

Whether it's with drawing, music, or personal relationships, Mazen Kerbaj has a code. This is my take on it.

GOING ADRIFT

It always starts with a drop of ink; a line; a face; a word; a note; a conversation. He throws it in hurriedly, anxious to get started. Sometimes he even kicks off with both hands at once. There's work to be done, life's too short to be milling about. This seemingly precarious first move starts a chain reaction with an infinite number of possible endings. Shortly, the man is possessed, feverish with drive. He is oozing ink and sweat, frantically reaching for another piece of paper. Hell any surface will do! Drizzle on it obscene amounts of liquid forming unidentifiable textures and shapes. And if that's not enough – it never *is* enough – add more stuff, different paints, alcohol, mix water with oil; do everything you have been told not to. What now? Tools, of course: the most exquisite natural bristle brush, the clumpy nylon hair of his daughters' broken doll, and anything in between as long as it does the trick. Just as long as it spreads the ink in that particular way over the surface, stretching the mark and the borders of the medium with it. Anything and everything will do, just as long as it opens up new possibilities.

DWELLING IN THE CHAOS

Mazen Kerbaj is not Jackson Pollock. All this 'action painting' was just the beginning. Now whatever space he occupies is covered with drawings, the tabletops, walls, and floor. If only he were a few inches taller, he would not have spared the ceiling. In the performative installation *Don't feed the artist* (first shown in Brussels, 2009), Kerbaj exposes his work process by sitting for days in a glass room in which he draws continuously and posts the results on the glass walls facing outwards for visitors to see. He immerses himself in his illustrated world and contemplates. The frenzy subsides giving way to reflection, and simply, to looking. Picture a person willingly taking an unidentified drug and earnestly waiting to experience the effect it will yield. 'Let's see what will happen,' he says on the brink of every new endeavor. What happens is that characters emerge, situations present themselves, and narratives sprout. Effortlessly, Kerbaj begins to converse with them. He negotiates with both the content and the form, persuading each to yield to the other. How this loud foul-mouthed megalomaniac is able to command such sensitivity is breathtaking. It is the same with his trumpet playing. He could be screeching through a rubber hose, while delicately balancing textural nuances of tone with his circular breathing. His intricate manipulations expose an intimate relationship with the medium. For one, you will never encounter him unarmed; he usually moves about with his custom made leather bag designed to fit a compact arsenal of pens, brushes, inks and notebooks. Without the bag, he will always have at least the most basic tool: his trusted brush pen. Compact, self-sufficient, and versatile enough to stealthily render bold marks as well as intricately thin strokes. For two, there is practically no context that he finds incongruous with drawing. We've seen him bring out his notebook at formal dinners, live concerts, the beach, anywhere really. This mix of continuous honing of skill coupled with a readiness to explore new grounds through experimentation is Kerbaj's tour de force.

BRINGING IT HOME

Finally, it is tying everything together that sets Kerbaj's work apart from the aimlessness that is often associated with anything experimental. His piercing wit, fierce self-critique and contagious dark humor come to the fore. With seeming effortlessness, he brings the ink strokes and blobs to life. Nothing illustrates this point better than the live animation project *Wormholes* with his longtime collaborator musician Sharif Sehnaoui. Drawing – I'm using the word loosely – on transparent surfaces that are videotaped and projected, Kerbaj takes us through a journey that sets off in a sea of liquid abstraction. And just as

we start to revel in the spectacle and get immersed in Sehnaoui's hypnotic music, a lonely ship appears.

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