

Will Sheldon

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PUNK, DRAWING, TATTOO, ART, FASHION, CHINA, INSPIRATION, BAND, DISNEY, RESTAURANT, LINE, CARTOON, LOU DALLAS, COLLABORATION, WORDLS, INTUITION, FLOWER, BUTTERFLY, SPIDERWEB, EAST VILLAGE, FUN CITY, LUNCHBREAK, WALK IN, JONATHAN SHAW

Johanna Schwab: I don't want to start right from the beginning, but from a motive of you, which I really like. I found it on your Instagram and it seems to be bit of an older motive... It's a pillow with ribbons on each corner. And it has scars and it has a stitched heart in the middle of it. Scars, Ribbons and Hearts are motives you use very often, as far as I could have seen on your Instagram feed. Can you tell me something about this special picture.

Will Sheldon: About the pillow?

JS: Yeah!

WS: I made a little artwork of it for a show that I did a couple of years ago at Cleopatra's, in Brooklyn. That's (Cleopatra's) not there anymore. I was looking at this Tibetan art book with all these little drawings of things. There's this language behind it, and there's symbolism behind it, or not even symbolism, there's just a whole page of plants and a whole page of flowers and a whole page of weapons and so forth. I was like, well, what would I do, if I did that? If I built my own language... It started off from there. And I liked embellishments a lot. When I was in High School, I was obsessed, and I still am obsessed with Vivienne Westwood, with this cut up, stitch on, deconstruct Punk look and that got me into listening to Punk music... I was really inspired by that British Punk look from the 80s, by the Sex store, Malcolm McLaren, all that. That's were the stitching and stuff like that comes in... I don't know, it's taking a bunch of things that I like, and putting them together and creating my own language...

JS: How did you become a tattoo artist? Because you are a painter, too.

WS: So, yeah, my mom's a painter, my grandma's a painter my aunt's a painter, my grandfather was a painter. Down the line, a lot of family members were painters and liked Impressionism and Abstract Expressionism, also portraiture and stuff like that. I always drew and it's actually not what I wanted to do at all, I wanted to play music and be in a band, because that was my thing and it was separate from what my family was into. But I always drew and I always liked drawing. In New Jersey I was in a band, from Middle School on, always trying to be in a band and play music with people.

JS: What did you play?

WS: I play drums. (ed. note: present tense, cause he still plays). The people in the band that I was playing in, in High School, were older than me and

they all started getting tattooed. And they all started asking me to draw their tattoos for them. And I would draw them and they were bringing them to the tattoo shop and they come back with the tattoos and they'd be drawn differently and I was like: am I drawing it wrong? Or: do I don't know how to draw ? I guess it stemmed from there, like I really had no choice.

I was in the band and everyone that I was in the band with had tattoos and was getting tattoos and I started getting tattoos. I just became the guy in the band that drew, that was going to be eventually the guy that did tattoos for everyone which I did. (...) I was working in a restaurant, and I also went to art school and then going on tour with the band After a while, I was like: I could keep on doing this, or I can learn how to tattoo and have a job, so I can, do my other thing and it kind of came out of that way. And I really was starting to get into the history of tattoos and this whole side of the thing (...), the tattoo thing really happened pretty naturally, the band thing was what I was more focused on.

Then the singer of my band went to the Middle East, because that's where he's originally from, to visit his family and he didn't tell us when he was coming back, so he left us hanging for like half a year and I had this tattoo thing and then just did more of it and also drawing more. That's how it took shape.

JS: How you draw a line is such a physical thing and makes it so unique...it's like you establish your unique line on paper, I think... I was wondering if there is tattoo artists who never drew a line on paper before?

WS: There's some tattoo artists that don't really draw ever, they just trace things (...) using a tattoo machine and drawing with a pencil are two totally different things and if you can draw with a pencil, doesn't necessarily mean you can draw with the machine. Sometimes using the tattoo machine - if you know how to use - is easier than drawing with a pencil. So they're two totally different things and a lot of people consider using a tattoo machine, like learning a craft, like plumbing or anything else, you're using machinery. It's not so artistic, it has more this craftsman vibe to it. There's no right way to do it, but there's a wrong way to do it. The idea for me was, to be able to use the machine like I use the pencil.

JS: Okay, yeah. And you are an illustrator too. I think it shows in your work, like the motives. Do you draw inspiration from books or from illustrations or comics or?

WS: I used to like looking at comic books. I never was really a comic book person, but I liked looking at them, at the art in it. And at the drawings of graphic novels and anime. I liked a lot of Disney movies and cartoons on TV. I liked the lines in them. I was really line oriented and the art that I like is line oriented and the illustration I like, is obviously very line oriented, but I never was into illustration necessarily. I just drew all the time and it came out of that.

JS: Which illustrators/drawers/artists ,do you like?

WS: I like the Chicago imagists, Jim Nutt and Karl Wirsum. There is this artist Marjorie Parsons who was married to Jack Parsons, she was very involved with Alister Crowley and this whole magic LA witch cult vibe. In the 40s, 50s and 60s she made works about herself as a witch, little drawings and illustrations. Um, I love Hans Bellmer, those drawings of dolls that he made. Its so about the line. And there is this one artist, Don Bluth, who did *The Secret of Nimh* (...). It's a kids movie from the late 80s, early 90s that is about a mouse who goes and saves all the rats from the

labs. That movie really burned into my head. It's not when you look at it, you'd be like: Oh, it makes sense with the way that you draw. It's not nostalgia, it's more that I like to stick to what I always liked. So that had a big impact on me. And there's these novels called *Redwall* and they were about animals, it was basically like *Lord of the Rings*, but with ferrets and mice and foxes and they had these amazing drawings in the front of them. I would always buy the books, read half of it and just look at the cover and be obsessed with. It's kind of based around this fantasy realm. Brian Froud drew all these fairies and I love that whole style: the way the bodies are contorted and twisted. They are very mischievous, yeah. I also really liked *Spawn* growing up. It's just, I didn't really know too much, I grew up in China then. I moved to New Jersey at the age of nine. I was born in Hong Kong and lived in Honkkong and Shanghai. So I wasn't really plugged into a lot of the stuff, I wanted to be plugged in to, but I would get my sources of my older cousin, that lived in North Carolina, that I would visit on the winter holidays. At that time I felt I didn't really knew about stuff, so when I saw something, I tried to take as much from it as possible, remember it and draw it. Yeah, that was like trying to take as much from it as possible, remember it and draw it. That's pretty much still how I kind of go about doing things.

JS: Just a quick one. How come China ? Have your parents worked there?

WS: Well, my grandfather was a journalist. He was the White House correspondent for this *Christian Science Monitor*. It was this publication, that used to be pretty reputable and now it's not as much. He went over to China, when Nixon went over and opened up the peace treaty with China and the US. So there's pictures all over their house with my grandfather and Nixon and all these other journalists in China. My dad, I think, was inspired by that and learned how to speak Chinese in College and then was looking for the first job that would take him there. He was in communications. So he went over there and he met my mom like a couple months before he was moving there. My mom was very into the idea of going to China, into doing something crazy and living somewhere totally different. So they went over there and then had me and my older brother. I was there for nine years. (...)

JS: Let's go back to your artwork. There is something you said, where I can relate to: *When I think of a good tattoo or a good imagery in general, I think of the simple things you learned in kindergarten or what you find beautiful or interesting at that age.*

What did you see, when you said that? Or maybe you can think of a picture now ?

WS: I think the things that I found beautiful in kindergarten, I didn't really think about them as beautiful. It's just being a younger person and looking at things and being in awe of certain things. Things like flowers or maybe movies that you watch but you're not supposed to watch, but you're at a friend's house and the movie comes on and it just changes your life. There's so many things and you're like a sponge; there's so many things that change your life dramatically all the time, you know?

JS: Seeing things for the first time ?

WS: Yeah, I mean, it changes you. You're never the same after watching that thing or you see that thing (...). Which later happens less and less, just because you've seen it or something like it. There is not a specific thing I see: it can be movies, drawings, music or a feeling. I think it's really obviously an important time. Art school is great.

It helped me out a lot, but for me it was kind of good to go back a little and be like: What do I really like? What changed me and was the stuff I had that experience with, rather than trying to push forward some idea, maybe to sound smarter or more grown up or intellectual. I want to, I wanna see me like that, but it's not really me. I'm not like into math or something. You know what I mean? I'm not gonna make art about something that makes me seem smart.

JS: Yeah, yeah. Totally. (..) a friend of mine told me (..) sometimes other people know more about your art than you yourself and sometimes it's the other way around. Both ways are okay, you know?!

WS: Yeah, I know. I know what you mean. I actually try to listen to people as much as I can about what they think about it. A lot of people have tons of different ideas about what people are doing, what I'm doing, what they're doing, and everything and there's no right or wrong. Someone told me, who I really respected, that what I was doing, was making drawings of drawings, which I like. There's something about the drawings, that remind you of some other drawing, and that's kind of where it really comes from.

JS: That's nice and also, like, what you said, so many people say something about it maybe, but there is only some of them, you care about what they are saying.

WS: Yeah, totally.

JS: That's also something, I didn't come up with, but just learned while studying art. I wonder if we talk about fashion now..

WS: Sure.

JS: Yeah, because I found out about you through *Lou Dallas'* work.

WS: Right.

JS: I read about her in an article and then was pretty much obsessed.. I think it was in *Fashionista*. Anyways you collaborated with her on some levels. As far as I know you painted on shoes

WS: Uh huh

JS: You made airbrush on pants

WS: Uh huh

JS: and you also did drawings which then were embroidered

WS: Uh huh

JS: I don't know if you did the embroidery yourself

WS: Unh unh

JS: ..that's maybe the part she did. I think it's beautiful what you guys do together. I was wondering how did you get to know each other, how do you work together and will it continue?

WS: We know each other through mutual friends, like from the art world and sort of New York world. We met circa three years ago. She did a little pop up show in a gallery my wife was working at at the time. And that's kind of where I first saw it (Lou's work). She went to art school, and a lot of our other friends went to art school, went to RISD (Rhode Island School of Design). I did two shows, one in Manhattan and one in Brooklyn, around the same time. She came, saw the stuff that I was drawing and was just like: Hey, would you want to talk about working together? And I was like: Absolutely! We speak to the same universe I think. We started working that summer. I think it was summer of 2017. And yeah, I made drawings based off of her ideas, what the show was going to be about and I drew on shoes for that one. I drew a couple of hats. I drew on the clothes and she embroidered them.

And then there was machine embroidered stuff and there was also printed drawings on the clothes. That was our biggest collaboration. (ed. note: The collection is called *Sod Walker*) Since then, I help out with whatever she needs for her shows. I do a lot of airbrushing with my artwork. She'll bring clothes and I airbrush whatever she needs or draw on whatever she needs. We also worked on logos together... I had dinner with her last night and we were talking about doing stuff. So I think that we will continue to work together. I hope. I really enjoy working with her.

I like not putting a cap on what can be done with the drawings... also how she works, I think it's all kind of connected. You know, she came from a painting background as well. She's an artist. Like first and foremost, I think. Working together was always pretty seamless and I learned so much working with her. For this last show I airbrushed on pants, a couple of shirts and drew on some of the models for the show. (ed. note: This collection is called *Saturn's bite*)

JS: Did you see the show?

WS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I was there. I drew on the models right before they started walking and they kept on throwing people for me to draw on...

JS: and were like: Aah don't touch it!

WS: Yeah, people started getting a little bit sweaty and so the marker didn't work anymore, but it was fine and they looked great.

JS: I was just thinking, that your style has this drippiness and that it would have been funny, as part of the show, if it really started to drip..that the color is still wet...

WS: Uh huh, oh, yeah, that'd be awesome.

JS: Yesterday I was like, my gosh, no way: you also worked together with *Women's History Museum*...

WS: We did. They put together a book for their third show and for all the models they created avatars or pretty much like aliens...(ed. note: Will made illustrations for that book)

JS: What about *Fagin* ?

(ed. note: *Fagin* is the name of an artwork of Will and *Women's History Museum*, the name has no correlation to the figure by Charles Dickens)

WS: *Fagin* was a work we did together for my show at Cleopatra's in Brooklyn. For that one, I wanted to make an oversized butterfly pillow, to create a sculptural aspect... And so I talked to Amanda and Mattie about it, who do *Women's History Museum* and they were like: We're already making pillows right now. And that would be awesome...they're making a small butterfly pillow it turned out and so we decided to make it and then draw on it together; all these doodles. That was part of the show with other artworks that I had. So it was this collaboration and then they used that same artwork later for their solo show at the gallery, at Gavin Brown's (Enterprise) and it actually got sold, I think, at that show. So yeah, it was in two shows.

JS: Amazing! What about the next years, do you wanna go on with that mix of tattooing, drawing and working with fashion people, like what about the music? Do you want to concentrate on something?

WS: Um, I've been pretty equal at this point on making paintings, tattooing, I play music with a couple of other artists and working with Rafi who does Lou Dallas, all this pretty seamlessly. It doesn't feel I do one thing more than the other. I mean painting for me is really nice, because it's this thing that I kind of meditate off on by

myself. Tattooeing is really nice, because it is a collaboration with people and I just like tattooeing and I liked that it works, and it's how I make money you know... and then with the fashion stuff, I love seeing it on clothes and I love working with Rafi and I love evolving with her vision and the music thing too. I love playing music and I love music. So I don't really see myself focusing on anything more or less. (...) But yeah, where I'm at right now seems like a hustle or something, but it's really not, it's just what I'm doing right now and it feels good. I don't want to be a fashion person, I don't necessarily want to be an art person and I don't necessarily wanna be a tattoo person or like a musician or something like that. It's not that I would be upset, if I was known for one specific thing, but I just don't think that I am one specific thing in that way, where I want to focus on one specific.

JS: I think you are so lucky, because like, from my perspective... I got bored you know, with only being an artist and showing my work in a gallery or in an exhibition space, that's why I turned into fashion, cause it's so much more exciting when people wear your stuff, you don't know where it goes, who's wearing it, you know, it's moving. And also with the tattoo it's maybe a bit the same... I don't know how you feel about exhibitions, when I like the artist, I love to contemplate in a gallery, but it doesn't happen too often. I think with your work it would work, because it's a world and you get sucked in there...

WS: I like different things about all the different worlds. I really love the fashion world, I really love the art world and the tattoo world and the music world in a lot of different ways. Yeah, I mean, it is interesting, I don't really think as much maybe as I should about what it is that I'm actually doing, I just do it. With the tattoos it's just, they are not really archival. I could do a tattoo and the person can get it removed, they could die or they could move somewhere and you never see them again (...). It really does leave you in a lot of ways. With clothing you can get it back, it can be saved and stored. All in all, also with the painting, I think they are all connected, it's one thing. I like to think that it is. But they all have to be dealt with sensitively in different ways.

JS: Yeah, it's interesting when you have fashion, then you see the whole world, I mean mostly the whole person and when I see the portraits of the tattoos it's only the tattoo but not the whole person, nobody knows about the story, why that person got that tattoo... Do you like when people share why they want to have that tattoo?

WS: I think usually people don't have too much of a story... a lot of people I tattoo tend to let the tattoo have its own mythology. They don't really like to put too much pressure on why they're getting it, more or less just because they want to have it and there doesn't need to be like over explanation for it. For me, the main thing is that you WANT to get tattooed and once you want it, you can go with your intuition and your gut (...). I try to be as sensitive as I possibly can with what different people want and like and what they would like for a really long time (...), sensitive in offering something that is unique but also universal enough so it won't be something that kind of fades away. At the end of the day, it is a flower that I'm tattooeing, it is a spiderweb that I am tattooeing, you know what I mean? I am not really trying something out, these things have been tattooed over and over again. These are the things that have been painted over and over again. People know, that a flower is more important than anything else... it just is, or I think so. It's not something so out of the ordinary, even though it is unique.

JS: Totally, I was just like going through, you know, my friends and I either know people who get something tattooed from their artwork or have this special moments in life and they want to capture them. That's why I thought, tattooing mostly starts with something that has a meaning for someone...I got two more tattoo questions.

WS: Sure.

JS: Okay. Cool. I read about the shop (ed. note: *Fun City Tattoo*) you're working for now, three years and it's a very famous shop. It began with Jonathan Shaw tattooing in his living room in the 70s because it was forbidden to do it legally. And then he opened his shop in the 80s. And it was a very counterculture vibe in the East Village, which obviously changed now, or it seems alternative but it is bobo. How did you get to that shop and did the aura play a role in your decision to work there?

WS: Oh, yeah, I mean, I had ideas on where I thought I should work, where I wanted to work, and what that shop for me to work would be, but it's not how it turned out and I ended up not having much of a say in where I was working. But now, when I look back on it, it's like: Oh yeah, this is the shop that I was supposed to work at; this shop makes the most sense for me. I live in the neighborhood and I grew up coming to the East Village and it has this pretty rich history of what you were saying, with music and fashion, especially St Mark's, it's gone through a lot of changes and it's still the same in a lot of ways. *Fun City*, I am really into how small it is and the owner of the shop is from New York and really cares about it. I've learned a lot from him. The first day I worked there, I was doing walk-ins, and some lady, I love telling the story, this lady came in on her lunch break. She was getting her second tattoo. She was getting something like a script name and I was like: Oh, do you have any other tattoos? That's a question I usually ask people to get a general idea of what I am about to do and she was like: Oh, yeah, I got my first tattoo here in 86 and I got it on my lunch break. And I decided to get my second tattoo here. I think that's amazing, that something is still there, it's still standing and that someone can look back and be like: Oh, I just go there again. There's a lot of people that have been going there since then. And Jonathan Shaw was like, a really, really cool character that was definitely a big part of the neighborhood for a really long time and I think still is in a lot of ways...

JS: You know him?

WS: Yeah

JS: He comes by sometimes?

WS: Yeah, yeah totally. He sold to someone and then they sold to Steve, who's the owner now, but Steve apprenticed under Jonathan, and he's been tattooing there for 19 years. (...) I don't know where *Fun City* came from, besides the fact that I think that people used to call Alphabet City, Fun City and New York City, Fun City, but there's also a really famous sex club that, I think, I heard Kathy Acker and her boyfriend worked at, doing sex performances, a couple years before this *Fun City* opened and that was called Fun City. So, I love the name and it's got a really cool history... so thinking back on it now, it does make sense that I ended up working there.

JS: Just because I see some of your tattoos, do you know how many artists have tattooed you?

WS: I am not really sure, but maybe 10 to 15. I've gotten most of my tattoos in New York, from people that are traveling to New York, that are from here or that moved here. Being in New York, there are a lot of people that travel here, so it makes it easy to get tattooed by a lot of people. But when I lived in New Jersey, I got tattooed by the same two people for a couple of years.

Most people at other places have their person that they get tattooed by, because they work there and they don't travel. My boss is really a tattooer where people go to him and they just go to him, where he's like the guy to go to

JS: You feel like you're finished with getting tattoos?

WS: No, not finished, but I definitely slowed down a lot, when I started tattooing a lot. I got tattooed pretty recently. It's kind of few and far between, since I do it all the time. It comes in waves for me when I want to get tattooed. I think that's a pretty real thing, people get tattooed really quick. I definitely got tattooed really quick. I got tattooed from age 17 to 24 a lot, because I was at a certain point where I really wanted to learn about it, so I needed to get tattoos. I needed to see them getting done, needed to see how people treat me...

JS: Yeah.

WS: Also, I just like them.

JS: Yeah, thank you.

WS: Yeah, good. Yeah. Cool.