim lady,” he said. “People are always asking me, ‘Why are you so dressed up?’ Why? Why? Because it’s today.”