

THE AESTHETE



The scottish text and billboard artist goes from poet vandal to rising art star

Robert Montgomery is sitting at the bar at Soho House puffing on an e-cigarette that he has nicknamed “Johnny Depp.” When he exhales, the smoke emits a blue color, perfectly matching the neon blue bold letters on his T-shirt that read POET VANDAL. It’s an example of ideal labeling, as he is, exactly, a poet who vandalizes public billboards. The shirt is his own design for the London-based clothing label, Each X Other, whose slogan is Art Meets Fashion. Also fitting, as the Scotland-born Montgomery is also an artist.

“you send yourself a text message at 2 in the morning coming home drunk from a party, from the back of a taxi, and the next day you decide if its madness or not,” he says, glancing at his iphone. “if it is madness you still keep it!”

It’s cool to be Robert Montgomery right now, and he knows it—his already-strong, rock star-like presence has clearly turned straight rock star. Montgomery’s widely recognized large-scale billboard displays and screened text art has made a significant impact in the online and social media communities, and fan followers have used his texts, art and tweets as the basis for tattoos. Among his work: “CHEAP MISERY IN OTHER PEOPLES HOLIDAYS,” “ALL PALACES ARE TEMPORARY PALACES,” and “THE PEOPLE YOU LOVE BECOME GHOSTS INSIDE OF YOU AND LIKE THIS YOU KEEP THEM ALIVE.”

For over a decade, Montgomery has been replacing ad pitches with poetry and presenting

commentary on everything from consumerism to beauty in bold white type set against a black background. Though not really a street artist, Montgomery takes inspiration from the Situationist tradition of *détournement*—capturing the audience’s attention in unexpected ways within the public realm. “Sometimes I will draft things in two different ways, and put it on Facebook and see which gets the most likes and then I’m like, OK, I’ll do it that way,” he says, sipping his beer and taking another drag off Johnny Depp.

Indeed, people no longer log on and log off the internet, they live in it—and for Montgomery, this is like having a sounding board for his work in progress 24 hours a day. “My work got out into the gallery system via the internet,” he says. Facebook, he says, where fans had posted photos of his guerilla billboard work on their personal pages, is essentially where his work “entered the art system.” He explains further, “It’s like my peer group selected the work, as opposed to a museum director who is the age of your parents.”

Montgomery also relies heavily on the art of drunk-texting to inspire his work. “You send yourself a text message at 2 in the morning coming home drunk from a party, from the back of a taxi, and the next day you decide if its madness or not,” he says, glancing at his iPhone. “If it is madness you still keep it!” If only we could all stagger through life, smashed with epiphanies that become great artwork—would there even be room for all of our drunken work to be displayed?

“Poetry in the digital age is fascinating,” says Montgomery. “I love this idea that technology is not just something we use for business emails, but actually digital media is a great new medium for poetry. That excites me quite a lot. I love that I can write a short poem and someone 2,000 miles away can see it 10 minutes later—it’s amazing.” In an age abounding in everything but attention spans, Montgomery’s short often truism-laced phrases couldn’t have arrived at a better time.

Earlier this month, Montgomery had his first solo show at C24 in Chelsea featuring his text-based installation works gathered to date; free flowing billboard displays, scrolling cryptic mottoes and aphorisms—most which can be found within the public landscape on the streets of Berlin, London and Paris. On opening night, Michael Stipe, who is an important “mythical figure” to Montgomery, came and bought his first piece.

Despite an often anti-capitalist slant, Montgomery’s pieces have managed to span the divide between the 1 percent and the 99 percent—the haves and have-nots. While his billboards became the mantra of London’s anti-capitalist Occupy movement back in 2012, in the same year his 2009 light piece, *WHENEVER YOU SEE THE SUN REFLECTED IN THE WINDOW OF A BUILDING IT IS AN ANGEL*, was selected by Dior menswear designer Kris van Assche to front the Dior Homme store in Soho, New York.

Does he feel more like a poet or an artist? Neither, really. “I didn’t study literature in university, I studied art. And I didn’t set out to be a poet with a capital P,” Montgomery says. Critics have compared his work to the great pioneers of text-based art, Jenny Holzer and Lawrence Weiner, both of whom Montgomery credits as his inspirations, although he has long since given up heeding the words of critics.

“When I was a kid, I had reviews in *Art in America* and the thing I learned was that the work I did then was to get good grades, and I wanted to stop and think about what I wanted to keep and make,” he recalls. “I worked a day job and worked from 7 to midnight and did that for a good five to 10 years while I worked on my voice. Struggling and having day jobs and shit is important because you get to a place where you find your voice within the discourse.”

Editor's Note: Main image features Robert Montgomery standing next to his own chalk work created exclusively for The Aesthete.

Art images courtesy of the artist and C24 Gallery.