

# ASSASSINATION: Matt Jones, Artist Represented by Buia Gallery



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by qi peng, [Salt Lake City Fine Arts Examiner](#)



Matt Jones in his Bushwick studio, February 2009. Photo credit of Kadar Brock.

THE ART ASSASSIN strikes again with his second hit here. This one is a lot more fascinating and perhaps difficult as interviewing a close friend has much emotional meaning in my heart. Alas, I hope that you have a blast reading this one.

[Matt Jones](#), who is a young artist with a developed and mature style, is represented currently by [Buia Gallery](#), one of the hippest and most cutting edge galleries in Chelsea. With his provocative style, Jones has a brilliant craftsmanship that combines the personal subject under the magnifying glass of an impersonal technique which has a unique fingerprint within the contemporary art world that tends to be cookie cutter.

THE ART ASSASSIN decides to drop in and chat up a rather nice storm with Jones (who is a close friend of [Kadar Brock](#), another New York artist whom I will be interviewing later).

For more information about Matt Jones' work for purchase, contact Buia Gallery at (212) 366-9915 or at [info@buiagallery.com](mailto:info@buiagallery.com).

Here are the details of the official hit on [Matt Jones](#) for the record:

**qi peng: How did you get interested in art during your early years? Which things attracted you to entering this world?**

Matt Jones: Drawing was a way out of boredom as a kid. My mom told me that when I was two years old I started drawing all the time. The thing that was attractive then is attractive now: direct expression.

**qi peng: Who are your biggest influences from an artistic standpoint? Were there any memorable experiences during your time at [Cooper Union School of Art](#) and [Yale Summer School](#)?**

Matt Jones: [Martin Kippenberger](#), [Francesco Goya](#), and [Edvard Munch](#) are the most important art historical figures to my practice currently. [Josh Smith](#)'s current show at [Luhring Augustine](#) is a big help, too.

At Cooper I had a series of great professors that nudged me along my path, [Doug Ashford](#), [Bobby Bordo](#), [Stephen Ellis](#), and [Jacqueline Humphries](#). The two greatest influences on my work from that time were [David True](#) and [Drew Beattie](#). I went through several stages of figuring out who I was and what kind of artist I wanted to be. The professors at Cooper were completely supportive and challenging.

Stephen Ellis exploded at us in his class the day after the [Armory Show](#) weekend in 2000. None of my classmates, including me, went to the Armory and he let us know how irresponsible he thought that was. The following year I was in his class again and had a full Armory report for him, most of us did. None of us wanted to be scolded like that again.

Drew Beattie in particular kept feeding me information, things to read, shows to see. He was and continues to be very inspirational.

David True admitted after I had graduated that when I first started taking his class (a morning class) he'd look at the individual studio visit sign up sheet hoping I'd give him a break and he cursed as he saw that I'd signed up for 9.00AM again. The next slot filled in was for 11.00AM. I completely benefited from his mentoring and only feel vaguely guilty for getting him up two hours earlier than he would've been getting up otherwise. He always showed up with his game face on and braved through the coffee fueled morning hours only slightly begrudgingly.

[Sam Messer](#) was incredibly helpful at the Yale summer program. His attitude is fantastic. Very open, very expressive and free. He'd suggest things and get you working without you ever knowing he was helping you at all. He's a master. Even more than that it was the environment. Total rural setting with all of these eager young men and women willing to do whatever to get the creative juices flowing, to share ideas. It was the most intense summer of my life to date.

**qi peng: How did you get into touch with Vanessa Buia, who represents your work at her Chelsea gallery?**

Matt Jones: Vanessa and I met over two pitchers of [McSorley's Dark](#) at [Sophie's](#) (a bar on East Fifth Street in the East Village) with Kadar Brock. She visited my studio (a studio I shared with [Brock Enright](#), dubbed Terror Mansion due to it's unsavory history and appearance) in late 2004 and put on an exhibition of my work with Kadar's in 2005 called [Human After All](#). I've shown at Buia Gallery ever since.

**qi peng: How has exhibiting there help to develop your style, your subject matter, and your visualization of your paintings/works on paper within the white box gallery setting?**

Matt Jones: It's strange - I don't know if I've ever really thought about this. It's good to have a gallery, it focuses you, it's slightly unbelievable (who ever thinks they'll have a gallery to show paintings in, really?!), it's totally expected (I do!), and utterly amazing to see your work on the wall at a beautiful gallery in [Chelsea](#). It gave me a new kind of confidence, a sort of justification for the life style I wanted. It felt like I was official - "now I'm a real artist" sort of feeling. Maybe it felt like everything got more serious. Of course that energy changes into something else and progresses. It takes on new forms.

**qi peng: Your recent drawings from 2009 are a mixture of pencil on paper or marker on paper. Are you attracted to vibrant and surreal colors along with patterns? Also how are the viewers to relate this new series to your large scale paintings? What do you hope to achieve within this current series?**

Matt Jones: I'm attracted to all sorts of colors! I don't know that I understand color. It's interesting and tricky and difficult and fun to even attempt to get it. Patterns. Kadar and I were in my studio tonight talking about patterns and the different levels of patterning I'm involved in. The dots in the background, the pastoral scenes that repeat and end up being squiggles, the stripes, the jungle, etc. I've recently started painting contact sheets from the photo shoots I do for the paintings - so, 15 portraits will be on the same canvas

running an emotional gamut creating an emotional pattern (as well as an imagistic one). It's very exciting for me in the studio right now.

Drawings are usually work meant to inspire the paintings or to figure out things for the paintings. When I get stuck I fill sketchbooks and then start making larger drawings. Drawing is a way out of boredom and uncertainty. The colors, I'm using [AD Markers](#) for the first time to try them out. Trying a new material puts me out of my comfort zone and that's when my creativity and imagination get a bit more freedom to roam wild. I don't know what those drawings are yet.

The pencil drawings are of new people and old favorites - an expanded universe. They've sat through one of my photo-shoots. The sitter holds a card that has drawings of a very expressive cartoon cat and the cat has different expressions on his face. The sitter mimics the cat's expression or uses this expression as jumping off point, and I take the photo. The shoots can get pretty goofy because it's sometimes embarrassing for most people to open up like that, to have the attention focused on them.

Then I play with the photo in [Photoshop](#) and use the new Photoshopped photo to start drawing. The drawings lead to paintings. I think about painting the cat emotion sheet all the time. It's inevitable.

The new work is bringing in aspects of the recent past work and finding the patterns within them. It's curious that I started using patterns for the backgrounds of the paintings, to go behind the image and it ends up that I've been interested in different layers and conceptions of patterns all along. It all seems more complex and makes more sense to me. At the same time.

**qi peng: I was struck by your paintings when I first saw your show "[Everlasting](#)" last year and thought that they were large silkscreen paintings. When I dug deeper and found out about the painterly technique behind the first impression, I was touched profoundly by the use of what seems to be a "impersonal" technique of looks like high-contrast photography and/or silkscreening to rather personal subjects which include your friends. How do you balance these concerns between the personal life and the imagery from mass media? Do your themes include the concept of celebrity and perhaps its deconstruction?**

Matt Jones: I need to work with powerful imagery. That's why I use the emotion-card. That's why the photographs are broken down the way they are. The image needs to act like an icon, a powerful icon for happiness, sadness, excitement - iconified emotional experience. This allows me to spend my time figuring out which powerful image, which colors, what kind of marks will be made because the image takes care of itself. Selection of the right canvas becomes important. I got a great deal on these pre-stretched pre-gessoed linen canvases with tacks on the side. The weave of the linen is thick, something I imagined Kippenberger painting on. I have stacks of them. I paint and paint so that they pile up.

The impersonal is the initial image making technique, the use of photography and Photoshop. It's all pretty impersonal. Everything's impersonal if you don't know the person. The paintings should feel like I know the person, or that the person is known and not generic. You could know this person. Maybe you do. Sometimes I say there's no meaning as to why I use the people I use in my paintings. That's bulls---. I learn so much about the people I paint as I paint them. They're usually picked so I can understand something about them even if I don't know that's what I'm doing. Their faces become memorized, their expressive qualities are ingrained in my mind. My relationship with them isn't the same after I start painting them. My knowledge of them is different. It may not even be real - it could be total imagination. They become these characters in my mind - they become mine and I get to decide what they look like. It's never malicious. They're deciding what they look like whether they realize it or not. I'm just the guy with the brush.

They deserve to be beautifully painted and grand in scale. I'm interested in the idea of celebrity, sure, but for the same reason I stopped using comic book sources in my paintings, celebrity isn't mine. It's not my experience, I don't know it or live with it. I'm interested in it from a distance that informs how I interact with and appreciate the people in my life that I have profound love for. The tenderness I treat their images with is something I would never have expected.

**qi peng: Any influence from [Sigmar Polke](#), who paints painstakingly what is the illusion of raster dot/half-tone images onto canvas? How would you place yourself within the overall context of art history in terms of [pop art](#), [conceptual art](#), etc.?**

Matt Jones: Polke is a big influence, yes. When I was at Cooper I read every book I could find concerning his work. I identify with his attitude, too. He wants to make these paintings, right? And he wants them to have a look, a very specific look, so he uses the techniques he's explored to get that look. I want to paint my paintings - the painting of them is the thing, and I want them to have a certain LOOK. I want the image to be legible, I want it to have a certain amount of power and clarity. All of these ideas serve each other and with the right balance serve to make the best painting one can make. Polke is very good at this.

As far as history is concerned and my place in it: I think about this from time to time - I'd guess that most artists do. I don't know if it'll really matter in the end. I want as many people to experience my work as is possible. I want them to feel the paintings, to get them, to get why they are, to feel and think and enjoy them.

Pop art is influential to my practice. Conceptual Art, I've studied it some and at different times have been more or less into it. I don't get involved in institutional critique. Painting is where it's at for me. I want to see really good paintings and add to the pile of great work that's existed throughout human history. Paintings need presence. They need to be encountered as we encounter each other in conversation, as we enter into the lives of those we care about, etc. We need to build relationships. That's important.

**qi peng: Knowing that you are a huge fan of video games and [Guitar Hero](#), how do you see the world of your artwork impacted by the interactive nature of these types of games? Do you derive any inspiration from Guitar Hero when you paint or draw?**

Matt Jones: Guitar Hero takes a specific kind of attention. It's very focused. I don't play to just f--- around. I want to be really good. It's like this with all things I take on. Whenever I get into something I really get into it. It's all work and work is good. I dislike doing things in a half-assed manner and try not to get involved with things that I can't give my full attention. Getting good at something lets you get what you want out of it. Guitar Hero isn't that different from painting. There's a path before you and if you make the right moves you get what you want out of it. Songs are great for memories, too. [Norman Greenbaum](#)'s Spirit in the Sky is in [Rock Band 2](#) and it's one of my favorite songs to play in the game. I downloaded the track and listen to it on my [iPod](#). I was listening to it earlier and Jen walks in and says "oh that's the song [Tigger](#) (a male burlesque dancer, or boylesque dancer) dances to dressed up as a priest". Now that song has a new memory attached to it. There are [Nirvana](#) songs (especially [Drain You](#)) and [Pearl Jam](#) songs ([Alive](#)) in these games that trigger memories and playing them is like reliving and recreating your memory - participating in in the memory in a new way. That has everything to do with my painting. Taking something I know or remember and reshaping it with thought and imagination to develop an alternate version, a different dimensional variant of the original memory or thing.

**qi peng: What future direction do you hope to take your work into? Do you feel that the recession will have any impact on your subject matter, studio practice, or the art world in general?**

Matt Jones: For now I'm going to keep on trucking. I really just started after quite a painting dry spell of reading, seeing shows, and playing video games (which was reignited by drawing). My practice is like that. I'll work really intensely for four or five months and then take a month or two off to play video games (usually brought on by me running out of interest in the current body of work or an overfamiliarity with what I'm making and/or a new video game coming out that requires my attention - [Diablo 3](#) will probably do this when it drops later this year).

My hope is that the recession will clear out a lot of the junk art that's floating around. You know what I mean, the stuff that makes going to see shows a bummer sometimes. Walking away from a show thinking "really? That's what you thought you should make?", shaking your head slowly and wishing to go see a movie instead of heading back to the studio, hoping that you can avoid contributing to the superficial landfill you just walked out of. I don't think it will impact my subject matter because I'm just starting, I'm just realizing what it is that I've wanted to do for so long - finally tying it all together! Unless the recession tears it all apart again... even then I'd have a blast reassembling it or building something new. When I was in my break/research/videogame mode I wondered if my paintings would be darker but as you see with the new marker drawings it's just not the case. It's all a cycle. Life is filled with cycles. Birth, death, repeat. It's

not restricted to our understanding of life. It's even bigger than we imagine, the cycle. We're going to see some quality art coming out because we need it now, we demand it. The recession will be a good catalyst for a rebirth.

**qi peng: What is a typical day within the Matt Jones studio like? Do you ever feel that you have to paint out of necessity or discipline or is it mostly out of your emotional willingness to enter into the studio?**

Matt Jones: Typical day in the studio: I get to the studio pretty early, 8.00AM is usually the goal. I assess the situation, see what I've got to do, turn on [NPR](#) (which I listen to all day unless it's a weekend and then I have to turn it off from noon to 4.00PM because I can't make myself like or listen to [Jonathan Schwartz](#)), and get to work. I paint or draw or edit photos until around 1.00PM. At that time I go to this great Mexican joint for their \$5 lunch special, then I come back and continue working until around 6. That's a good day.

Going to the studio is habit and need. It has an affect on me if I don't go in. Sometimes I'm really excited to go in and get work done. Sometimes I get distracted and call it a day early and head to the Met or go for a long bike ride or watch a movie. It varies. Really it's all the same thing or leads to the same thing. Presently I'm in a "can't wait to go to my studio" mode. It's excellent.

**qi peng: Any opinions on art magazines, art blogs, or art fairs in general?**

Matt Jones: I don't read art magazines much unless they're about something I'm specifically interested in, an artist I love, or someone recommends something. The same with art blogs. There's some interesting discussion going on but it takes too much to get involved beyond certain specific issues. Getting caught up in that would take away from time spent on my work. I go to a lot of shows and am a member to all the great art museums in the city (I feel like it's an artist's responsibility). A lot of my time is spent with art books (I'm very proud of my collection). I'll read anything [Schjeldahl](#) or [Saltz](#) write. I like reading [Roberta Smith](#)'s reviews. [Matthew Collings](#) is another favorite.

Art fairs are like working out your eyes, mind, and heart. They're all over the place but one really must go to them if they're in your area. It's hard to not attend the Armory Show every year. There's just so much one could see.

**qi peng: Also, on a more lighthearted note, do you have any favorite musicians, artists, and/or stuff you would like to recommend to us?**

Matt Jones: I listen to a lot of 90s rock like Nirvana, [Smashing Pumpkins](#), [NIN](#), [Tool](#), [Deftones](#), [Rage Against the Machine](#), Pearl Jam, etc. and a lot of electronic music like [Proem](#), [Aphex Twin/AFX](#), [Clark](#), [Autechre](#). [The Sword](#) is a favorite newer band. I've been listening to a lot of [Muse](#) and [System of a Down](#), as well as the [Analord](#) tracks. My taste is all over the place. The music I grew up listening to is still in heavy rotation on my iPod. Right now it's [Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness](#).

**qi peng: Do you have any advice for aspiring BFA or MFA graduates who are trying to make it into the big leagues such as the New York or Los Angeles (or any large city for that matter)?**

Matt Jones: Don't let anything stop you from making your work. If you let things stop you then you shouldn't worry about it. Maybe you aren't an artist, and that's totally OK. Working a 40 hour week at a job and then working six hours nightly after work and all weekend is how you build your practice. It's not going to pay for itself. You have to work and you have to make work. Your ideas need to continue to develop. Forget what you think being an artist means and focus on making work. Go to museums, go to any show you can, read books you like, read books you aren't interested in. Try EVERYTHING. Talk to people about your work as often as you can and LISTEN to what other people say about their work. Be sincere and honest with yourself and those around you.

There's a thought that creeps up on me when I doubt myself. I've actually dreamed it a couple of times. It's kind of a perverse evil fantasy:

I'm 45 years old, sitting in an arm chair with a can of beer. I'd long since quit making art or thinking about art. My kids toys lay all over the carpeted room I'm in (I strongly dislike carpeting), there are stains in the floor. The TV's on but I haven't actually paid attention to the millions of hours of TV I'd watched in ages. There's this nagging feeling as I sit there that I've wasted my life, that I could've done something more, participated in a more positive way, jumped outside the normal day to day into the exceptional and I missed it. I f---ed up.

The thought-dream always ends with the beer can hitting the floor and me walking out my already open front door into the brightest light you can imagine.

**qi peng: Your fellow Cooper Union graduate artist Kadar Brock and you had some wonderful experiences exhibiting together. What was it like to be amongst friends? Any cool stories you wish to share about the fun times?**

Matt Jones: Kadar used to have this crazy apartment in a gated community on [Atlantic Avenue](#) in [Bed-Stuy](#). We formed this group called 1980 (we were all born in and around that date) and we'd have group critiques in our studios and put on these shows with other artists we were friendly with (some from Cooper, some from the Yale Summer program, some from the scene) under the title The Atlantic Conference. His front room was huge and gallery-like so we invited everyone to hang art and curated a couple of shows there, having a big party to celebrate each one. We needed people to see our work so it wasn't just us looking at it all the time.

Having a good peer group is one of the most important things a young artist can do. Don't live an isolated life. You need to make work and you need perspective as to how people view what you're making. Feedback, you really need feedback. It's also crucial to know what other people are looking at, reading, making. It can only help your practice.

Coming up with the exhibition card for [Human After All](#) was a particularly fun experience. Kadar and I wanted our paintings on the card and we both wanted it to be different/interesting. We started brainstorming. The second half of our tenure as students at Cooper we, along with Mark Gibson and [Brian Dulaney](#), discovered we were all [Magic: the Gathering](#) players. We played a lot then. So on the card we decided to reference that time in our lives (it really was conducive to our imaginations and creativity and even led to some M:TG related paintings in 2002 out of my studio) and we played M:TG for the card with our paintings behind us. We asked Vanessa to be in the photo off to the side on her phone making some business deals. She was great at it! Having the whole team in the photo was important. [Mary Mattingly](#) shot the photo at our request. She's a great photographer. We met at the Yale summer program and continue to be great friends. It was a totally pleasurable experience.

**qi peng: Where are some places that you would enjoy traveling to? Any other art hot spots that you dream of visiting?**

Matt Jones: I'd love to do a residency or spend some time in lots of places. My center now is very much in New York, in Brooklyn. Jen and I took a trip to Berlin and it was fantastic. I'd love to spend more time there, make some work there. Mexico City looks interesting. LA was a little stressful for a New Yorker but I could see myself getting used to chilling out very easily - the weather is so goddamn nice! I want to go to Spain, to the [Prado](#). Ireland/Scotland are big musts for me ([Giant's Causeway](#)). For a while at Cooper I was obsessed with [Freemasonry](#) and the [Knights Templar](#), reading every book I could on the subject, so I'd love to visit [Rennes-le-Château](#) and the surrounding landscape.

**qi peng: What is your opinion on technology within the art world? Do you think that painting is influenced heavily by the technological advances we have, ranging from the iPod to the [Blackberry](#)?**

Matt Jones: Technology has and will continue to advance at a pace far beyond our own mental, emotional, and spiritual evolution. It's incredibly rapid the way technology progresses. I think we haven't caught up with it yet in the art world. The best use of technology beyond traditional oil on canvas painting that I've seen was Josh Smith's pasted on print outs in his current show. He's taking slightly pixelated images and printing them very large on one sheet at a time, creating a kind of mosaic, on the surface that from a distance looks like a painted image. This is further confused by the actual painted paintings and the collage plus paint paintings also in the show. This is the [NES](#) 8-bit system to today's technology's [PS3](#), sure - Smith slowed down, took technology that was within his reach and applied it in a way that he understood and that served his practice.

I look forward to what technology will bring to art but I'm not anxious about it. I'm against using technology for technology's sake. Where's the art in that? That sounds like science and art isn't science.

I totally love my iPod and my Blackberry.