

# *BOMB*

## A Cruel Joke: Jordan Strafer Interviewed

On whiteness, AOL pages, and the distinction between morality and law.

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Jordan Strafer, *Lambchop Ring Sparkle*, 2021, vinegar, glue, airport beads, post it, inkjet print on onionskin paper.  
Courtesy of the artist.

A bedraggled, homemade doll in a hospital gown looks up at the sky. A plane is crashing, writhing in the air, and the trail of black smoke behind it spells out a message: "Stupid Slut." So goes a scene from Jordan Strafer's video *SOS* (2021), which premiered at the New Museum last year. This particular mixture of humor, violence, and DIY wackiness engines Strafer's fantastical, autobiographical videos. Part YouTube, part art film, Strafer's work often leaves you laughing, and then wondering if you're a bad person for laughing. In *A White White Day* (2016) Strafer, her father, and a baby doll go through a series of intimacy exercises with mime paint on their faces. Other works feel random in a way that only the internet can make feel normal: *No Bag* (<https://nobag.online/>) (2020) is an artwork in the form of a web game, with vases linking out to drawings and videos; *sharks and goat* (2020) is a fifteen-second video of ... two dead sharks and a goat; and so on.

Strafer's newest film, *Peak Heaven Love Forever* (2021), in her first New York City solo show at Participant Inc presents an allegory for an ailing patriarch and unnamed familial tension onboard a flight. It is her first time working with a full cast of actors. The installation also features a set of drawings on onion-skin paper and a side screen tracking the flight path in the film. Strafer and I convened at a Lower East Side dive bar one snowy January day to discuss whiteness, AOL pages, and the distinction between morality and law.

—Simon Wu

### **Simon Wu**

Often dolls, and human beings, appear interchangeable in your videos. What pulls you to work with puppets and dolls?

### **Jordan Strafer**

Interchangeability is important to me: between actors and then between dolls and actors. Dolls are a practical decision, a way to make stuff with less people. I'm also attracted to them on an intuitive level. It's fun, and it feels childlike. Play is really important. I don't want to think too much while I'm working, but I do very intensely scrutinize all my decisions before and after making. Interchanging real and fake people is a storytelling device; and since most of the stories are autobiographical, I'm making decisions to take myself out of it as much as possible, because I don't want someone to see my work and think, "Oh, my God. This thing happened to Jordan." I want them to think, "Oh, God. People are terrible." I would rather someone think about the symbols in the work. Or, "What is up with this woman's rash?" "Why are they on a tacky luxury air ambulance?" I would rather the autobiographical aspect be secondary.

### **SW**

But your films are almost always autobiographical, right? Do the memories and experiences you choose to work with have a particular quality that makes you want to transform them?

### **JS**

I think it's true, as people say, that the specific is universal, and there's nothing funnier than real life. Something that I have been trying to do in my work is to make each character symbolic of their roles, for them to become archetypes. In the story, they begin to feel like metaphors or metonyms for something else.

### **SW**

So what inspired *Peak Heaven Love Forever*?

**JS**

*Peak Heaven Love Forever* is based on a true story of when my dad was dying. He suddenly fell very ill on a cruise with his husband. I was at Bard at the time doing my master's. He ended up in a coma, and I flew out to London to take care of him. One thing led to another, and we ended up having to take an air ambulance back to Miami where I'm from. It was him, his husband, my ex at the time, two paramedics, a flight attendant, and me. It was a real emergency, so several of my dad's friends helped organize getting him repatriated back to the United States. Most of it is true, other than the murder-suicide, twincest, and plane crash. We were served sushi and Chardonnay in crystal glasses. Transatlantic air ambulances are just former private jets outfitted with a mobile ICU setup; it was oddly luxurious, even though it was the only option. That was probably the worst time of my life so far. After I'd processed the experience a little bit, I thought it should be a play or a video. In 2019, Lia Gangitano offered me a solo show at Participant Inc that would take place in 2022, and that is when I started working on it. I decided the piece should feel like a movie that falls apart.



Jordan Strafer, still from *Peak Heaven Love Forever*, 2022, video color, sound, 19 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

**SW**

In several of your videos, there are makeup additions that emphasize the skin of your characters: the rashes in *Peak Heaven*, the white face paint in *A White White Day* (2016) and *Sunset Inn* (2016). Can you talk about how whiteness, as a racial identity or a concept, operates in your work?

**JS**

I want to discuss whiteness in my work because that's what I am. The only stories I can tell are my stories, and the only way that feels appropriate to me is to critique myself. It is important to me to address racial identity, gender, sexuality, class, and "Americanness." I want these characters to be complex and have tender moments, but they're also really bad. Everyone is kind of undead in this world, and depraved.

**SW**

How did you come to the idea of the skin effects?

**JS**

The skin effects come from the process of making these works. I started by painting white faces

onto people. I began doing that in a high school photography class and continued in various ways in undergrad and grad school. I wanted to push it further, so then I started using silicone masks and more dolls. In *Peak Heaven* I wanted every character to seem masked in some way, so I ended up using applied prosthetics.

The point of that was partially to make it more grotesque. Especially without dialogue, I wanted each character's look to have a backstory of its own—a "Florida man" with a sunburn; a young woman with a worsening, body-horror-esque heat rash; a flight attendant who resembles a doll—but also to disguise them in some way, to make them extra real and not real at the same time.

**SW**

When you were working with the white paint in high school, did you think it was a race thing?

**JS**

I didn't really know what I was doing, but I noticed an effect on camera where it disguises the person and reflects light. The texture of the paint was thick and gross and funny, and my high school friends posing for me were no longer themselves. I'm also interested in clown figures, dunces, and mimes as figures who choose not to speak. At Bard I was doing the white faces more thoughtfully and wanted to raise the question: Is it white face or are they in mime makeup? Hopefully, it's both of those things. I also don't want any performers implicated; they're not portrayed as good to each other at all. I want to be implicated.

**SW**

The wackiness reminds me of old YouTube videos, like *Shoes* (2006) by Liam Kyle Sullivan. Did you have a particular relationship to the internet that forms how you think about making these videos?

**JS**

One of my earliest internet memories is having an AOL homepage. You would copy and paste HTML code to make your page twinkle or have avatars. I'm of the generation that was on the early-ish internet playing computer games all the time, and it was "not allowed," or "not good," or whatever. I think that does seep into my work. There's a roughness to the way it looks. I'm attracted to the clunky, the not-smooth, and not-too-slick.





Jordan Strafer, still from *Judy Smolak: Lifestyle, Ideas, Family, Biography & Net-Worth*, 2020, Youtube video, two minutes, sixteen seconds. Courtesy of the artist.

**SW**

Your films don't depict the internet directly, but they feel saturated with it. I noticed it. A child of YouTube recognizes another child of YouTube.

**JS**

Totally. So much of what I do in the studio when I'm not directly working on a video is take screen shots, print them out, and do stuff to them. I have hard drives full of screenshots, which is a result of browsing the internet.

**SW**

Does it seep into the process of your films? There also seems to be an element of improvisation, like in *The Amanda Show* or Ryan Trecartin.

**JS**

It's almost always part of my process: much of the references, props, language, costumes, everything in it is a form of collage. I mad-lib many sources together in order to fit the broader semi-autobiographical narrative. I spend a lot of time looking at movies, YouTube videos, and forums online. I'll get deep into a topic such as highly sensitive people, the Manson women, child hospices, near-death experiences, and so on; and I'll go deep into comment threads.

**SW**

Speaking of YouTube, how do you think about the circulation of your work?

**JS**

Well, I want people to see my work, so I don't feel picky about how it's shown, although I feel that certain videos should be on certain platforms. For example there's a video I made earlier in the

pandemic that I made specifically for YouTube called [Judy Smolak: Lifestyle, Ideas, Family, Biography & Net-Worth](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP353ZLF_g0) ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP353ZLF\\_g0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP353ZLF_g0)) (2020). It was a fan video about this character that I made up called Judy Smolak, and she's a freelance philosopher. It's based on this Carolyn Bassette-Kennedy fan video that I found on YouTube that was a slideshow of her life with music to it.

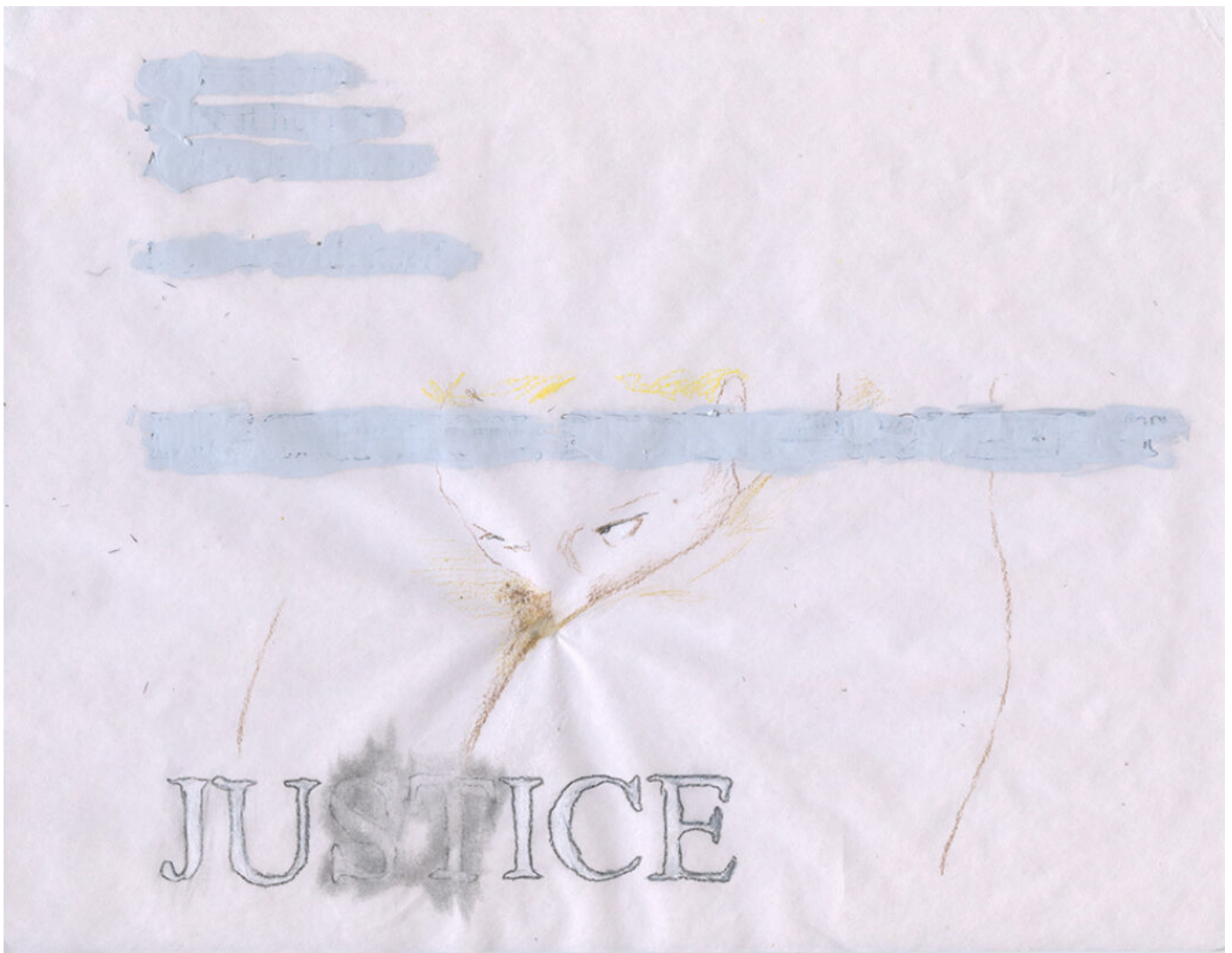
## SW

There is also a textual element to your work: the scripts are spare but very specific, and word associations appear on your carbon-copy drawings. Where in your process does script or text come into play?

## JS

In addition to collaging found text, I keep a voice-memo diary, recording dreams and thoughts almost every day. I also copy and paste or record things other people say. I often will sit down and transcribe the memos, so I have an endless document with highlighted parts and bolded parts of what I want to use for what and leftovers from this or that.

Recently, I've become interested in the form of the joke. My grandma is ninety four. She lives in Miami, and she goes on this website *Babamail* where she finds these really long, often dirty or offensive jokes that aren't very funny, and she prints them out and folds them up and then unfolds them and reads them to me. They're often in the present tense, and they're often really cruel, at least to one group. And in general, cruelty is an interest of mine. The text for *Punchline*, the Participant show, was one of my takes on those jokes.



Jordan Strafer, *JUICE 1*, 2020, colored pencil, graphite, white-out, matte medium, and eraser shavings on onion skin paper. Courtesy of the artist.

**SW**

Do you want to talk about the aspect of violence in your work? It's usually the least autobiographical component, but it's also quite a consistent theme.

**JS**

I usually depict violence being done to a femme character by a masculine character. In *Peak Heaven*, the femme character that essentially plays me is the violent one. I've always had some element of violence in my work but in a very fake way. I don't want to make art that shows what I want the world to be like; I want to make art that reflects how I feel it is. Violence is everywhere, all the time, even in family structures where people supposedly love each other.

Suicide has been an interest of mine as well. Some questions I have been trying to work through in my work are: What if you could just opt out? What if it wasn't taboo? What if it was a choice to be alive? And it wasn't a sin or illegal or pathologized? What would our society be like?

**SW**

Yeah, the videos aren't *about* violence, but they're a stimulus or a manifestation of other tensions.

**JS**

Another broad topic throughout the work that relates to violence, whiteness, and class is justice. I grew up with parents who were both criminal defense attorneys. They never let me watch cop shows because they favor the prosecutor, the government, and the police. They were like, "Turn off that show. Those cops are breaking the law."

I learned to understand morality and the law as separate things. I think a lot about definitions of justice, but also about what we as a society think justice is. What is the benefit of punishment? Where do our ideas of right and wrong come from? When all my characters are depraved in some way, and they're all wrong, is justice even possible under those circumstances?

**SW**

That makes sense. It feels that morality is more the question than violence.

**JS**

And morality is a religious idea, from patriarchal or Abrahamic religions. Imagine if we didn't have God or a king or president or a dad. If we didn't have to structure every day around a patriarchal belief system, what would our lives be?

*Jordan Strafer: PUNCHLINE* is on view at Participant Inc in New York City until February 20.

Simon Wu is an artist based in New York City. He serves as the Program Coordinator for the Racial Imaginary Institute and is an alumnus of the Whitney Independent Study Program.