



Mark Gonzales

City Dreaming

Posted Wednesday 2nd May 2007 /

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Photography © Joe Brook

Ckate legend Mark Gonzales radiates with imagination.

I've never liked the idea of meeting one of my heroes face to face. I mean, following years and years of adoration, disappointment seems almost inevitable. I can see myself nervously approaching one of my idols, engaging in an overly topical conversation before breaking down and telling them about how they once saved my life when the world was a giant sea of shit swallowing me whole. But just as I get to the gut-wrenching details of my story, he or she goes ahead and snubs me at the ring of a blackberry, leaving me to stand with the newfound opinion that my one-time hero is now the biggest dick in the world.

Such scenario would completely soil any perception of my favourite person's greatness. Hence my first and single most important journalistic

rule: 'Never interview someone who I am fanatical about'. That way, if one of my interview subjects treats me like shit or blows me off, no big deal — I didn't like the fucker that much anyway.

I followed this unspoken principle religiously for years up until recently, when I got word that I'd be meeting Mark Gonzales, one of my all-time favourite skateboarders and artists. Oh, fuck.

The landmark meeting takes place at a Chinatown café, in New York, at around 10am. I am halfway through my third espresso when I hear a loud clank on the window and turn to see the Gonz himself locking his bike in a position that might make it less worthy of stealing. He walks in and nods, slightly out of breath. "I didn't chain my bike up, do you think it's safe?" he asks sheepishly. It should be fine, I say, since we'll probably be on our way soon.

Tucked under his arm is a brand-new Vision Mark Gonzales mini, one that would undoubtedly cost a goddamned fortune on eBay. It's garnished with vintage Tracker SixTrack Ultralite trucks and back wheels that grotesquely mismatch the front ones. The front truck holds two big, soft wheels, 65mm or so, while the back grips two 38mm ATM wheels – obviously left over from Mark's mid-nineties company. 'How on earth is he going to ride this thing?' I wonder. I study the *Mad Max*-looking set-up in bewilderment as Gonzales thumbs away obsessively on his sidekick in between sipping tap water.

Five seconds on the street and Mark is already drawing stares, despite not yet standing on his board. I don't quite understand why, but Mark's character seems to hold a magnetism that is completely alien to me. "I want to get on top of that, do you think I can do it?" he says, pointing at a giant brick wall. I nod, but internally I shrug and say, 'No fucking way'. He stammers back, giving himself some running space, runs and somehow effortlessly scales his way to the top. I am amazed.

Pacing back and forth atop the dangerously high and thin wall, he mugs at those down below. A child and her mother walk by, looking up. The little girl points towards the man on the wall and asks, "How did he get up there?" Mark smiles down at the girl and quickly shoots back, "I flew up here." The child grins as if she had just witnessed the doing of a super hero.

We're on our way to meet Mark's assistant, who's going to drive us to an empty pool in Harlem so Mark can get a few photos shot. En route, we stop at another café. I ask if there are times when he actually gets sick of skating. "I'm usually keeping it fresh," he says. "I'll use a different board. Like the

board I'm riding today is made by Vision a long time ago. I'm gonna ride this board and I think it'll be a lot of fun."

At thirty-eight, Mark still skates hard, but in the traditional, somewhat irreverent style he's known for. He breaks things down to their simplest form as he explains the type of skating he likes. "Most of the times when I skate it's usually super fast and it's to get to a location. If we're missing something for dinner, like if we need onions or cheese, then I rush out to get the food. And that's probably the funnest," he says. "If I go out just to skate, it's usually to learn a new trick."

We cross block after block as we head further and further across town. As the cars speed by and the controlled chaos of the city erupts in every direction, Mark's face remains calm and unfazed. "I want to learn pressure flips," he says. "I was kind of out of skating around that time. I was doing a lot of artwork. I'd like to heelflip pressure flip. Like ease up off your toe and put the pressure on your heel."

For Gonzales, the limits of possibility simply do not exist. And that's probably why he's inspired generation after generation with his skating. Our conversation about learning tricks reminds me about his recent documented attempts at kickflipping on a bike — an act that is seemingly impossible. But is it? "I think I can make it. I haven't gotten very close at all. Mentally I've always been real close but physically I've always been real far away from it. The reason I think I'm getting close is some of my friends think I've totally lost it. So that's why I think I'll be close to making it soon. It's always when you're super laughed at, that's when it's gonna happen. It's always when someone thinks, 'What an idiot,' that's when you're gonna pull it."

Mark's thinking about progression extends to all aspects of his life, including his prolific artwork. "I wanna make my art like a shell, nothing there, like no content 'cause I feel that's the way the masses are. And I feel like art should represent what the people are," explains Gonzales. "Most of the people have nothing inside, and I want my art to have nothing inside — to be empty of everything, to have no content."

His musings on art naturally progress towards the topic of his profession: "I consider skateboarding an art form because it's the only thing that can't be judged in an athletic way. It's a total art form, there's no way around it. It's a form of expression."

He goes on to describe skateboarding in a manner that I have never pondered before. In fact, I wonder if anyone in the history of skateboarding

has ever locked into the same sort of sentiment. “If anything, it’s a tribal art form because different people from different cities skate differently, and they try to enforce their tricks on people who visit their territory or come to their city,” says Mark, enlightening me. “They want you to use their language and do their tricks and be inspired by their city. So skaters from San Diego say certain words and skate differently than skaters in New York. I think the reason skateboarding’s always going through changes is because it’s an art form. If it weren’t an art form and it were an athletic thing, everyone would be wearing jerseys. It would be more organised, and personal style wouldn’t be emphasised.”

I follow Mark’s assistant to her pickup truck. In the meantime, Mark heads off to pick up a prescription and have lunch with his girlfriend. We stop for more coffee and drive around street corners, eventually settling double parked somewhere in front of Gonz’s apartment. I hear rolling wheels in the near distance and turn to see Mark shooting down the sidewalk. There are two complete skateboards under each arm. He chucks all five boards into the bed of the truck, each varying more than slightly. A longboard, a normal board, a giant ten-inch wide old-school board and a few others I can’t make out, all rattle and slide in the back with each turn we take.

As we enter the borough of Harlem, Gonz’s assistant is unsure of our whereabouts. “Mark, which way do I go?” she asks, her voice ringing with frustration. But Mark isn’t paying attention. He’s busy telling me about his respect for freedom and disdain for confinement. “I admire skaters. I mean, I just look at them and how they’re free to just push in any direction. I don’t know, that’s why they make so many skateparks for free now, to stop that freedom, to get them all into a caged area,” he explains as his face intently peers through the backseat window. “You can’t have people on the street being free. The streets are for people to walk, the streets are for muggings, to be swindled. The streets are where you go to get your heroin and you don’t get your heroin, but the guy gets your money. The streets aren’t for kids pushing and being free.”

“Mark, I don’t know where I’m going! Where is this spot?” his assistant asks again. It turns out that Mark doesn’t know where it is we’re going. We come to a stop at a backed-up red light. “Let’s just skate here!” Gonzales says. As we exit the vehicle, I scan for any semblance of a real spot, but see nothing ‘skateable’. Mark nods and bolts away on a giant longboard, kicking forcefully before ducking down low and shooting past a moving car, narrowly missing flipping over its hood. He then hops up a curb and loops back around towards where I’m standing. Behind me is a half torn-down fence with its metal pipe top angled upward, looking flimsy and dangerous. It has impalement written all over it.

Without testing out the pipe for ‘skateability’, Mark pushes super hard at the thing and pops a backside 50/50 up it, grinding almost to the top then bailing and turning towards me before landing on both feet. “I want to see if I can launch off the top,” he shouts, his voice boiling with adolescent excitement. He flips over his board and takes off, kickflipping off the curb. How the hell he picked this place to skate is beyond me. It’s not a spot and would have been overlooked by even the most trained skater’s eye. But, having met Mark, it makes sense that only his mind could immediately create something so unique out of absolutely nothing.

He spends the next hour or so shooting skate photos and mugging for the lens. I fan out hard and study the impeccable style I’ve grown up watching in videos and trying my best to emulate. The sun is setting quickly as we load into the truck and head back to Manhattan. I think about how fucking rad the day was. I mean, I got to hang with the Gonz. Then I think about my old rule — the one about not interviewing people I admire. I look towards Mark and decide that it’s time to retire that one. It was a stupid rule anyway.