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Our interview with Harmony Korine ahead of his exhibition at the Center Pompidou

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Harmony Korine, the bad boy of Ameri

Harmony Korine, the bad boy of American cinema, revealed by Larry Clark as the precocious screenwriter of his mold-breaking 'Kids', does everything differently. A drugged-up drifter and a recalcitrant artist, closer to Godard than to Hollywood, he is currently dreaming of changing images in palmy Miami. To mark a major retrospective of his work in Paris, Vogue Hommes talked to the director of 'Spring Breakers', to take stock and look ahead.

Harmony Korine is probably the closest thing American cinema has that could be dubbed “revolutionary”. The word may sound quaint, these days, but the man in question is still young, and aiming to stay that way, like a gently ageing Rimbaud. In other words, he hasn’t sold out on his dangerous - idealistic, pure, extreme, and often rage-filled - youth. He burst onto the world scene at age 19 in the credits of Kids, as co-screenwriter of Larry Clark’s first feature film. Two years later, at just 21, he directed his first film, Gummo, shot in the Nashville where he grew up (he was born in California in winter 1973), whose ramshackle poetics showed that Korine was more than just a Larry Clark mini-me, fated to imitate his mentor: a genuine one-of-a-kind, influenced by the likes of Buster Keaton, Jean-Luc Godard, Leos Carax, Werner Herzog, and the US

avant-garde. But events very soon sent the young man off the rails and he slid into drug addiction, depression, and paranoia. He lost a heap of projects in fires at two hous-es where he lived, took himself off to Paris, London, and Berlin, where he shunned human contact, convinced that he was being spied on, or that people wanted to harm him. He wound kitchen foil around his head so that he wouldn't leak any of his ideas. Trailing an even more confused (if possible) Macaulay Culkin behind him, he ended up by getting it together and going into rehab in the United States. From this black hole expe-rience, Harmony Korine has clearly retained a desire not to let himself be caught up in just anything. He takes his time, and, since the successful release of his eye-popping Spring Breakers starring James Franco, he has kept pretty much under the radar, cropping up from time to time, as an actor playing opposite Al Pacino in Manglehorn, or directing music videos for The Black Keys, Rihanna, and Gucci Mane.Harmony Korine is self-taught: a raw poet and artist who very early on developed his own biology of art, without learning the word or its meaning. His is an impulsive, organic rapport with moving pictures and still images alike, driven by a compulsive need to express himself, a primal scream from the depths, an artistic agony that has never left him, even now. This is why the complete, all-round retrospective at the Pompidou Centre in Paris as part of the Festival d'Automne should first be seen as a thrillingly auda-cious move. A symbolic, status-affirming demonstra-tion of its commitment. However familiar they may be with Harmony Korine, everyone will find something new in an intensive programme of shorts, feature films, music videos, paintings, collages and poetry. Many of these have never been brought together and shown before, or not for many years, like the Anne Frank video installation he created when he was about twenty. "We get bombarded with so much mediocre crap every day, it makes no sense to be in a hurry," he grins at the start of our interview. Harmony Korine, 43, does not do stuff the wrong way round or in random order. He does it his own way. After that scorching, druggy youth, when he rushed to get everything off his chest, as if afraid he might not grow old, he is today moderating his activity, and racing to get on with living.

VOGUE HOMMES: How do you explain the fact that an artist like you, with a reputation for being marginal and undergroundm and who was long seen as the bad boy of American movies, finds himself receiving stately museum treatment at the Pompidou Center in his mid-forties?

HARMONY KORINE: It makes me feel like a young old person [...].

When you were preparing this large show pulling together all your work, did you have a sense or a taste of the whole, a dominant colour?

Not yet, no, because it isn't fully gelled or real yet. The opening is coming up but I can't take it in. I'll probably need to step back a bit, after the event itself. There's a stocktaking aspect in the project, even if it's provisional, something I've never done before, and I don't really know, myself, what effect, what meaning it might generate. On the other hand, I'm delighted at the prospect of the event. The proposal itself touched me a lot. I've never done anything on this scale, nothing as ambitious, comprehensive, or diverse as this. And I'm really happy to see all these very different things brought together: film shorts and feature-length films, music videos, TV commercials, paintings, photos, writings. I'm delighted and also intrigued to be able to show everything in this way, starting way back at the outset with the first works or attempts dating from my teens, and then running through the next thirty years, right to today. What taste will it have? I don't know - I'm curious to find out.

It would seem that you've always been an artist, even when you didn't know it yourself.

When I was young, I didn't have any references, I didn't know what I wanted and I was ignorant, driven by intuition and impulse. All I knew was that I wanted to do something, to create and recreate a world-view. I had no idea how to control anything, especially not myself. By nature I was childish and burning up as an artist, but I didn't understand what was really happen-ing inside me. I wanted to get out, to get away. I was a bit compulsive with my obsessions. I was seeking to devel-op my voice, and my aesthetic was almost spiritual […]. I had so much I wanted to say! Every day, I wanted to fight, I was burning, I was like a warrior. I became increas-ingly obsessed with the cinema and, almost straight after leaving high school, I started making films. I took a lot of risks with my artistic impulses, but I didn't know how to protect myself as a person. I caused a lot of misunderstandings because of that. People took me for a sheer troublemaker because I was wild, didn't have any polish. My work was raw, too, and because of that it wasn't understood by the institutional art world. I knew that I wanted to be great, famous, a genius. I had huge aspirations towards art and recognition.

In your case, the process of recognition was curious because you became famous for a film that you had scripted that was made by someone else: Larry Clark's Kids. The general feeling was that you were at least its joint progenitor, its co-creator.

Yes, it was weird. I was 19 when I wrote Kids in my grandmother's basement, without the slightest idea of what I was doing, I didn't have a plan, so when I'd written a page, I had no idea what would be in the next. But it only took me a week to write, it just flowed. I can't explain it other than by saying that all through my childhood, and right up to Kids, I had pictures and sounds in my head but I didn't know how to articulate them. And then, suddenly, I wrote Kids. There was no transition. It was brutal, but, as a sensation, as progress for me, it was fantastic. The film is partly mine, and perhaps very profoundly mine, but it's really also Larry's film, too.

You're presenting an installation on Anne Frank at the Pompidou Centre.

It's an art project that I developed when I was 22 or 23, when I was working on Gummo, which has been shown only once, in a contemporary art gallery. This is the first time it's been shown in twenty years. It consists of three videos screened simultaneously on three screens. The narration isn't conventional - it should be seen more as a tapestry in a vernacular American style. First there's a family living a closed life in the ghetto, with a man being shaved for hours on end, whose watch squawks like a chicken. Then there's a direct evocation of death. And then there's the third video, on the theme of the angel and the fall. All three are screened simultaneously and make up a strange story that's also a testimonial to what my approach to things could be, back then.

You have this amazing admiration for Buster Keaton. When you were a kid, you even dreamed of being him.

When I was very young my father took me to see Steamboat Bill Jr. and it was one of the most impor-tant times in my life. I was spellbound by the extraordi-nary poetry of it, the naïve humour. I discovered what was for me a really new way of making people laugh. I'd never seen such whimsical stuff before, so yes, I wanted to be Buster Keaton. In his films, he's constantly pursued, victimised, and jeered at, but he keeps on, indifferent, provocative, and at bottom,

indomitable. He upsets people with his acting, the codes, and he's hilariously funny. He was a real model for me!

You yourself created a lot of controversy when you started out. Not so much today : do you miss the controversy? Aren't you afraid of becoming mainstream?

The impression I get is rather that I unleash controversy whatever I do, even now, even without particularly trying to provoke. I don't think that not upsetting people is something that will ever happen to me! When I was younger, I loved to stir things up - I got a sort of excitement out of it. But it was fuelled by anger. I was enraged at the cinema, the way films were made, the general conservatism of the establishment, at how boring art was and the conformism of film directors. I didn't belong to that world, I didn't want to belong to it, and I violently rejected it. So I wasn't shocked at all to be rejected myself and to stir up controversy. I loved the shock, because it confirmed what I thought, it was part of my identity. Rage was what drove me on. I wasn't trying to convince people of the virtue or the morality of my art, I didn't want to document my life. I wanted to nail my impressions, my intuitions, my experiences. There wasn't any political message behind all that, and in fact I never made any political-type statements, not in my films, not in real life. There's this real sort of magic, of mystery, for me in the fact of having been driven towards making films. I'll never really understand that impulse, but it's the truth. I began to make films because that's all I could do.

That reminds me of how Beckett explained why he wrote: "Only good at that".

Yes, that's it! For me it was self-evident that I had to behave like an artist because I didn't know what else to do. All through school, I had the impression that the people around me knew why they were there, and I didn't. I was always retreating into my imagination. Art is an experience, art has no "reason", no model. Art is weird, it's the most difficult thing to define. Artists can often only talk about themselves, about that experience. I don't even know why art exists. It exists because it has to, I suppose.

Spring Breakers marked a turning point in your career and your celebrity. We might have expected you to follow up rapidly with something else after that. But you haven't made a film these past five years. Will the post-Spring Breakers be difficult to manage, to digest?

Yes and no. It takes time. I need time. In the first place, I'm really enjoying life, which is something relatively new for me. I really love being alive, walking beside the ocean, sitting on a bench. I don't want to be an artist or a film-maker who does one thing after another just to fill a vacuum. There are so many shit films everywhere, and I don't want to get caught up in that spiral. That said, since Spring Breakers, two projects have fallen apart, including one that bombed at the very last minute, but that's everyday life in this business. These last few months, I've taken a step back and done a lot of writing. I've got a script. If all goes well, I'll be starting to shoot my next film this winter. And then there's also the fact that, in the past five or six years, painting has taken up more space in my life and I think it now obsesses me even more deeply than film-making.

How would you define your painting?

It covers almost all genres, I'd say, which ends up forming its own genre. All my works are intercon-nected and feed off each other and share bits. But that takes place in a sort of

unconscious state and chaos. With painting, I sometimes feel that I'm achieving a sort of aesthetic unification out of all this chaos. Paint-ing puts you in the shadows, in a secret atmosphere, with its own vibe. In the end, it's like creating a body to live in, or a place to live. Like Godard's cinema, yours makes room for chaos.

Godard is one of my favourite film-makers. When I was young, I was obsessed by his films, and he's still a favourite. I probably didn't understand half of what he wanted to say, but what I did understand touched me, and when I see his films I see the whole, like what you hear when you're listening to an orchestra. He edits, he glues stuff together, and he quotes […] and that's what I do, too. I feel a very strong attraction to artists who create their own language, like he has. I've always wanted to do that - invent my own language, my own narration, my own path. I don't understand why they show so much uninteresting stuff in so many films before they manage to show one interesting thing. You waste the rest of the film trying to explain and prepare the ground for that moment. You can sense this unnecessary journey to get you to a given point increasingly strongly. But what kind of cinema is it that lines up all those mechanistic links? It's a total waste of time. With Spring Breakers, I dreamed of a film that only consisted of climaxes. I injected as much as I could of that very physical component the film's based on to make sure that the result was close to a psychotropic experience, a hallucination.

In your films, people don't have bodies, they are bodies.

I agree, but I find it hard to explain why. Anyway, there's a marked difference between the bodies in my films and those you see in American cinema in general. It comes from me, it's the way I look at men and women, at the actors or their characters. I love to watch people. In Miami, where I'm living right now, I ride around on my bike, I watch the fishermen working, I hang out and just smoke my cigar. I'm very contemplative.

Why Miami, by the way?

I'm living in Miami right now because, bizarrely, Florida's geography and climate are enough to make you feel a little outside of America. I love the sun, the ocean, girls in bikinis, and for me it's the right place to live at this minute. But it'll move on. I've always moved on. I've lived in Nashville, Panama, Mexico City, in Colombia, and even for a short time in Paris. I'd really love to live in Cuba for a while - it's one of my favourite places in the whole world.
One of your projects is to adapt Alissa Nutting's so-called shocker novel, Tampa.
Until now, I'd never adapted a book or ever wanted to. Then I read Tampa and I was blown away. It was crazy, provocative, savage. There was a rage in it that I recognised. I wrote a screenplay of it and it may get made. It's not really a love story between a teacher and a student; it's about a teacher who fucks a student. It's violent and obsessive.

You lived in Paris before you shot Mister Lonely. What links have you kept with French cinema?

Leos Carax is a close friend, and so is Gaspar Noé. I've always had strong ties with France. First, be-cause the French supported me before the Americans did. When I was young, I'd already understood that the French took cinema more seriously. People criticised me for being an agitator in the United States. They were impatient with me, as if they were dealing with a dif-ficult kid. In France, they clearly saw how sincere the cinema was. The French promoted me before anyone else did. That's why I love the idea of this retrospective at the Pompidou Centre.

When I lived in Paris, I was very different, and in bad shape, I have to say. I did a lot of drugs, I bummed around, falling asleep on the steps of apartment buildings, in the metro, in cafés, etc. So I really love the idea of coming back fifteen years later with all that work that I've done since then, and to see this city again through the eyes of the person I am today.

At this year's Cannes film market, it was announced that your next film would be co-produced by Vice.

They've been friends since we were kids. I knew them when they founded their free magazine. We've wanted to do things together for ages. So they'll be co-financing it. The world is changing, and so is film distribution and the means of production too. People aren't going to the cinema any more like they used to. They don't consume it in the same way any more. They watch films on YouTube, on their phones. The young-er generations don't have the same relationship with films, and the disruption is only just beginning. Going to watch a film in a cinema is the old school way. Peo-ple want things in minutes, and they're getting them. There's an almost spiritual shift in our representation of cinema. The cinema landscape is much more frag-mented. You get the sense of a huge vacuum that people want to go on filling ad infinitum. And as soon as a film is released, even a long – awaited one, it's hardly on the screens before everybody's waiting for " the next big thing ". It begs the question, "What is a film?". And, more broadly, it makes you think about what cinema is. With every film I make, I have a sense that it'll be the last. It's strange : it's like the day's coming when you can't make films any more […].

What direction is your own life taking?

Until now, my life has always been very varied, depending on my age. Both my personal and artistic life. I like change. I like to do different things, to live in different geographies, to diversify the ways I express my art, to change my habits. Everything changes, everything has changed. And will change again.