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40 YEARS LATER, NEW YORK IS STILL TABBOO!'S FAVORITE MUSE

by Interview



Tabboo!. Photo by Greg Cariedo. All photos courtesy the artist, Karma, New York, and Gordon Robichaux, New York.

Downtown New York of the 1980s might have been exploding with eccentrics and bohemians, but even in that era of feral creativity, it's unlikely that the city had ever encountered anyone quite like Tabboo!. The artist, born Stephen Tashjian, arrived in New York in 1982 via a rural Massachusetts upbringing and an art school education in Boston, and quickly made a name for himself with his audacious performances at Pyramid Club and Wigstock.

But Tabboo!'s artistic interests weren't limited to the stage. He's always been a practicing painter, capturing friends, fellow performers, and beautiful ephemera like the flowers that fill his East 5th Street apartment. But it's only in recent years that the artist's paintings have received their proper due. Today, New York City is experiencing full-on Tabboo!-mania as the 63-year-old artist opens two simultaneous Manhattan shows—at Gordon Robichaux and at Karma—that delve into his ongoing fascination with the city's storied skyline. Entitled simply, "Cityscapes," the dual exhibitions revel in Tabboos!'s enduring love affair with the greatest city in the universe, its vistas swirling like a Ferris Wheel around him. Painted primarily from his apartment building, the works on view range from quotidian walk-ups to spectacular, towering landmarks. Perhaps it takes a wild wit like Tabboo!'s to translate the city's freakish, enchanting energy into acrylic on canvas (many works include a healthy dose of glitter). Here, we asked Tabboo! a few questions about his favorite subject—New York City.

INTERVIEW: When did you move to New York City?

TABBOO!: I moved on June 15th, 1982. On my very first day, I met Jean Michel Basquiat and Anne Craig, who were performing at White Columns art gallery. They told me I should go to the Pyramid Club and book a show, which I did that night!! Day one kismet. I was off to the races....

INTERVIEW: Your performances in the 1980s are legendary. Did you incorporate painting into your shows, or was it always a separate discipline?

TABBOO!: I never paint when I perform. I can't paint if anyone's around, really. Though I have painted backdrops for shows (most famously at Wigstock). I've been an artist since I was a little child. In fact, I recently came upon a painting I did at 4 years old, and it was very similar to one I did just last year. It had a crow, a blue jay, a robin, a sun, and some flowers. I went to art school as a teenager and started learning to stretch my own canvases then. I majored in fine art painting at Mass Art in Boston in the late '70s. I've been having art exhibitions every year since. My first New York solo show opened only five months after I arrived here in '82, at an art bar called Lucky Strike organized by my friend Martin Burgoyne. He was also Madonna's best friend and back-up dancer at the time. She filled in as bartender at the opening.

INTERVIEW: Most of your cityscapes are painted from your apartment in the East Village. That's some view you have.

TABBOO!: I've been in the same building my entire life in New York, and I've stayed because of the incredible light that I get from all four directions up on the 5th floor. There is a big studio space along with a bedroom, living room, kitchen, bathroom, and hallway. These big apartments were easy to find back then in the East Village, because NYC was a bombed-out mess and only the brave and desperate were looking for them! So I stayed—forty years!!! Not your average story. Coming from a small rural town in Massachusetts, my beautiful Emerald City NEVER ceases to amaze me!!!!

INTERVIEW: Over the decades, you painted portraits of friends and fellow performers. How did those come about? Is there a difference between capturing people and painting buildings?

TABBOO!: My portraits were done old school, with the people actually sitting for me in my studio. I usually finish them all in one afternoon. For my cityscapes (except for classic buildings like the Empire State or Chrysler buildings) it's a lot looser than painting friends, because I don't have to be so "realistic." It's more an essence.

INTERVIEW: Does New York City inspire you as much today as it did in the '80s?

TABBOO!: New York City, and life in general, is a daily gift to be very excited about. The older I get (yes kids, I'm 63), the more I live to the fullest potential—as should everyone. I continue to paint on a daily basis, post inspiring IG videos, perform with Amory Dahl as our group “T&A,” pump the fashion looks on the runway of life, and enjoy the company of great friends! Like being gay and left-handed, that will never change, nor would I want it to!!