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/// ARTICLE

## Dzine: "Listen, I Have This Crazy Idea..."

by Paul Laster

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Dzine, "Luxembourg," 2011. Enamel, pearled automotive paint, metal, mirror, fabric, Swarovski crystals, gold plating, silver, custom jewelry, wax and rubber.

**A self-taught artist that's elevated his practice from the urban streets to galleries and museums around the world, [Dzine](#) — born Carlos Rolon in 1970 — has been shaking up the international art scene with his colorful hybrid paintings and customized vehicles for the past 10 years. The Chicago-based artist paints abstract canvases that integrate glass beads and crystals into their vibrant, Baroque surfaces and constructs bejeweled bicycles, boats, and cars that flaunt dynamic sound systems.**

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While Dzine was in New York for his solo show of custom nails, hand ornaments, and jewelry-encrusted paintings at Salon 94 Freemans, I sat down with him for a wide-ranging conversation about where his ideas come from, what his daily process looks like, and why, sometimes, you just have to pick up the phone.

### Where did you go to school?

I went to Columbia College with the idea of getting a degree in graphic design, but after one semester I was really turned off with the process. The first class that I had

was on art and architecture and the one thing that stuck with me was seeing the image of [Robert Smithson's] *Spiral Jetty*. A light bulb just went on, and the first thing I thought about was, "I don't need to be here." There was something so powerful about *Spiral Jetty* that I thought it went beyond the class, and I just knew right then and there it was something that I wanted to attain.

dzine\_double\_550

*Dzine, "In Search of Dragons," 2004. Acrylic with glass beads on canvas mounted on wood.*

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### **Had you already been making work before you went to school?**

I was making some art before college. I had seen Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant's hip-hop documentary *Style Wars* on PBS when I was 13 and I was completely captivated by the artists' obsession for painting on the street. I wanted to feel that energy so I started researching **Jean-Michel Basquiat**, **Richard Hambleton**, and other artists on the graffiti scene before they became stars.

### **Was your first studio the street or did you start making work in an indoor space?**

My first studio was the kitchen of my home. I started painting on the street, but I wasn't really interested in everyday graffiti. I was more into experimenting with found objects and traditional techniques on the walls. I felt like I needed to stand out a bit more.

### **What's your studio like now?**

When I signed on with **Jeffrey Deitch**, and I had my first big show at his gallery the concept of high production came into play. I wasn't really crazy about it. I decided after the exhibition to lower production while maintaining quality, so I reduced the staff. My current studio, which is 4200 square-feet of space, is very organic, very transparent, and very honest.

salon\_550

*Dzine, "Imperial Nail Salon," 2011. Installation view, Salon 94, New York.*

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### **What are your preferred mediums?**

Currently the work is very painterly and very sculptural at the same time. I feel like I've found my language, and now I'm trying to figure out what are the best materials to translate that language. Sometimes you have to go all the way to the left and take risks and sometimes you'll get killed for it and sometimes you succeed. Right now I can't say that I work in any one medium. I'm most interested in making things in an unorthodox manner.

### **How do you start the workday?**

It's very 9 to 5. We burn some incense, sit down and have a meeting. We talk about the day, what we want to accomplish, what we need to complete. Halfway through the day we discuss the pros and cons about the work and decide if we're achieving the goal of what we wanted to do with the work. A lot of the times we'll make something and we'll scrap it and we'll go back to the drawing board and we'll do it again. Sometimes we'll just clean the studio all day. I want my team to realize that this is their space, as well, and I want them to have the same feeling as me.

*"Sometimes you have to go all the way to the left and take risks and sometimes you'll get killed for it and sometimes you succeed."*

**How do you initiate work on a new idea?**

Organic comes back to mind. I don't think you can force people to accept an idea. I think the public is smarter than we think. You have to make sure that what you're doing is the right choice, that it's on point, and for me I really believe in doing a lot of research. I usually clip images online and create folders. Once I start creating folders, then I'll find out who is the leading person that has the most knowledge of this subject and I'll try to contact them and discuss the idea.

**Let's take one of your customized bikes as an example. These are really complicated pieces. Break it down for me. Where does it begin?**

When I started doing the bicycles a lot of the work was outsourced, but now I do everything in house. The custom culture communities are very tight and I've been fortunate to be accepted into that community. A lot of times I'll start by calling people and this is what makes the work successful. I trust certain people and I discuss ideas with people that know nothing about the art world but are stars in their own community. For example, there's this guy Mike who made the low rider bicycles to my specifications. Mike's a detective. It's funny. He's in his mid-30s, he's Caucasian, and he's a detective.

bike\_550

*Dzine, "The Tipping Point (Custom rider for Lance)," 2009. 24 kt Gold plating, 23kt gold leaf, custom engraving, chrome, nickel plating, enamel paint, automotive paint, suede, Swarovski crystals, neon, rubber, Ipod/audio speakers and mirror. \*In collaboration with Mike Linville.*

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**He's totally the opposite of what you'd expect of that culture.**

That's right. Your reaction right there—that's the underbelly that the people in the galleries and the museums don't know and don't see. People can think what they want but I know the end product comes from my relationship with Mike.

When I did the custom cycle rickshaw, I called Mike and said, "Listen, I have this crazy idea." He didn't even know what a rickshaw was. I had to send him some pictures. I wanted to mix low rider culture with a tuk-tuk [a small motorized taxi] and a rickshaw. I wanted it to play classic Pakistani music from the '20s, but I wanted the rims done like they were made in California.

I flew to Fort Lauderdale, we sat down, had dinner, reviewed sketches, and started discussing the idea. Our shared interest was making the most customized vehicle possible—something that has never been done.

**When did you get this fascination with custom culture?**

It came about through a series of events. I was invited to be one of the artists representing the Ukraine in the Venice Biennale in 2007. I traveled back and forth to the Ukraine, but had no idea of what to do. A month beforehand I was asked to do a lecture at the Culture Center Chicago, but instead of doing a lecture I had a guy that was the main source for 45 records for DJ Shadow spin vinyl on stage at the Center for an hour. At the end of the event, he gave me a bootleg copy of the film *Flyin' Cut Sleeves* by Henry Chalfant, who had been my teenage inspiration.

I watched it on a flight to New York to discuss a group show at the Brooklyn Museum. The film was about gangs in New York in the '60s and 70s and their leaders, including *Benjy Melendez*, who fascinated me, partly because he was secretly Jewish. Again, a light bulb came on and I thought, "This is an amazing story." I tracked down Benjy and we started talking. When I asked him how he got around, he said by bicycle, which made me think of custom bikes that Puerto Rican clubs members ride. It had nothing to do with the current low rider culture. I just thought, "What an amazing sculpture it would be to create this vehicle with a video on it discussing this person's journey."

boat\_550

Dzine, "DNIPRO," 2007. The boat is entirely custom, and has a total of 9 TV screens, 22 speakers with lights, 8 amps, a Chevy chrome engine with Neon Lighting, original 1963 Chrome trim and side mirrors from a Chevy Impala, custom bucket seats, Ostrich leather interior with religious fabric, Pioneer CD/DJ equipment with Alpine touch screen videos, a laser light show and a smoke machine.

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I made a customized bike for the Brooklyn show with the video screening on it. Then that got me thinking about my parent's generation and the Puerto Rican diaspora, which inspired a custom boat with laser lights and a sound system that I made to tell a story about being Ukrainian and going to other worlds by water.

I truly believe things happen for a reason and they're organic. That was the beginning of my custom position. Then I discovered a whole culture of people making these costly creations that didn't really do it for money. They're driven by passion, which reminded me of why I wanted to be an artist in the first place.

**"Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration"**

— Thomas Edison

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