

Michael Natale, aka GammaBlog Interview – Brian Adam Douglas aka Elbow Toe

Elbow Toe has only been putting stuff out on the streets for about a year. But he is prolific and the pieces often vary wildly in style, gathering from all sorts of influences. Some of his pasted paper pieces could be confused with Swoon's, an indication of his skill as a draftsman. But his developing style of exaggerated postures and inventive distortions are his own aesthetic.

GammaBlog: OK, first off, Elbow Toe, the name is funny. Where did it come from?

Elbow Toe: It actually came out of Neck Face. A few years back I saw a couple of his pieces, those hands. I thought it was the silliest name. Well about a year ago, I was really dry with my own work, and thought I'd try street art. So if there was Neck Face, I'd be Elbow Toe. I'd mix some other body parts together. It had kind of a nice cadence to it, El - Bow - Toe. I like the drawing I did with the cut off arm and the toe, sort of it's physical manifestation; it's kind of fun, but it's so stupid.

GB: Have you ever regretted.....

ET: Now, I do, yeah. I got some drinks with a friend at the Rodeo Bar, and had written my name in the bathroom. And someone wrote beneath it, "Elbow Toe – Good Art – Worst Name Ever!" Elbow Toe, you can't be all cool like "I'm REVS" or something.

GB: But now you are producing all sorts of work...

ET: My wife said to me that it's kind of ironic that now I'm getting involved in body parts with internal things going on. And maybe Elbow Toe isn't such an odd name regarding all of that. I don't know I still think it's pretty silly.

GB: What kind of things did you draw as a child.

ET: G Force and Star Blazers, they were these Japanese animated films, of a battleship that had to go and save Earth by flying to this other planet.

GB: How old were you.

ET: This was when I was five or six. I was into making these large drawings of battleships, and war machines. Some of the early stuff I put out on the streets were these war machine kind of pieces. I actually went back to what I was doing as a kid...As a young, young kid I was really into cartoons, Snoopy...

GB: What other cartoons?

ET: Not necessarily cartoons, but the Muppets. I loved drawing Kermit and Fozzy and such, and

Dr Seuss....

GB: That must have developed some skills, turning 3-D characters into 2-D drawings.

ET: Yeah, it did. My dad would draw with me a lot. I tried to draw superheroes.

GB: Was your dad an artist?

ET: No, he had been a professional football player, here in New York. So he was definitely more of a jock. But he knew how to draw. My grandfather made the dies they press coins out of. In the summers I would hang out with him and we would also draw together. I always loved drawing more than sports, because it was my own thing, as opposed to sports, where you had to necessarily compete. (Laughs) I got out of it for awhile, when I realized there were these kids who could draw really well, and I found that intimidating.

When I was in high school, after my parents had divorced, I was like the new kid in town, and I had to find something to get into. I missed the big clique thing. I got into a commercial art class and really took to it. I wanted to make things as absolutely realistic as I could possibly make them.

GB: I can see that. The beauty of line just blows me away. When I see people doing stuff where the line is good, that's what gets me. That's what drew me to Swoon.

ET: Yeah, me too. I saw a photo a friend took of some Swoon in Red Hook, and I felt, wow, OK, I don't have to be stupid with my characters, I can actually bring my fine art to the streets. Seeing that I could put crafted, drawn work out, that it didn't have to be this big graphic thing, necessarily, really got me jazzed about making my more current work. You could put it out there and actually have it appreciated, and not just put the canvas in a storage space, and hope maybe for a gallery show.

GB: Name some artists whose work excites you.

ET: A lot of them are older...dead... Chaim Soutine, he's a Jewish Lithuanian artist, De Kooning and Bacon looked at him, he for some reason decided that you could take a figure and twist it and turn it. Before him I'd seen Frank Auerbach who's a part of the whole British school with Bacon, and Lucian Freud. His paintings are like an inch thick with oil, he works on them for a year... they are so tasty. His drawings are the same way, he works a charcoal so much that he wears holes through the paper and has to glue another piece of paper on and then work back in again. I saw his stuff and then the Soutine show at the Jewish Museum in '96, I was in awe. You don't have to make it look completely photo-realistic, you can be as expressionistic as you want.

I really like Max Beckman's work, the theatricality of it, the masked characters. That's why I do the chicken and the photo pieces I put out. My wife's an actress. Through her I got into avant garde theater. I find a lot of theater directors inspiring. And dancers like Pina Bausch (images), her gestures, she takes a whole moment and compresses it into this one space.

GB: I can see that from some of the contorted poses you choose. A lot of these seem to be portraits. Are you working from life or taking photos?

ET: I used to draw from life, but at this point I work on these things when I get home from work, at night, and it's hard to get my wife to sit still for a couple of hours. (laughs) Lately the reference I get from them are poses that are more something I want them to be doing as opposed to what would be natural for them. Because I have a gut feeling of some imagery I would like to make. It's not necessarily true to the person.

When I get someone to do a pose, I'll shoot all around them. So that way when I get in to distort things, I'll have more reference. It's like having them there in the space with me. So I can theoretically walk all around them. For example, I can take this part of the face and pull it around over here. This is one of the things I learned in Illustration. I studied with Jim McMullan. He's famous for his Lincoln Center posters, beautiful watercolors. He was really emphatic about not just getting the shot you wanted but getting the stuff all around it.

GB: We've mentioned Bacon, but I'm also seeing a bit of El Greco and early Picasso.

ET: I dig El Greco, and Goya, I really love the black period of his work. Both of them distorted for the purposes of what he was trying to communicate. There is something sort of sensuous about that, and the early Picasso as well. I don't try to make things completely ugly. I like to play with a really compressed moment against something that's a lot more stretched out. I think it builds tension in the piece.

GB: Some of your pieces are prints. Are you doing it the same as Swoon, cutting into plywood sheets.

ET: Yes, but I can't seem to get the walking on them thing. I read that in the interview you did with her. She says she just walks on them for five minutes. I tried walking on them for five minutes and I know that I'm larger than her and it just wouldn't take. I just wasn't getting rich blacks.

GB: She said she was really dancing on it. Maybe that means she was pogoing on it.

ET: Maybe I should try that, the jumping.

GB: Do you have downstairs neighbors?

ET: No we're in the basement. So I end up down on my hands and

knees rubbing for a good forty minutes a print. I want to get a rich black.

I'd done these portraits lately of a friend of mine named T.J. and they kept getting ripped down. I would do these paintings that were taking a lot of time, whatever, they're going to disappear, I know that. I found I was getting so fed up; it was like the image was jinxed. And I thought, "alright I'm going to start doing some charcoals, not going to do a woodcut, just charcoal drawings, fix them, and put them out". So the past five or six images I've been doing have been unique. And even with the Dremel my hands still hurt and it takes a good thirty hours to carve one of those things out. I like to draw a lot more than I like to carve the wood. But when it's all carved out and you have the charcoal against the wood it's so beautiful. The charcoal has so much more variation, the ink makes it flat, your line quality is the only thing. I like the charcoal better now. I like to constantly be playing with the image and pushing it around.

GB: That's something good, you are creating unique pieces.

ET: I was enjoying the woodcuts. I did this one, it's actually my wife and I, in the Gowanus, it's titled Adam and Margaret. I started doing this oilbar work on top of it. The thing that is nice about the prints is that you can use it as a starting point, you can do so many variations over it. My initial constriction is, I work with the same image, how do I make it so that it works with the environment it's in. But (laughs) I still like charcoal, it's nice, you get the smears and all that sort of stuff going on.

GB: What kind of paper do you use?

ET: Usually kraft paper, because it's a nice mid-tone, so I can go light with paint on top of the drawing.

GB: What size are you using?

ET: I've been getting four foot wide rolls lately. I'm looking into getting a sixty inch roll. And a friend of mine gave me some big seamless paper from a photo backdrop. I want to do some really big, eight foot wide heads. Do you know the scene in Fellini's Satyricon where they are walking by this giant head. I want to take the scale to immense, where you feel dwarfed in the space, and maybe put it in an alley where you are already feeling kind of claustrophobic.

GB: What's your workspace like?

ET: I have luxurious 14 foot ceilings and lots of skylights for a workroom. Our actual living space is restricted to a loft all the way in the back.

GB: What's your technique on pasting?

ET: I just go to the local hardware store and buy a gallon of wallpaper sizing, a brush and a little tin.

GB: Do you have technique for being inconspicuous.

No. (laughs)

GB: Swoon says she just rolls her pieces up puts them in her backpack, gets on her bike, gets off her bike and does her thing like she is doing only what should be done.

ET: (Laughs) I don't do that man. I'm so paranoid. When you emailed me for this interview, and when I got here I was waiting for the big sting operation. I try to be as inconspicuous as possible. I was putting a piece up in DUMBO and a guy walked by while I was putting it up and he said "wow that's really beautiful." It's really interesting in contrast to the official feelings about this...

GB: You've got to pick your spots too. Swoon talks about third spaces, spaces that no one cares about, they're the canvas for her works.

ET: They seem to be disappearing like mad. I find it really upsetting, there used to be more character to the city. Even on the Gowanus they are trying to get high-rises put up there. And DUMBO is becoming so clean. It's interesting that some of those pieces stay up there. I'm surprised. Doorways are good. I like alcove spaces.

GB: A frame?

ET: A frame and a little privacy for doing something, and maybe you don't notice the piece right away. I don't know how other people choose their spaces. I certainly don't go hunt for them in relation to a piece. Once I get a piece, I ride around and it's usually a gut feeling, this piece just feels right in this area.

For instance, I put a piece on wall near some of WK's work on the Lower East Side, and there's a big butterfly there.

GB: Oh, you did? Because most of your stuff is put up in Brooklyn, right?

Yeah, because I'm too lazy to go over into the city.

ET: I'd actually wanted to put this Lucia portrait there. It's an old woman with big craggy hands and a lot of paint on her. I wanted to put it there, but it has this ledge that I didn't want her to wrap around. But then I made this one of my step-mom. She's got these flowers growing out of her head. It felt like a good wall, and I'd not even thought about that there is a butterfly above it. I ended up getting her on, I'm done, and I step back and I realize that there is this really nice interaction happening with this butterfly over these large flowers. It's those kind of moments with this stuff that turn me on fiercely.

GB: Have you ever had a close call with the police?

ET: I've had close calls in that they'll come by a minute after I get done, and my heart goes down to my shoes. I've started doing these oil bar drawing on doors lately. I did this one, which I wasn't necessarily happy with, right in the Gowanus on Union Street, a really busy drive. I'd do some drawing, then I'd lay down on the concrete till the cars went by. Then I'd get back up and do a little bit more, then I'd lay down. The oil bar is all over my hands and all over me cause I'm laying on it. I get on my bike and go across the street to get a look. Then I go back to get the picture, and then I start to ride away and I see these lights going behind me. And I'm praying as I'm riding, "please, please go away." Horribly stupid as it was, I was covered in red oil bar... "Graffiti Artist Caught Red Handed." I always think in those moments, "I'll never do this again, I'll never do this." And then I remember "Oh, but I want to do this image."

GB: Any civilians ever come by and rag on you.

ET: No. One time I put an anti American imperialism sticker out for a friend, and someone gave me a look and said "what are you doing." But for my own work it's all been very positive, which is a little weird.

GB: What about graff writers. Have they written over your work.

ET: Not yet. I put a piece I did of my wife's aunt over a piece by Colt 45. Jake Dobkins took a photo and now there's this big discussion on Streetsy. I get the sense that the writers are pretty pissed when street artists go over their work. I respect what they do. I find a lot of their linework to be quite amazing, and cryptic akin to the Chinese characters. From my standpoint it is not a battle for territory but rather an integration of ideas. But I'm pretty sure they see it as being dissed. But that is never my intent.

GB: The nature of paste-ups, is here today and peeling and rotted tomorrow. Pasting doesn't seem quite as much of a marking of territory as painting does.

ET: Part of a sign to me that it might be safe to put up some stuff is that there is a lot of graff on the wall. I mean c'mon, you know? There's this person, I don't know who it is but I actually like their stuff a lot. They are just these big angular faces, you get the cheekbones and a brow and a mark for the nose. It's house paint. Someone said it was Cost. He did his thing over Swoon's in the meat packing district. And I put these woodcuts of my cats over the guy's face. And you get this really beautiful layering. And someone said "Oh, you better watch out, you put something over Cost's thing." But it builds up into this lovely image.

GB: I know who you are talking about. I think he lives in this neighborhood. He creates these faces just out of slashes of broad white brushstrokes. I didn't know that they were done by Cost.

GB: Could you talk about your word stuff, it reminds me of De La Vega and Christian Paine. Could you talk about that.

ET: That started out of a period I felt I couldn't draw right now, and I'm frustrated, and I was just writing in my journal. And I'd just read this thing in the Times where they interviewed

REVS about his diaries down in the subway tunnels. And then I heard it again on This American Life. And I was thinking that maybe I could just put my thoughts out there. It related to this series I'd done for awhile, I called them anti-ads.

They had text and an image. I tried to play them off each other, and make it much more personal than advertising. Where I really tried to talk about myself and humanity in general, and instead of trying to sell you on something, I was trying to sell you on being a little bit more your own person. I liked the sense of putting something out there that maybe people can relate to. I started doing it more now with the images I draw on the doors. So I'll take notes about people or something I'm feeling about what I'm looking at, or going through during the day.

I had seen the REVS 8 1/2 x 11 wheat pastes in college all around, and sort of locked them away in my head. One day when I was feeling stuck with my stuff I thought it would be fun to do a whole series of headlines like you see on the ny post, and paste them on news boxes(i figured this part out after doing about 20 of them on other surfaces).

I was also going for something akin to signs for class president. sort of an ad campaign for elbowtoe. I had done one earlier on that combined imagery and text, this one was much more aggressive in it's message, the type was large(Impact font i believe) and i enjoyed the odd readings that you would get from the word wrap, like the one for elbow-toe dis-likes war. If you didn't take the time to read slowly it could almost be seen as elbow-toe likes war. And I would place them alot in pairs or on whole rows of newspaper boxes, so it was this whole sort of headlines about elbow-toe. As soon as i started making them i knew of the obvious reference in structure to the revs/cost pieces, I even made one that said elbow-toe rips you off. Well and i think this can be a positive experiece, some folks commented that it was too much like revs/cost, which is fair. But I had to try it none the less. I think they were rather successful personally, but when I went back to one street, they boxes had been buffed and ironically the onlyone that was left was elbow-toe is boring. I actually really dug that. It took interactivity to a new level for my work.

I used to live on the Upper East Side, and I'd seen De la Vega, his stuff on the streets, I appreciated it. It was always a nice moment to come across. It was something you could interpret. It sort of came out of that, something else to try. Maybe it's a bad habit, but I tend not to stick in one way of working for too long. I get really curious. I'm all over the place.

GB: That's a good thing, no? I mean it makes it hard for people to pigeon hole and market you, but what the hell.

ET: I really enjoy it. I mean, now I'm going to do this way of working for awhile, these text pieces. I mean I haven't thought of one for a month. I was just out in San Francisco, and I put a couple out. It's just another way to express something.

GB: Do you have any other creative outlets, music?

ET: I like to listen to music. I love Captain Beefheart, Tom Waits, those kind of cats. A friend of mine has a band, Wooden Wand and the Vanishing Voice. It's jazz influenced, a lot of

improvisation. I kind of dig that kind of music, but I can't play an instrument. My day job...I'm a pretty senior level programmer. I do a lot of online interactive work.

Any other creative outlets? No not really, not since street art. I used to do a lot of video, then I did my first street art piece, and it was much more satisfying. I gradually pushed everything else that I used to be creatively involved in, into this one thing.

GB: I think it would be hard being creative on the computer if you are making your living from it.

ET: It's nice to create something physical.

GB: List some street artists that have influenced you.

ET: Swoon has definitely inspired me. I like Judith Supine, his stuff is really, really cool.

GB: It's really funny that he took his mother's name.

ET: Gore B's stuff is so thoughtful, what he's doing. I mean all those guys are doing very interesting plays with figurative stuff. It's interesting to see how figurative work has legitimacy in the street art realm that, it doesn't necessarily have in the galleries spaces. I went to school here in the 90 and I used to see REVS stuff everywhere. I loved those little wheat pastes, "REVS is Dead", etc. I love his steel sculpture, which is frustrating since, there were two in the Gowanus that in the past month are gone. Someone sawed them off.

GB: Somebody's taking all the boards down. On my site I have a photo I took of them actually sawing one off.

ET: Man, that sucks. That is definitely a risk of putting your work out in public though. And the fact that you have to hacksaw the bolts off... They must want that work bad.

GB: Someone told me that they are going up on EBay.

ET: I wouldn't be surprised. I like WK Interact's stuff, particularly the scale.

GB: Photoshop stuff blown up large, Xerox machine manipulations. They're fun, look cool, are graphically bold and breathtakingly large but they sometimes strike me as a bit cold.

ET: He had to get permission to do those large pieces.

GB: Yeah, I'm pretty sure of that.

ET: I mean some of those guys like Neck Face. I'm impressed by his ability to climb. On the F train you see roofs of these warehouses, and it's just this arm that's the entire length of the warehouse. And it's like Jesus Christ man, you know, first, how did he get up there? And I have

vertigo, and I might be able to get up but then trying to come down, I'd be stuck. And they'd be like "What are you doing on our roof?"

GB: Yeah, you don't need that.

ET: There's some person who put up this piece in SOHO, you know those little Russian dolls that stack. It's really gorgeous, obviously a labor of love to make these things. They are almost Asian looking characters, with braids, really intricate patterns.

And Os Gemeos, those Brazilian guys, not only do they climb insanely, but they are so fucking facile.

GB: Yeah, mad skills, surreal figures, I love them. Faile stuff I think is great.

GB: Faile and Bast, they've been pasting forever, and they're such a part of the cityscape. Faile makes me laugh, and the Bast faces have a gravitas and mystery, but combining clip-art and scans on the computer and pasting it up, just doesn't grab me like original artwork does.

ET: It seems like there is this graphic design centered group of street artists like Faile and Bast, and Shepard Fairey. Then you have the painter printmaker group and the more cartoony sort of group. Banksy's work is pretty smart. Just the sheer courage of walking into....

GB: Yeah his going into major museums last year and placing his own work along with official looking information plaques was hilarious.

ET: I mean it's kind of nice he's fucking with a different echelon. I know a lot of people who say, well advertising is all over the walls, and that's our legitimate reason to have our stuff all over the walls. After getting into all this stuff, I actually like how the piece interacts with the space. It can totally change the corner of a block, if you put a cool looking piece there. On Beard Street over in Redhook, I don't know who made them, there's these sort of triangular things, then Swoon put some stuff up and some other person's now put this canvas up. With every new piece that gets put on, the street becomes something else.