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Harmony Korine Just Wants to be Left Alone

The director, writer, and artist says he finds a freedom in painting that's hard to come by in film. His latest show, 'Young Twitchy,' is currently on view at Gagosian gallery in New York.

Jonathan Smith



Matt Carr, Getty

A couple of years ago Harmony Korine started noticing weird flickers of light on his phone screen while taking pictures around his home in Miami. “I would just stay up late at night after everyone in my house would go to sleep,” he told me recently. “I would walk around and stare out at the water and look at the sky. I started taking photos of the sky late at night using flash, and sometimes different photo apps and stuff, and the images were kind of interesting with the accidents and the light flares.” He played with the colors and the contrast of the photos, and then used an art app to draw over them. “Somehow it was just coming up with these almost like little lifeforms. Kind of cosmic alien lifeforms.” Over the course of about six months, he spent countless nights sitting outside, smoking cigars, and messing with the pictures. After amassing a couple hundred of them, he decided he wanted to turn the images into oil paintings. “I wanted it to be pretty, the process of making them as basic as possible. Just oil on canvas and nothing else. I like the idea of starting on digital and then going to something super analog and basic.”

The resulting series, called *Young Twitchy*, is on view now through April 20 at Gagosian Gallery in New York. And despite claiming that he’s not ambitious (“I’m happy just doing my thing and being left alone”), Korine has been busy recently. His latest film, *The Beach Bum*, a VICE Studios production starring Matthew McConaughey and Snoop Dogg, opens later this month, and the current Gagosian show is his second in six months. The last one, *BLOCKBUSTER*, was a collection of old Blockbuster cassette tapes purchased from a closing

Nashville location, which Korine then painted over to create bright mosaic canvases. Korine has been painting more in recent years, saying that he finds a freedom in the medium that's harder to come by in film, which requires more collaboration.

We spoke to Korine about his new show, ghosts, novelty foods, and Florida.

VICE: I don't know if you've ever heard this or not, but there are people out there who believe that ghosts like to reveal themselves in electronics. Do you think the light flares you were seeing on your phone could have been ghosts? Maybe your house is haunted?

Harmony Korine: No, I don't. I think everything is energy, anyways. I don't necessarily think it's a tangible creature. It's more these were just guys I was making to keep me company. They were friends. I called the show "Young Twitchy," because I kept thinking the character is so twitchy. I just like the idea of these little twitchy lifeforms. I don't necessarily really think there are ghosts at my house.

Yeah, every now and then little light orbs will show up on my cell phone and I used to date someone who was convinced they were ghosts.

But you never know, right?

You never know. In one of the statements you made about the show you talked about them as alien friends. I agree they do seem playful, but there's some—specifically I'm thinking the one called Twitchy Lurker and one of the others, the one with the car—seemed sort of menacing. In your mind, do you think all the creatures have a happy vibe or are some of them... different?

I see what you're saying. Yeah, those two are the most confrontational. For me this always happens. It happens in my movies. I always think the work is in some ways friendly and heartwarming and then people always say, "Oh there's something more, there's this menace in it." I don't know. Maybe there's both? It's hard to say.

Obviously when I look at your paintings I have a whole backstory in mind for what these guys are doing, and whether or not they're menacing or nice. I'm curious, as a filmmaker and narrative storyteller, when you're doing these paintings—and when you're painting in general—do you ever think of the works as having a self-contained narrative in the sense you might with a film?

It's different. If it's something that veers more into abstraction, probably not. If it's something like this show, for sure. There's a definite kind of narrative. I mean if you see the characters that repeat... these kind of strange cosmic dogs, and then the Twitchy guys, you can definitely see this idea of mayhem on the docks of Miami. It's just kind of a strange party that starts to come alive. So there's narrative I think probably in this show, particularly. But I don't know. I don't ever set out and say *I'm going to do a show about blah blah blah blah*. But then I also don't really do that with the movies, either. It really is a culmination of imagery. There's a kind of randomness to it but then with the juxtaposition of specific images sometimes a narrative develops almost on its own.



© Harmony Korine, 'Twitchy Kodak Flack,' 2018. Oil on canvas. 60 3/8 x 48 3/8 in, 153.4 x 122.9 cm. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

It seems like over the past few years you've been painting a lot more. What do you think it is that sparked that, and do you think the increased output of how much you're painting has changed the way you've approached it?

I just like it more. I enjoy it more than making films. Over the last I'd say ten years, it has definitely become probably the main focus, artistic focus. I just enjoy it. I prefer to be left alone to make what I want to make — it's not such a collaborative effort. Truthfully I like doing both. I like doing everything. I like being able to write, paint, make films. But I probably get the most happiness out of painting.

So you feel that you have a sort of ultimate freedom when you're painting?

Yeah! If I want to use the colour yellow, no one is going to tell me it's wrong. Also, with film you have to really explain things, or it takes a lot of—just the process is much more involved because just the sheer force of making a film just involves so many people, whereas with this I can take my time. I don't have to have explanations for why things exist. I don't have to explain or say why this painting exists. It can exist because I want to make something beautiful.



© Harmony Korine, 'TBT,' 2018. Oil on canvas. 60 1/8 x 49 x 3/4 in, 152.7 x 126.4 cm. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

Right, except for when assholes like me call and ask you to explain the paintings.

[laughs] Then I just have to make some shit up real quick.

Switching gears, I was reading an interview with you from a couple years ago and you mentioned that you have a boat with a video poker machine on it and you just cruise around all day drinking Mountain Dew and playing video poker?

Yeah, in Key Largo I have this boat. Actually now there are three poker machines and for some reason I get a lot of Taco Bell, and I bring Taco Bell there. I get the Crunchwrap Supreme and I sail around, drink some Mountain Dew, eat some Crunchwrap Supremes in Key Largo and it puts my mind in a perfect mental state.

Are you good at poker?

I only play on the machines so it's hard to say how good I am. When you play against machines, there's a lot of luck involved.

Do you gamble at all?

No, I don't gamble. Also I would never play against other humans.

Why is that?

Because I don't trust them [laughs].

Because they might be cheating?

Yes.

That's probably true, especially in casinos. You can't trust those fuckers.

Exactly. I'd rather spend the money on Taco Bell.

How do you feel about novelty foods? I feel like Taco Bell does a lot of special collaborations and one-offs.

I love it. Novelty foods are probably the best foods. Foods made with Fritos, anything that's wrapped in a Dorito. I always love stoner food. It's good. Obviously it's not that healthy, but I don't know. I just tend to go for it.



© Harmony Korine, *'Twitchy Roze,'* 2018. Oil on canvas. 60 x 48 in, 152.4 x 121.9 cm. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

It seems like a lot of your work both in film and painting is kind of a slightly darker version of the reality that most of us know and live in every day. To me, these paintings in particular seemed kind of analogous to that vibe because the scenes are classically “well-painted,” they’re calming in a lot of ways, but then just off to the side there’s this insane creepy creature just hanging out. Is that something you thought about as it relates to your other work?

Yeah, of course. It's kind of like the real world pushed into something more hyper-extreme. The paintings and a lot of some of the films, it's about trying to figure out, like you said, how to articulate a certain type of vibration that I'm feeling. It's difficult to speak in words. Sometimes you'll be looking at something that's so beautiful but I just know that there's something lurking on the other side [laughs].

Yeah, it's like one little thing is off.

I guess that's just how I feel about everything. Something's always off but also it's perfect.

You seem particularly interested in themes or people some might consider “seedy,” and it feels like Florida has provided you with a lot of material over the last few years with the *Adult Yachting* series of paintings, and obviously *Spring Breakers* and now *The Beach Bum* .

How do you think Miami, and Florida in general, has influenced your work over the past few years?

Well, I just love it. I just love the way it looks. The way it feels. It's such a strange place that seems to exist completely on its own. I just kind of, I can't put my finger on it. It's the characters and how it's just such an extreme place. And at the same time it's tropical and tranquil. And also there's a lot of Orthodox Jews where I live, and I love that. It's really a perfect place.



© Harmony Korine, 'Twitchy Lurker,' 2018. Oil on canvas. 60 3/8 x 48 3/8 in, 153.4 x 122.9 cm. Photo: Rob McKeever. Courtesy Gagosian.

It seems almost like what we were just talking about: It's so beautiful and perfect in a lot of ways, and then there's also this weird, really fucked up stuff that only happens in Florida.

Exactly. It's the sunshine and it's the southernmost point in the United States. It's kind of the psychic runoff, the drainage, you know? But at the same time it's just like, Miami, the history of it is so short so it's constantly reinventing itself. You can project what you want onto it and so much of it is about surface, which I really love the surface.

Do you think the vibe has changed in Florida, and Miami in particular, with worries about climate change? Is that something people are starting to think about?

Nah, not really. I just roll with it. Everything is perfect. I just have faith. You just try to stay low to the ground and just believe. No one really talks about that.

Must be the laid-back mentality they have down there.

Yeah, and if you go into the Keys, it's even more. It's just, fuck it, who knows how long it's going to be there, but you're going to enjoy it while it's there.

You've said before that you want your films to be mainstream. Especially with *Spring Breakers*, and *The Beach Bum* coming up, your films are walking the line between mass pop appeal while also maintaining that niche, cult status. When it comes to your paintings,

do you want those to be mass market as well, on the level of say a Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst?

That's a whole other thing. With the art, it feels maybe slightly more precious in that I don't make that much of it. I enjoy it just being like whatever it is, however it's received, wherever it goes, I like the idea that paintings exist in all these places. I feel like it's just another component of this idea of unified aesthetic. All the movies, the paintings, the writings are kind of interconnected. I mostly see it all as one thing anyway. I'm not really that ambitious. I'm happy just doing my thing and being left alone.