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Interview By Simon Smith

*After much traveling, artist/photographer Jonathan Gitelson found his voice, his purpose and his legacy here in Chicago.*

Jonathan Gitelson has been inching toward renown for some time, garnering praise for his street photography and movie posters, recognizable for their thoughtful whimsy and comic-book flair. *New City* magazine lauded him as being one of the “breakout artists of 2006.” And now that he’s been commissioned by the city to create a mural for the remodeled Armitage brown line train stop, Gitelson’s unique artistic vision is about to become a lot more familiar to Chicagoans. So why is he sitting on the sofa, watching hours of footage he recorded of the trashcans outside of his window? Writer Daniel Pappas recently spent some time with Gitelson and asked him about his literary heroes, his world travels, and his fascination with the secret world of garbage cans.

DP: You’ve been known to cite Jack Kerouac and Albert Camus as influences. How did you personally feel like you could relate to those writers and that time period?

JG: You know how when you’re young you take yourself rather seriously? I think when you’re in your early twenties you try to figure yourself out. You’re at that point of going off to college, into the world on your own. You’re questioning a lot of things, which is kind of tied in with that existential philosophy, ‘what does it all mean? What am I doing here?’ I kind of knew that I would have no idea what I would do afterward. I was more self-indulgent, I guess.

DP: And then what did you do immediately after graduation?

JG: In the spring of my senior year, my photo teacher came up to me one day and asked, ‘Johnny, do you speak Spanish?’ She had met someone who was teaching photography in Guatemala and was wondering if I’d call her. At the time, I was teaching a photo class to kids for a non-profit after school program. I had never traveled out of the country. I was completely a baby from the Northeast. I moved to Guatemala that August and I was really naïve. I flew down there and I lived there for eight months. I was teaching photography to kids... well, in Guatemala many poor families live in these garbage dumps, so I was teaching kids whose families lived in these garbage dumps. So, it was like an after school program but it was really more like we helped pay for the

schooling, their uniforms and their textbooks. It was a lot of teaching but also a lot of humanitarian work...

DP: What kind of photos were you taking in Guatemala?

JG: Street photography, for sure. Lots of walking around on my own, not talking to people. And also, looking back, I think they were pretty dark. I didn't know the language very well and I got into lots of photos that seemed to represent isolation. Everything was observed and shot from a distance, physically and metaphorically, I guess. They were black and white... and the interesting thing was that it was my first time having to develop pictures without a professional darkroom. So, in order to develop your film, you had to get all of your water in the morning, because the water would turn off at noon, so it taught you discipline and resourcefulness.

DP: This whole time, you were just starting out. You were just learning how to be a photographer. When you returned, did you have a better understanding of what is was you wanted to do and how you wanted to go about doing it?

JG: Still, to this point, I was still completely unexposed to contemporary photography. I was still into looking at Robert Frank and some of his books and he was from the late fifties... and what he was doing at that time was amazing and completely groundbreaking, but we're talking forty years earlier. If I came back with anything, it was the confidence that I didn't need to have high-end equipment. So, then, when I came back and moved to Boston, I had a different approach. The thing I took from Guatemala was that, wherever I go, I'm going to set up my own darkroom. And so, the setup I had there in Boston was pretty jerry-rigged and rustic, but I was able to keep going and my love for photography was really growing through these little experiences.

DP: You were twenty-one, twenty-two?

JG: Twenty-two. I was working all these odd jobs but I always had a darkroom. I was shooting on all my days off, and I was surrounded by a lot of other artists...musicians and painters mostly ... I think if I hadn't had that experience in Guatemala, maybe I would have been more timid. I would have sat around going 'oh, I don't know, I don't have a darkroom. What am I going to do?' I learned that that wasn't so important.

DP: Were you starting to think about grad school yet at this point?

JG: I actually thought that I would never go to grad school. I would think, 'well, none of my heroes went to grad school.' But then, of course all of my heroes lived before there was grad school. I was under the impression that if you were

awesome enough, The Museum of Modern Art would just come and find you, so you don't really have to do anything.

DP: I'm noticing that you made a whole lot of big decisions in a small amount of time and most of them seemed geared toward a pursuit of lonesomeness or a need for solitary adventures.

JG: I definitely was still kind of a romantic person, but maybe less so then when I first left home. You know, that romantic notion of Jack Kerouac on the road, doing his thing and having adventures... that definitely was a huge drive when I was younger. And that's why I think I liked people like Robert Frank who were doing that same sort of stuff. And the other thing, I think, is that for doing that sort of work, you have to be solitary in a lot of ways because, at least for me, if I went out with somebody, I'd be chatting and I wouldn't be concentrating on taking photos so I always had to go out by myself.

DP: So, then you moved to Chicago. You went to Columbia College where you met up with other people like you and I know you were part of a group there that really helped inspire you.

JG: At the time, I thought I was only interested in schools that just had photography programs. I didn't want to go to art school; I wanted to go to photography school. And there actually aren't that many. So, the two schools I got into were Pratt in Brooklyn and Columbia and so I flew out here to Chicago, just to check it out, and I loved it. I landed at Midway and took the train in and it was all very Jack Kerouac-type stuff. You know, the old train yards and rundown factories, I was picturing hobos hanging out by firelight... the second I reached the city, I thought, this is it. So, I chose Columbia. So, I started at Columbia and what ended up happening was just pure luck. The group of people that came in at the same time I did were good. They were all talented and they were also good people and they somehow, in one way or another, came together under the understanding that it's a lot harder to go it alone. So we were all being very supportive but also trying to push each other, and now my best friends from Chicago, I mean, we all show together, we all travel together and lecture together, we hang out together. So, I think we fed off of each other.

DP: How did they help form your new direction?

JG: The interesting thing is that Columbia is a traditional school in a lot of ways and I think that if I had gone to a less traditional school my work would be much more traditional. I think a large part is my stubbornness. They were asking me the same questions I was asking myself. 'What does this mean? What are you doing?' At a certain point I think I hit my breaking point. I decided to make work that meant absolutely nothing.

DP: That's a pretty drastic shift from your previous notions of the dark and tragic. Those were all very serious things.

JG: I switched from doing black and white to digital, which was something I had never done. And I introduced humor, which is pretty much the opposite. I think it was from being in an environment where I was asked to have meaning, meaning, meaning all the time. That was when I did that project where I was waving in front of different places I had lived. That was one of the first pieces I made. The title explained what the project was, 'I Wave in Front of Every Apartment that I've Ever Lived in Except for One.' And then I waved in front of every apartment and that was it. I was also getting exposed finally to a lot of contemporary artists and that was a big huge part of it. I was turned on to Ed Ruscha's work and he was someone that I found very exciting. In a way, the literature stuff crept back in, not in terms of content, but just an interest in storytelling.

DP: We should talk about your new project. The trash can project...

JG: Yeah, this is a project that has really changed as I've gone along... This thing was happening where my cans were getting stolen a lot. And I noticed and thought about it a long time before I knew what to do about it. It initially started out as a way to figure out what was happening to them. About a year ago I started setting up a camera in the window. Every morning I wake up and put in two of these 12-hour VHS tapes and then I sit here and I fast-forward through an entire day of footage. The more I watched all these things happening, first of all, the less they started getting stolen, which initially was frustrating. I was wondering why the hell they wouldn't steal my carts. But then I started realizing that the project wasn't about the theft anymore but more about the life of these common objects and all the weird things that happen to them. It's sort of evolved into this look at surveillance and identity and other things, but it also touches on what happens in the middle of nowhere on a daily basis when people don't know that they are being watched...

DP: And the objects are personified. It's almost as if the garbage cans have a rich life on their own.

JG: That's one of my favorite things that art can do sometimes... My friend Brian has been photographing people shopping. And one day I was at IKEA where he's shot before and all of a sudden I felt like I was in one of his pictures and I felt like hyper aware of everything I was doing, and I felt also like someone might be photographing me right now. With this project, there are times where I'll be walking and I'll put something in someone's can and I'll be much more aware of what's happening. There's also this idea of it all being public. They're not my

cans. I didn't buy them. I have this sort of personal feeling toward them. It's bizarre...

DP: I know that you recently got commissioned to do a public art piece. Can you talk about that?

JG: Yeah, it's going to be part of the Armitage brown line station. It's a permanent 45-foot wall. When you walk through the turnstiles, it will be facing you.

DP: How did you get involved? How did you get selected to do the project?

JG: I was in a show at the Cultural Center and they asked me to write a proposal and I did. For three months I interviewed people on the platform. I just asked them, 'what is something important or memorable that happened to you here in Chicago and where did it take place?' I recorded it. And then later, I would go to the location where their story took place and I would photograph it. Each tile is going to include a photo and an excerpt from the interview. The tiles are going to be glass, twenty-four inches... So, one of them, for example says, 'I moved here in May. I found myself in a job downtown that I didn't really enjoy. When it got to be too much, on lunch breaks I would go to the little park by the Art Institute. It was a great place to get away and forget about what was going on at work.' One guy told me about his favorite swimming hole when he was a kid.

DP: Have you thought about what your most memorable story would be if you were asked that question?

JG: I spent a lot of time thinking about that. I think it works better if someone just asks you and you don't have a lot of time to think about it. I was thinking about one of my first dates with my wife and I was thinking about where I used to go for breakfast every day the first year I lived here, but it's hard.

DP: This is a really elaborate project. There's a lot of time invested in this.

JG: I'm still in that place where, I'll believe it when I see it. It looks good outlined on my wall, but... I love the idea of people's stories getting out there. I think about Studs Terkel and *This American Life* and this is sort of a tribute to things like that. And this was cool because I had to drive to places like Eighty-Fourth and California... neighborhoods I had never been to before.

DP: This is a real feel-good project, isn't it? You're documenting these people's favorite memory. Mainly, it seems like you've been getting fond memories of places.

JG: (Reading from one of the tiles) 'When I was a kid, I came up in the Robert Taylor homes. I'll never forget one day we went to Hyde Park just exploring. When I crossed Drexel Avenue to Hyde Park at Fifty-First Street I literally thought we were in another town. Hyde Park exposed me to a whole new world and my life has never been the same since.' It's definitely optimistic and I think public art should be most of the time. That's why I think 'The Bean' is actually so amazing. A lot of time art is something that maybe people feel like the need to go to school for in order to be a part of it or something, but the Bean is something that is just fun and anyone can go out any time of day and there are going to be like fifty people there touching it. I think that's what public art should be.

DP: Have you contacted the people who made the cut and let them know that they will be part of it?

JG: Not everyone gave me contact information. They all signed release forms. Some of them didn't have Internet access. I tried to interview as many types of people as humanly possible. There are college kids, there are elderly people, upper income, lower income... I feel really good about it for the community but I feel good about it for me too (laughs) because I feel like if I can have this be a part of me and my body of work, it will help a lot.

DP: This is legacy building.

JG: Yeah, it's great. Chicago is sort of my new adopted home and it's nice to have something that links me... I think if I step back from it and really think about it... I'll be overwhelmed with how long it will last. I'm still in the middle of it now so I haven't had a lot of time to think about those things.