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Freewheeler

By Jocko Weyland

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The artist Robert Rauschenberg famously declared that he wanted to exist in the gap between art and life. Mark Gonzales performs in that space every day. A rare hybrid, Gonzales is an internationally renowned skateboarder who is also an artist and writer, though most citizens have no idea who he is as he skates around Oakland, Calif., on a crisp Saturday in an argyle sweater, Bulgari sunglasses and a shock of dark hair. He spontaneously jumps on the side of a moving bus and narrowly misses being hit by another. "The one thing I'm afraid of is not being afraid," Gonzales says.

From anyone else, that could be dismissed as disingenuous, but Gonzales leads his life with such a disregard for fear that you have to take him at his word. On any given day, he can be seen skateboarding around San Francisco, cutting in and out of traffic, dropping down curbs, flying onto ledges and walls, causing a ruckus and leaving bystanders wondering what just happened as he disappears around the corner. His skating is a seamless mix of aggressive locomotion and improvisational finesse -- nerve-racking to watch but effortlessly graceful.

He also does things that could be considered annoying -- like telling a saxophone player on the sidewalk to "put a sock in it" and yelling after two kids with skateboards to "get some Rollerblades" -- without getting hit in the face. His outlandish claims -- "I tried to register as a Republican in Venice, but they wouldn't let me" -- and quasi-philosophical koans -- "It's all relative to likes and dislikes" -- are entirely lacking in irony and hover somewhere between the obvious and the astute. He discusses a skating tour of North Korea as if it were a viable option, and then launches into an erudite discussion of the relative merits between Cross and Scheaffer pens. He's got 10 plans at once, and always seems to act on all of them.

Now 34, Gonzales began skateboarding professionally as a teenager. Decorating his board with Magic Markers led to his pursuit of drawing and painting, followed by poetry and short-story writing. His art has been exhibited in galleries in New York and Los Angeles and was part of the recent "Bay Area Now 3" show at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. His work has been published in Germany and Japan, while his booklets -- makeshift and scrappily photocopied -- are often self-published, with titles like "Dear Poetry." He freely admits that his skating reputation has helped him find an audience: "Skateboarding opened a lot of doors for me -- and closed a lot of them, too."

Gonzales has collaborated with the artist Raymond Pettibon, appeared in Harmony Korine's "Gummo" and slept on a La-Z-Boy shooting downhill in a Nissan commercial directed by his friend Spike Jonze. In the artist Cheryl Dunn's film "Back World for

Words," Gonzales skates on the walls of a German museum accompanied by a soundtrack of his own devising that mixes Fijian greetings with the music of Robert Schumann. Parallels to modern dance -- Gonzales once took ballet lessons on a whim -- don't seem unjustified. He also curiously wears fencing garb in the film. "I wanted to appear like a dancer but not too feminine," he says. "The fencing uniform shows your body type but also means business."

Just as his skating is an unscripted mix of simultaneously precise and hair-raising movements, his writing is a blend of humor and pathos: "The king of the zoo is the man with the food" and "Slowly day after day your life will start to have less meaning." His obsessions, from Howard Hughes and Greta Garbo to Babe Ruth and numismatics, are as unadulterated as they are eclectic.

"He's functionally retarded," says Jake Phelps, the editor of Thrasher magazine. "He can't order a pizza, but he can tell you all about Napoleon or some other freak."

According to Jonze, who first worked with him in "Video Days" -- the 1991 skate documentary that is probably one of the most watched of its kind -- Gonzales's far-ranging fascinations are just one part of his unusually liberated *modus operandi*.

"When you try to describe him, it sounds like he's doing it for effect, but he's not," Jonze says. "There's something so special about him that is indefinable. He's inspiring in the way he looks at the world and he remembers the smallest details, the ones you wish you could remember." Jonze can't get over how Gonzales has maintained a correspondence with Jonze's mother since their brief meeting several years ago; and how, when he and Gonzales drive around Los Angeles, Gonzales insists on taking long detours to visit people he hardly knows, like "the older lady who worked at a coffee stand in Laguna Beach who he said was the coolest person."

Raised in South Gate, Calif., by a general contractor and a saleswoman, Gonzales picked up skateboarding during its 1970's boom and stuck with it after its downturn at the end of the decade. Because he lacked the funds to go to skate parks, most of his time was spent simulating vertical moves on the sidewalk near his house. Gonzales's innovation was to take the no-handed aerial above the lip of a pool (the "ollie") and bring it to the street. By quickly snapping the tail down on the pavement and guiding the board with his feet, he lifted himself into a gravity-defying high-speed glide that ushered in a new era in skateboarding. He then took things to a previously unimagined level by being among the first to ollie up to and slide down a slanted handrail, an evolutionary leap analogous to the shift from horse-drawn carriages to automobiles. Gonzales and a few other no-handed-flight originators established the ollie as the building block for almost every trick in skateboarding, transforming the paved planet into one huge skate park.

Tony Alva, one of the leads of the popular 2001 documentary "Dogtown and Z-Boys," caused an earlier revolution by spearheading the transition from the fairly static sidewalk surfing of the 60's to the radical departure of gyrating on the sides of empty swimming pools. When Alva first saw the wiry 14-year-old Gonzales, he immediately recognized his talent and became his first equipment sponsor. "He didn't emulate

anybody," Alva says. "He understood mentally how to ollie very early on and got it down to a science. And he had control of his board like nobody I've ever seen."

These days, Gonzales has a new skate company called Krooked, which produces boards decorated with his artwork; he is an occasional contributor to Thrasher; and he is scouting for new authors for his Cujo imprint. Though his involvement in "Video Days" alone is enough to assure him a place in the pantheon of skateboard legends, he continually shores up his reputation with action. He could have capitalized on his renown to become as financially successful as the ubiquitous Tony Hawk but instead chose a different path. And while he occasionally competes in contests, you won't see him in the X Games on ESPN. And he alone will write his autobiography. Gonzales is one of those exceptional people, Jonze says, "who has a wariness about doing things he doesn't feel strongly about." So don't expect Mark Gonzales to become a character in a video game or shill for the milk industry anytime soon.