



Brain Drain

## Mark Gonzales Hasn't Had a Smartphone for 5 Years (and Counting)

We talked to the downtown skate legend and artist on how he mentally prepares for success, why comedy is high art, and why life is way better without a phone.

By Noah Johnson

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When I meet Mark Gonzales at his studio on Canal Street in Chinatown he's painting. He has a show opening at HVW8 in Los Angeles in two days. Fifty paintings have already been shipped across

the country, and the final few are being finished now before Mark, his wife, and their 3-year-old daughter fly out the following morning.

That's a lot of paintings. "Yeah," he says as he sketches in pencil the outline of smiling cartoon blocks, "I hope they hang them all."

It's a bright and warm spring day and Gonzales, who is a visionary professional skateboarder, and at 48 remains one of the most influential skaters in the world, seems content to be in the studio with the natural light pouring down onto his work, surrounded by styrofoam bowls of paint and gear from his sponsors—Adidas Skateboarding, Supreme, and his own skate brand, Krooked. The figure at the center of the painting he's working on, Gonzales says, is the tyrannical Roman Emperor Nero, famous for many atrocities including the execution of his own mother (Gonzales did not divulge that historical nugget—I found it myself on Nero's Wikipedia page). Nero appears in many of his new paintings, Gonzales says, as does another historic figure known for a Roman execution: Jesus Christ.

I ask him why he's chosen to paint Jesus. "I have no idea," he says. Are you religious? "I was baptized. I made my first communion. But I wouldn't say I'm religious. It's crazy because those Romans were pretty nasty with the Christians. Nero would just tie people to stakes and set them on fire." No matter, the show is titled Fower Plower (which becomes obvious when you see it: there are lots of flowers in the paintings).



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I came to talk to Mark about mental stuff. I want him to tell me about his frustrations, anxieties, inspirations, the sources of his creativity, the secrets to finding Zen amidst the discord of modern life. But Mark doesn't seem to be self-reflexive in a way that would be conducive to such a conversation. He's focused on the moment at hand. He doesn't seem to be nervous about his upcoming show, or hurried to get paint on the several blank canvases in the studio. If anything, his biggest concern right now is picking up his daughter from school, which, his wife assures him, doesn't have to happen just yet.

### **GQ Style: Do you have a routine? What's a typical day like for you?**

**Mark Gonzales:** I kinda have a routine, I take my daughter to school. That's my duty. She's three. I do that every day. And then after that I get some time to do art. It's less skateboarding now, I wish it was more skating. As I'm getting older. Skating is a lot of fun but after doing it as long as I have—you have to see a unique spot or have a desire. It's competitive. Like: This other skater who's a little bit older than me, he's someone I looked up to, he's done a trick where he slides around the bowl. It's similar to a street skating trick because he slides so far, and he slides around the whole bowl. It looks so fun so I want to do it—but I don't want to do it the same way as him. I want to do it frontside, which to some seems more difficult, to me I think it'd be easier. That's what motivates me, just to try to outdo him.

### **Who is it?**

Steve Caballero. He's been winning all the contests too—the seniors contests. But I don't want to enter a contest. I just want to nail him with that one trick.

### **So healthy competition keeps you motivated?**

Well, yeah, or a unique spot. The closest bowl that's pretty good is in Bay Ridge, so I go out there. That's why it's a little difficult. I'll be in the mood to do a super long boardslide at like four in the morning. I can't go out to Bay Ridge at four in the morning. It's a bit different. If I have



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an art idea or a drawing or a story or something I want to convey that's not skating it's a little easier to do.

**Do you often find that inspiration strikes you at four in the morning?**

Oh, for sure. Everybody's asleep. That's when you're allowed to be creative. Because when people are awake, you know, there's people watching you. No matter where you are. You might think that you're in a private area and there's still somebody that can see your shadow and say, what's that shadow doing. Once everybody's asleep, it's a creative person's sanctuary.



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**Skateboarding is famously frustrating. I know from experience and from watching videos, skaters are always having these psychological meltdowns because they can't land a trick. I was thinking about that part in the Supreme video Cherry where you and Jason Dill and skating together and both losing your shit.** Yeah, well, Dill is famous for losing his temper. But everybody does. Sometimes in your mind you're like, I can't wait to do this. It's so perfect. I won't kill myself. But then I get there and it doesn't work. It's frustrating and humiliating. I can remember being young and having pros that I looked up to and watching them freak out and I was like, whoa, this is supposed to be fun. What's going on here?

**You don't have a phone or any social media, what does that do for you?**

I don't know... I think it's been a solid year maybe and I don't even recognize it.

[Gonzales's wife Tia who is sitting on the couch nearby holds up all five fingers of her hand.]

Five years? Wow, that's a long time. I didn't realize it's been that long. My eyes are open. I'm listening and watching people all the time. I'm more in touch with the pulse of the city and the people rather than being on social media. You see some people pick their heads up from their phones and you can read their facial expressions and you can monitor what they were looking at, or at least in your own mind you can imagine what kind of message was coming through the phone.

**I think the phone, since it's always on you, can be a source of anxiety and sometimes brings a lot more problems for people than it's worth.**

I used to love to crank call people. I like the Jerky Boys and shit.



**Yeah, you can't really do that now because no one even calls anymore and you can't really prank text someone. It doesn't have the same impact.**

I haven't even realized it's been five years. But I got really addicted to the iPad. You know they have that app where you can draw with your finger? And I honestly think my iPad art is better than David Hockney's. I'm serious. His iPad art is weak.

### **So why'd you give it up?**

Because I'd be on the train with my daughter and she's in the stroller and she'd be sitting there and I'd be on my iPad. You can't do that! You gotta take care of your kid. You have to pay attention to your children. You can't be on your phone or your iPad. And another thing, because I had to be home with my wife and my child I couldn't go out and skate in the middle of the night, so then I would just animate skateboard tricks. I would come up with a trick in my head or I'd see a spot and rather than going there and doing the trick I'd just animate it. And I'd get the satisfaction. My wife pointed it out to me, she said, you didn't do it, you only made an animation. It was a hard reality.



**Being disconnected from social media must keep you out of the loop a bit with everything happening in current events and politics. How do you keep up with what's going on in the world?**

One of the worst things is that most of the public phones don't work very well. That sucks. That's one of my major problems. And I'm riding in cabs because I take taxis a lot, so I watch the news in the cab. And then I read the signs in the metro. The ads. Divorce court and stuff like that. There's all kinds of stuff. "Be a good New Yorker." "If you see something say something." "Please don't litter on the tracks." My news is visual news. Our society, though it relies on smart phones, it's not like they're going to take away street signs. From ancient Rome until now there are things that will never change. You still need sewage, you still need fresh water. So my news is just whatever's on the walls, public announcements in train stations and taxis. If I walk to where the Trump Tower is I see all the cops. I don't have a phone and I don't know what's going on, but I see and I listen to what they're saying. It's a bit funny when someone asks me about something like I should know about it and I don't know, and say, I have no idea what you're saying to me. I don't know what you're saying to me, really.

**Humor always seems to be a part of what you do. Do you look to comedy a lot of inspiration?**

Comedy truly is mainstream society's high art. The comedians. They're out there. They're the ones out there with a shield and a sword. They're the real artists speaking to the people, rather than Jeff Koons, you know. I'm not trying to put Jeff Koons down, but people that go to work everyday and work really hard, I think the artist should speak to them. Art should be created for them, not for a small select group. It's holy, you either go to church or you make art. Sam Kinison was a preacher, you know, and he's a super funny dude. Art is holy.

**Do you have other habits and practices other than skating and making art that keeps it all together for you?**

Keeping my wife happy. We're very happy. We have a lot of fun. We spend time near where she grew up—in Massachusetts by the ocean.

I've learned how to sail. That's been great. I want to do that more. There's so much stuff to do in the world.

**How do you manage the right balance between work and life?**

It's baffling. I found that if I spend time with my daughter like take her swimming and do stuff with her, somehow I end up having more time, rather than not going home and working all night. It works better. Right now I was just worried that maybe we gotta go pick her up soon.



**What do you tell young people who look up to you and aspire to be like you?**

I want them to teach me how to pop higher. [Laughs.] There's always more to learn but I've always found that if you want to learn something new you have to research it. You have to understand where it came from. If you want to do something new you have to look at the past. You have to see. I have to go to the library because the internet isn't able to give me the information I want about surfing, about the Polynesian culture. I want to read the stories about the folklore of the Hawaiians.



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## Have you been surfing much?

My wife got me surf lessons last year, so I know how to surf now. I tried surfing for so long and was never really able to do it until I had an instructor. He said, what are you rushing for? Just slow down, dude. Pay attention to the water.

