



HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

THE REWARD OF RISKY ART
WITH MARWAN SHAKARCHI

After we talked to Thomas Simon about his film *Art of One*, we couldn't stop thinking about the film's subject, visual artist Myneandyou (a.k.a. Marwan Shakarchi). In many ways, Marwan's story mirrors Thomas's. They're both artists who threw the dice, quit their jobs, and hoped for the best. We were curious to learn more about Marwan, so we called him up at his studio in Dubai. There he spends his days (and years) finding new ways of proliferating his signature symbol — a cloud with X'd out eyes — in the mundanity-rattling style of his old mentor, the legendary Shepard Fairey.

"If you've ever read any of [Shepard Fairey's] books, he talks about repeating a symbol over and over again so it awakens a sense of wonder about your environment," Marwan told us. "That's what the 9,000 clouds I've put up over the past six months have been all about."

Marwan believes in hard work. Long hours. Indulging in obsessions. And giving yourself over completely to whatever you are creating. Which is why after spending four years working a safe, comfortable marketing job, Marwan quit, moved to Dubai, and started spending all of his time working on clouds.

In a lot of ways, you could say he's successful. He's making a living doing what he loves, and people are starting to notice. But the type of success Marwan is after is subtle and precarious. He is creating something much bigger than himself — a symbol rather than a brand — and he risks getting lost inside his own cloud. Which might be exactly what he's after.

When did you start thinking of yourself as an artist?

Probably during my school days. I studied art until I was 18 or 19 years old, but then I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life. So I took a completely different direction and went to university to study economics. I thought it was a safer option, which was a huge mistake.

Where were you at the time?

I grew up in London. We're an Iraqi family, but I've never been to Iraq. So I'm one of those confused British Arab nomads who has no idea where he's really from. I studied at the University of London and ended up getting halfway through my degree in economics before I realized how much I didn't enjoy it. And that was the point when I started to express myself in a visual way. I think it was a selfish time. I call it "selfish art." I was just drawing to vent my frustration; I started a band; I got into touring for a few years, which led to my designing all the EP covers and T-shirts and stuff like that.

Did you finish your degree?

I did end up finishing the economics degree just because I'd already gotten so far, but I'd lost interest in it a long time before that. When I came out of Uni, I had no idea what to do with myself. So I got a "real" job in the marketing department for a pretty reputable company. I thought it was a good thing, and to be honest, I enjoyed it. I did that for three or four years. It gave me the life I thought I wanted. The life everyone looks for. There was security there and a future. With a job like that, you can buy a nice house, buy a nice car, have a nice life. Nice is in quotation marks, but I figured that's what you do: you work for money.

But once I had all this money and this "nice" life, I realized how unhappy I was with the whole thing. I didn't like what I was doing. I didn't feel like I was doing anything unique. If I left that job, the next day they'd replace me with someone who could do my job just as well as I could. So what was the point?

I started Myneand yours while I was working this marketing job because I realized I wanted to do something that was entirely my own. But that meant I was working a day job and a night job. I never stopped working. And because I was focusing on two things, they both suffered. When I was working my 9-to-5, I'd be thinking about Myneand yours. When I was working on Myneand yours, I'd be thinking, "Oh shit, I have to go back to work tomorrow." I had to make a decision about what I was going to do and what was important to me. I struggled with that decision for two and a half years, until someone finally pushed me in the right direction and said, "You're miserable. Quit your job. Take a risk."

And of course, that's what had always stopped me. I was too scared to take the risk. I didn't know what I was going to do or if I could make a living from it. I kept asking myself, *Is this a stupid thing you're trying to do?* I mean, I draw clouds every day. So I guess back then it was lack of confidence. But it was only after I quit and started focusing on the clouds 24 hours a day that I really started to develop the message and the idea, and build my confidence. I started to believe in the reason behind the whole thing and to understand how important it is to me. And when I saw other people reacting to my work and connecting with it, that's when I started thinking that maybe what I was doing was worth it.

When you saw people connecting with your work, that's when you knew it was time to quit your job?

Definitely. The most important thing for me is that connection with people, when you bridge those barriers and boundaries that everyone has. If you can do that through your art, it's the greatest feeling. So yeah, when people started reacting to it, connecting to it, that's when I stopped asking if what I was doing was ridiculous.

When did you first start drawing the cloud?

Actually, the way it started wasn't with the

cloud. I'll tell you one little story. It was during my second-year finals while I was studying economics. I had an exam the next morning, but instead of studying, I went to the exam hall late at night — the hall where the test was going to be the next morning — and I spray-painted the worst art you've ever seen in your life. I spent three or four hours doing it. It was a really bad piece of work, just me venting. But when I went to the exam the next morning, I saw this huge huddle of people. Officials with notepads and loads of students were looking at this work, wondering what the hell it was. It was kind of a big deal — and probably not in a good way — but I saw that this was how you generate a reaction.

After that, I started drawing loads of weird things. I started tagging my name as "Myne" because it was my work and my frustrations. Like I said, it was selfish art. I was literally saying this is mine. But the more I did it, the more I realized it wasn't just about me. Art should be about giving as much as it is about taking, which is how "Yours" came into the whole thing. Ever since then, I've always written Myneand yours, and I never feel like it's just about me anymore.

So you started working as Myneand yours while you were working your day job?

In the evenings that's all I would do. I'd go home, work on illustrations, and then really late at night I'd go out and climb buildings and put my illustrations on things. The cloud came about around this time. It was a very random thing. Very organic. I wasn't looking for a symbol. It just happened. There was one cloud in particular that I'd doodled that a friend wanted as a tattoo. That cloud didn't have Xs for eyes. It was just a clumpy-looking cloud. He ended up covering from his waist to his armpit in these clouds.

Whoa.

That was exactly my reaction: Whoa. And that's the moment the cloud was born. I started making stickers of the cloud and sticking

“Art should be about giving as much as it is about taking.”



them on things on my way to work. Bit by bit I was putting clouds everywhere. I went from printing 10 stickers to printing thousands. It just grew. There was no point where I sat down and thought, *Okay, you need to do this and this and this*. It just gained momentum on its own.

Did people at work know what you were doing at night?

People at work knew, but they didn't really understand at first. I think once they saw my dedication to it, they started taking an interest in it. They knew how I felt about work, that it was just a job. Most of them felt the same way. They were just doing a job. Just trying to survive and pay the credit card bills. That's another reason why I had to do Myneand yours. Because I was surrounded by people who were equally unhappy with what they were doing every day. That in itself pushed me out of the office and out of that life. Funny enough, my old company recently asked me to come paint the side of one of their shops, so it will be my old life and new life side by side.

Can you tell me more about selfish art versus unselfish art? Is it a maturity issue?

I don't think so. There aren't any rules about anything. It's just whatever you feel. I call it "selfish art" because it was all about me and my problems. I guess all of us feel that we're at the center of the world. But when you think like that, you start to live in your own bubble. The work I was doing [for the marketing department] was coming from inside that bubble, and I guess I was trying to pop the bubble. I think loads of artists are venting frustrations. They make art for themselves, but other people still derive pleasure from it. I don't think there's anything wrong with that. And I don't think what I'm doing now is "mature art," but it's definitely less selfish. It's coming from me, but I'm doing it for other people. Seeing other people enjoy what I'm doing makes me happy.

When I'm doing these outside installations,

there's no financial gain for me. I have to spend money on this habit. I have to get ladders and stuff. It takes time and a financial investment, and the only reason I do it is so people can see it. Nobody is paying me to do it. I guess I get satisfaction from taking the risk. Every wall is a challenge. I believe in asking for forgiveness not permission. I don't want to go through all the different councils and regulations I'd need to clear just to put something on a small wall. I'd rather go out at night and hit it and hope for the best.

Do you get nervous working illegally?

I used to look over my shoulder all the time. Every time a car came, I'd duck. It would take me ages just to do a small piece. Now when I do it, I commit to it. You're up there, you've started, so finish it. If something's going to happen, it's going to happen. That is the risk you're taking. Absorb the risk. Let it be part of the process. Once I came to terms with that, I started feeling more comfortable and enjoying it. The things you do without permission, those things are special.

Recently, I started taking it to another level where I put up these big pieces during the day. At first it's a bit scary, but then you realize that people never question people who work during the day. They assume you have permission, and the majority of people are very positive about it. There are some people who do stop you and get upset. They threaten you. But that's kind of cool. It's nice to inspire positive things in people, but it's also nice to see someone get so pissed off. There have been some pieces I've done that are gone the next day. That means I've pissed someone off enough that they've done something about it. It's cool if you can make someone react to your work like that. I respect people who get pissed off enough to do something about it. Some people never do anything.

Is it important for an artist to live outside societal norms?

I think so. If you feel comfortable, if you don't

take risks, then you're not challenging yourself. If you feel awkward or uncomfortable, that means you're stepping outside your box and learning something new about yourself. You're becoming a stronger person mentally. If you're not doing that, then you're just sitting around. And I can say that because I sat around for a very long time. I spent my university days just sitting around. But that gets boring. All of the things I've done over the past two years have been very uncomfortable. But you just have to take it on, try it. What's the worst that can happen? If it fails, it's not that big a deal.

What were your biggest fears about leaving your day job?

My biggest fear wasn't financial. It was, *Are you doing something really stupid here?* It was, *Are you being ridiculous?* I was just doing these little doodles. I was drawing. And on top of that, I'm a married man. I have responsibilities.

Once you quit did you have any sort of plan, some big project you were working on?

No. I just wanted to see what would come of it. I just wanted to sit down with my Wacom tablet and my Mac, and figure it out bit by bit. I think if I'd had a plan or a set of rules, I wouldn't have been able to do it. I needed that year to figure things out. Now I understand what I'm doing a bit more, although I'm still learning every day. Every project I've done has been full of mistakes, but there's no rule book. There's no guide for how you're supposed to do things. There are just the people you're surrounded by and the people you learn from. There's never been a plan. Every day is a new thing.

The important thing about leaving my job was being able to devote myself 100 percent to this. I get to the studio early, and I'm usually the last one to leave. I know that if I don't work as hard as I can, nothing is going to happen. I won't be able to keep doing this, and I'll have to go back to my old way of life. So the work never stops. On the weekends I'm out taking photos. In the evenings we're going to the

right events, trying to meet the right people. If I take a tissue out of my pocket, clouds fall out. It's an addiction. Whenever we walk to a restaurant, I hold my wife's hand with my left hand, and with my right hand I stick stickers on whatever is around me. She has no idea. I guess what I'm trying to say is that your work can become an extension of you if you believe in what you're doing and what you're contributing.

How many stickers have you used?

My first batch of stickers was 2,000. They were the worst stickers I've ever made. Then last December, I made 10,000, and I have only 1,000 left. So between December and June, about six months, I went through 9,000 stickers.

What got you interested in creating an icon?

Oh right, I forgot to mention that I used to intern for Shepard Fairey. That's where I learned this idea of repetition and how to use

a symbol. He taught me how hard you have to work. He's probably the hardest-working man I've ever met. So I got the idea of repetition from him. If you've ever read any of his books, he talks about repeating a symbol over and over again so it awakens a sense of wonder about your environment. I remember seeing the Obey Giant icon everywhere for years, and I never thought about it. Then one day I saw it and everything changed. I realized that something was going on here. And when that happens, you start to see your environment differently. You look up instead of down. You keep your phone in your pocket. I guess with all the media and advertising bombardment, we've just learned not to think about what we see. But when you start questioning everything around you, you start developing as a human being. That's what the 9,000 clouds I've put up over the past six months have been all about. There's no website. No name. The cloud isn't selling you anything. It exists purely to exist. People tell me I should put my name

on it. Put my website on it. But if I did that, it would destroy everything. I want people to wonder what's happening. What the hell is this crap? Who the hell is this dude? What the hell is going on here? I want to make this last forever.

As far as we're concerned, Marwan is after something much more interesting than success or fame. He is trying to wake people up, and he is willing to use whatever tactics — legal or illegal — are at his disposal. You don't meet people like that very often, but when you do, it's a great privilege. Look him up if you can, although he's not easy to find. Otherwise, keep looking for his clouds. ◦

Read our conversation with Thomas Simon and watch Art of One on blog.musicbed.com



