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Harmony Korine Looks Back at His Strange Last Two Decades

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Photo by the author

Harmony Korine has spent just over two decades drawing equal parts praise and revulsion. At 19, he wrote the Larry Clark–directed *Kids* about a group of New York City skateboarders, one of whom has both HIV and a passion for having unprotected sex with virgins.

The film caused plenty of controversy at the time—it was 1995, the AIDS crisis was at its high point, and the movie featured kids smoking weed and beating the shit out of people for no reason—but Korine was also praised for his writing. Like *Gummo*, his 1997 directorial debut, the movie has since become a cult classic.

I recently met with Korine at the Gagosian Gallery in London, where he's exhibiting *Fazors*, his new series of paintings. We talked about his films, his lost years, and his love of the TV show *Cops*.

VICE: Let's start with your directorial debut, *Gummo*. I'd imagine, after writing *Kids*, the studios were anticipating something vaguely similar, not a nonlinear art film.
Harmony Korine: Yeah, I don't think there was any understanding before, or even after, on the part of the studios or people who financed the movie. I remember giving the script to Miramax, because the studio had produced *Kids*, and I don't think any of them even made it past page eight. I knew the only reason I'd ever get a chance to make *Gummo*was because of the success of *Kids*, so when New Line Cinema financed it, it was more like, "Here, take this money, and hopefully you'll have, like, the residue of the success of the last film." But I was really focused on trying to create something specific that had to do with something that was a vision inside me.

I read that the TV show *Cops* was a big inspiration.
Yeah. I had a segment from the show that was about glue sniffers, which I re-edited so it was just a kid sitting on a stump with gold paint in his mouth. It was a repetition of him just saying the same thing over and over again and hearing the cops talk to him—a beautiful image of gold flecks of paint and dust flying out of his mouth. I thought I could contextualize that and put it into [*Gummo*], but we found his family, and he'd died, and the family didn't want to give us the rights.

***Cops* was weirdly groundbreaking for its time—pre-internet, you didn't see a lot of that kind of stuff in the media.**
Yeah. Also, it was the first representation of what I'd seen growing up in the South in any type of media. There was no proper representation of, like, Southern culture or trash culture. The most exciting thing on the show was that they would kick a door down, and you would see heavy metal posters on the wall or some kid with a Bone Thugs-n-Harmony T-shirt listening to country music. It was the first time you'd see that kind of weirdness at the cross sections of pop culture. It was a really influential show because it was the first time people were seeing this.

You wrote *Kids* at 19 and were directing at 24. Was is it daunting making movies at such a young age?
It was fun. It was a surprise, maybe, to my parents or to the people who grew up around me because I was mostly a delinquent, but for me, it wasn't a surprise because I knew I needed to make things at that point. It was exciting because I was finally getting to do what I wanted, but at the same time, it was crazy—I started getting into narcotics, and there was a wildness to it all.

In the late 1990s, you set about making the movie *Fight Harm*, where you'd provoke strangers to the point that they would beat you up. What made you want to make it and why was it never completed?
I just wanted to make what I thought would be the greatest comedy of all time. I thought there was always some essence of violence in the purest form of comedy, like WC Fields slipping on a banana peel, and I thought the repetition of getting into fights would be funny. I saw *Fight Harm* becoming one of the most popular things I could ever create, but really quickly—after eight or nine fights—it started to take its toll, and I ended it.

You stopped making art and movies from 1999 to 2007, after *Julien Donkey-Boy*. Where were you in those missing years?
I mostly disappeared. I didn't really want to have anything to do with anything, really. I just wanted to live a separate life. I was obviously super enthusiastic about narcotics, and so I was probably coming out of that. I lived in London for a while... France and South America. I guess, in some ways, those are lost years.

Were you burnt out?
I don't even know if I was burnt out. I always want to entertain myself, so when things become too serious I check out and go do something else. I don't really care what it is—as long as I'm making something, I'm OK.

How were you entertaining yourself during that time?
Mowing lawns or shooting guns.

Were you making movies?
No, not really. At that point in my life, I was more drawn to a more criminal mentality.

Were friends concerned about you or urging you to get back into making things?
I don't think so. Toward the end of that period, I was so lost and debased. I pretty much disconnected from everyone I knew.

You returned with *Mr Lonely* in 2007, which is such a sad movie. Did those years play into that sadness?
Yeah, probably. I was coming out of something, and there was a sadness to it.

That Iris Dement song you used in the final sequence is heartbreaking.
[Laughs] I remember watching the first cut of that movie; I thought, *Holy fuck*. I couldn't believe I had spent so many years making something so sad.

You've said that you hardly watch any movies these days.
I maybe see ten movies a year. Before, I'd see ten movies a week. It's weird because I still believe in them, but my perception of movies or the power of images has changed. I don't even know why movies are two hours long anymore. Films are about emotions and poetry and transcendence—something enigmatic. Why does it have to be feature length? It could almost be a flash. My experiences with new movies don't go as deep as they used to, but if I re-watch movies that meant a lot to me as a kid I still get really excited about them. I thought *Mad Max* was amazing. On the surface, it was so simple—it was almost like a video game. I thought it was best movie of last year.

We're in an age where so much content is streamed. Do you still care about having your movies open in the cinema?
Always! For me, when making movies I'm always thinking about the cinema experience. That's why I haven't made television yet: Television is a writer's medium. Not to say there aren't good things in it, but television—no matter how good it is—is underwhelming. The size of it, and sitting in your living room. It's pedestrian, whereas cinema is magic, it's huge, it envelops you, and there's something completely sensory when it works. Whereas television now is more relaxed; you can pause it and eat a hamburger.

With 2009's *Trash Humpers*, you shot on VHS using a bunch of video cameras you found in thrift stores.
Near my house in Nashville [as a child], there was an old person's home; they lived in this basement and would only play that band Herman's Hermits. I'd walk by at night and see some of the people were super horny; they'd be rubbing up against each other all the time. It was a highly sexualized thing, and as a kid, it would really freak me out. It's one of those things that stuck in my head, so *Trash Humpers* was a continuation of that idea—of trying to make something that was visually really corroded and horrible, but at the same time had a real American vernacular to the imagery. I was trying to tap into the way things looked and felt growing up.

You edited everything on VHS tape decks, too, right?
It was in the middle of summer, and my editor was 90 percent blind. He was always shirtless, and he would just sit there and take pencils and start wedging them into the VCRs, getting these kind of beautiful glitches. We were trying to imagine, *How do you make a movie that you can*

imagine was found in the guts of a horse or buried in the dirt? Now you can buy VHS apps for your phone and mimic what took us a really long time to do.

You often see indie directors like Gus Van Sant go from making small, left-field indie movies to big studio pictures, but *Trash Humpers* to *Spring Breakers* in 2013 was such a radical jump. Was that difficult to get off the ground?
The easiest part was the actors—that part was very easy. But every movie I've ever made has been hard to make. I've never had an easy experience.

Because of studios getting involved?
There are always those people—no matter what you're making. It's never commercial enough. No one is ever happy enough. There are always people who want to push you in that one direction. I know in my heart if it's right, so I don't doubt myself. People can have their opinions, and I will listen, but in the end, I will know I'm on the righteous path, so it doesn't bother me. Everything is perfect, no matter what happens, even if I'm creating disasters—it's all meant to be the way it is.

Your upcoming movie, *The Trap*, is about a boat-robbing crew in Miami, and you've spoken before about this idea for it to be ultra-violent and akin to a drug experience.
I'm always trying to get to a point where the movie-making is more inexplicable—an energy, rather than anything steeped in narrative. I was always trying to do something that was closer to a drug experience, or a hallucinatory experience, or something more like a feeling. There's a language that I've been trying to develop for a while, so that was what *The Trap* was going to be a continuation of. But I don't know if I'm going to make that movie. I was supposed to shoot in May, but I lose interest. It's not that I'm not making it. I'm just almost done with another script. I'm going to make one of the two this year, I'm just not sure which one.

Let's talk about your art. How long have you been painting?
I've always painted. I've made artwork for as long as I've been making movies, but over the last few years, it's taken over.

Tell me about the *Fazors* series.
This series was just me trying to make artwork without a specific fixed point. There was a pattern that I started with, and I was taken by this—I call it "phasing." They're kind of sensory or energy-based paintings. I wanted to work with colors that were, like, cut from the sky or something. Again, they relate to the other stuff—the looping, phasing, trancing—and there's a physical component. Like, if you look at them for a while, they wash over you.

And you chose to work on this huge canvas size?
I often do small stuff, but for shows, the size is almost like a movie screen—it feels like there's something powerful about the size.

Do you go into the studio with an empty head and just start?
Sometimes. For this series, I worked on them for a long time—it took a year or so to make these. I'd just go into the studio every day and start riffing. The figurative stuff is more intuitive; there are specific characters I've been drawing since I was kid that keep coming up in these ones.

Finally, I have to ask about David Letterman saying you were banned from his show in 1999 for rifling through Meryl Streep's purse in the green room while you were high?

The way Letterman tells that story, I don't really believe it's true. Truth is, I probably did eat a couple of pounds of shrooms right before, so my hallucinations were probably pretty on point, but at the same time, if you see a revolver in a purse, what are you gonna do? Do you know what I mean? You're gonna pick it up and play Russian roulette.

Harmony Korine's exhibition Fazors *is on display at the Gagosian Gallery, 17–19 Davies Street, London, until March 24.*