

Jerry Vile: Self-Appointed Jester in the Court of High Art

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You should be taking Jerry Vile seriously.

It is easy to let this Detroit legend's tongue-in-cheek antics, low-culture references, and sometimes-crude style lead to the conclusion that Vile is conducting little more than an exercise in making people uncomfortable. Of course, it is equally easy to argue that destabilization of the mainstream through provocative social commentary is the most crucial and fundamental role of art in society, and therefore Jerry Vile is one of Detroit's most critical art practitioners.

Whatever your perspective, there are few with lukewarm feelings for Jerry Vile's cult of personality. As the man best known until recently as the organizational force behind the longstanding annual erotic art spectacle, The Dirty Show, Vile expanded his horizons in August of 2013 with a controversial piece titled "Crisco Fist (the Vessel of Hope)"—a giant-sized can of Crisco which he placed in juxtaposition with the famous Joe Louis Fist statue downtown, in response to the announcement of last year's Detroit bankruptcy filing.

Crass, perhaps. But also a cheeky and eloquent summation of the feeling shared by many Detroiters surrounding the less-than-welcome imposition of the bankruptcy proceedings. And in a city notorious for a lack of functioning services that can leave trash moldering on residential streets for months on end, it is telling that the piece was removed by city

workers within 6 hours. This and other antics—including populating the lawn of the Detroit Institute of Art with lawn flamingoes done up as vultures, lampooning the rumors that the museum’s legendary collection might be sold off to pay the city’s debts—are all in a day’s work for the man who seems unable to avoid calling attention to an emperor with no clothes.

Vile followed this opening salvo with an exhibition of work at Inner State Gallery in May of 2014. The show was heavily promoted in carnival-barker style, including a strong contender for best press release of all time, and featured an array of disorienting works, including the unveiling of a new piece that stretched the line between art and pornography to its breaking point. The opening night gala brought the central conflict of Vile’s work to the forefront: elements designed to attract (sex appeal, slick promotions, merchandising) in a visceral struggle with those designed to repel (obscenity, counter-culture, and sheer gross-out factor). Vile is on a mission to marry the highbrow to the lowbrow, and like most forms of class warfare, his work is sometimes met with discomfort, resistance, and condemnation. Indeed, staring down the opening’s refreshment table, with the shrimp cocktail (that was promoted as bait for rich art patrons with comedic fanfare) accompanied by edible grubs and taxidermied rats, it is impossible to recognize twin elements of allure and hostility underlying Vile’s every move.

With a mission as ambitious and ambiguous as this, it is tempting to turn to the artist himself for clues to his intention, but Vile’s personality is difficult to parse from the highly cultivated persona that is decades in the making, reaching far back to punk rock

roots and a publishing career that ranged from stringer for *Juxtapoz*, to writer for *White Noise*, to man-in-charge at *Orbit*.

One gets the sense that Vile, who is both kinder and more “vanilla” in person than his alias might suggest, uses his complicated public statements to deal with conflict within himself, a battle royale he has wrought between high and low culture—on one hand he will frankly acknowledge a desire for material success in his art career, on the other, stoically suggesting that, “You can really value art by how many calories it gives off when you set it on fire.”

But ultimately whether the Jerry Vile bites his thumb at the trappings of high art while secretly nursing a desire for acceptance therein or is merely celebrating in his role as ringmaster of the freakshow, such imbroglio between insider/outsider status raises too many questions to be written off as a gimmick or shock-jock artmaking. Certainly, Vile is on course to escalate, with recent projects tinged with an air of urgency, for all their humor, and idol of shock and glamour Jon Waters signed on to perform an “extra dirty” version of his one-man show for the upcoming 2015 Dirty Show.

Many a truth, they say, is told in jest; as Detroit’s resident court jester, it remains to be seen if Jerry Vile will get the last laugh.