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Monkmus Eve

Videodrome

The animated videos of Ken Wong, a.k.a. Monkmus, are well-loved by fans of Kid Koala, Badly Drawn Boy, and Death Cab for Cutie. So why don't more people know about him? The confident but humble filmmaker says it's because fans of the respective bands don't cross over, but more likely it's because he moves around too often for people to catch up. Wong has lived in Los Angeles, Portland, and Toronto, and we caught up with him as he was about to leave San Luis Obispo for New York City.



GR: Do you consider yourself a filmmaker, animator, artist, or what?

M: I've considered myself more of a filmmaker for a long time. I'm always changing, adjusting my style for the bands, tracks, and music and am most concerned about the pacing and making sure the feel is right and that the story goes with the music.

GR: Most people think of character design and motion when it comes to animation. It seems like you're more attentive to details that are under the surface.

M: Well, I just want things to feel right when they're done. I want there to be an energy to it, and I think the design and everything else goes into that. And I've been drawing for so long that I just draw a certain way. I'm always adjusting, but it still comes out looking the same.

GR: When you were a kid, did you draw a lot?

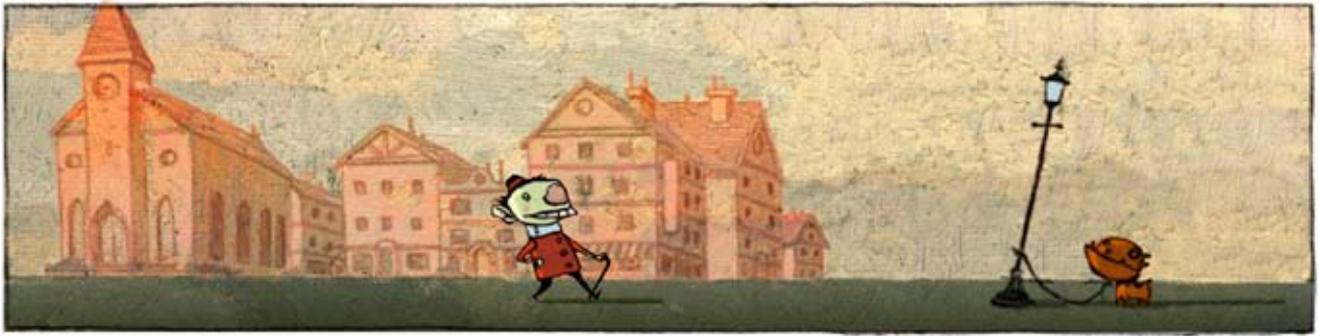
M: I grew up in Maryland around D.C. I was really bad about keeping my textbooks clean. I used to draw a lot in them. My mom could draw and she always supported me drawing, but neither of my parents thought of it as a career. And neither did I until late in high school when an art teacher said, "Maybe you should look into art school." I was like, "What's that?" Then I started getting interested in animation. I started seeing Tim Burton stuff coming out from Disney and started getting excited about that field.

GR: Before that, were you expecting to grow up and get a shitty job?

M: Exactly. It was my first semester of my senior year in high school. I was fortunate to get into RISD. My dad was like, "Art school isn't supposed to cost that much!" But my mom said, "You have to go because RISD is a really, really hard school to get into."

GR: Don't more animators go to CalArts than RISD?

M: I think it's a new trend, and there was a handful at RISD. Seth MacFarlane was in the class ahead of me and Mike DiMartino was in the same class as me.



Development art for "The Topside Rag" (Cartoon Network, 2005).

I think people like my work but no one knows I've done all of it because the fan bases are so disparate.

GR: When I think of RISD, I think of noisy music and neon-colored art.

M: Totally. I was in the same class as Brian Ralph. We weren't close and I wasn't in the Fort Thunder crowd, but I hung out with him and saw a lot of exciting stuff coming out of there.

GR: Your stuff seems as youthful, but way more refined and mellow.

M: A good friend of mine said that I was fortunate to have spent time at both RISD and CalArts. My work is halfway between the two. RISD pushes for doing your own thing and thinking for yourself. CalArts is like, "Work hard and get to Pixar." That's great and I know some great artists who were made for that and do beautiful work at the studios. But getting a little of both is really helpful. CalArts really teaches professionalism and you don't get any of that at RISD.

Actually, I got into the Disney training program and it's really hard to get into, but I turned it down because I didn't want to sacrifice three years in Florida for something that I wasn't 100 percent sure about.

GR: How did you end up making videos?

M: Actually, I wound up at DreamWorks. I did in-betweening on *Prince of Egypt* for a year, and that was a good experience.

GR: But was it a good movie?

M: The design and the artists that were working on it were brilliant, but the story killed the project. The funny thing about the studios is that they'll make some great decisions in the beginning, like "We're going to use Willie Nelson for this horse movie and we're going to do it with no dialogue." But when it comes down to execution, people get cold feet.

GR: It seems like a lot of music video guys want to work on big projects, but you moved in an opposite direction.

M: Yeah, I went backwards. I would have loved to stay at a studio but the way they do things turned out to be such a factory.

I left, went to *The PJs* for a year, then decided to go independent when I got an offer to do some work with a friend of mine. My friend and I were working on a web project with a children's book illustrator named J. Otto, who was a huge fan of Kid Koala.

GR: And you guys are related?

M: Kid Koala is a distant cousin of mine. Eric's family moved to Maryland when I was in high school. We hung out when our parents would get together, but never actually got close. I hadn't seen him in 6 or 7 years, but I gave him a call to see if he'd be interested in doing music for the website.

We sent stuff to Eric, and a week later, he said, "I really like this J. Otto stuff but, actually, do you want to do my music video?" I was like, "That would be cool!" So we got in touch with Ninja Tune and "Fender Bender" got done.

GR: What was the process like?

M: Eric is a pretty laid-back guy in general, and he was so busy when I was making "Fender Bender" that he just let me go. We had one meeting at Coachella at some Denny's. After that,

Still from video for "Basin Street Blues" (Kid Koala, 2000).



ROCKER'S DELIGHT

	 Kid Koala (Canada)	 Badly Drawn Boy (UK)	 Death Cab for Cutie (USA)	 Los Campesinos! (UK)
Song, Album (Year)	"Fender Bender," <i>Carpal Tunnel Syndrome</i> (2000)	"Year of the Rat," <i>Year of the Rat</i> EP (2004)	"I Will Follow You Into The Dark," <i>Plans</i> (2005)	"We Throw Parties, You Throw Knives"; "You, Me Dancing!" <i>Hold On Now, Youngster</i> (2008)
Genre	Turntablism	Indie singer-songwriter	Indie rock	Brit pop
Related Bands	Bullfrog, Gorillaz	Elliott Smith, Bright Eyes	The Postal Service	Broken Social Scene
Plot	Young dude and old geezer collide, weirdness ensues.	Damon Gough hugs his way to world peace.	Bunnies on the pages of a sketch-book don't come to life.	Armies fight and dance their way to Armageddon, mutants survive to fight some more.
Monkmus' take	"Kid Koala's music inspired 10 ideas that eventually were combined into 1 super crazy idea"	"It began with Damon comforting one person, and the idea just kept growing bigger from there."	"At one point it was a bunny and a duck. Thankfully, I went with two bunnies instead."	"The music struck me as fun but also violent. So I came up with a concept equating partying to warfare"
Misc.	First of Monkmus' many collaborations with his distant cousin.	Damon Gough's alias came from the '70s cartoon, <i>Sam and His Magic Bell</i> .	DCFC fans have offered to buy the book featured in the video, but Monkmus has given it to his wife.	The videos were commissioned as two parts of a larger story.

They're all very personal but nobody would ever know.

Character sketch for "Year of the Rat" (Badly Drawn Boy, 2004).



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it was pretty much, "You'll get it when it's done."

He could have come back and said, "I don't like this," but he thought it was great. I gained a certain amount of trust from that, and every project I've done with him since, he pretty much lets me go because he has faith that I'm going to nail it.

GR: Although you've made a lot of videos since then, you mentioned that you actually haven't been interviewed much.

M: I think people like my work but no one knows I've done all of it because the fan bases are so disparate. Kid Koala is one group, Death Cab is another group, and Los Campesinos! is a new group.

GR: And none of their fans are friends?

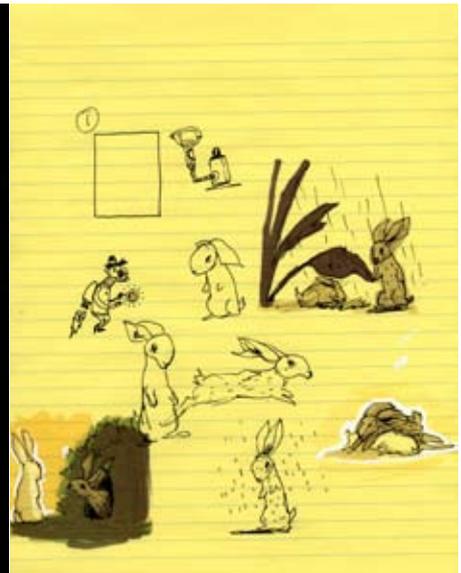
M: Exactly. People know my work for one piece, but I've recently put more stuff on YouTube and I'm starting to build awareness that I do other work.

GR: When you sign on to make video for new bands, do they expect you to come up with a totally different style?

M: For a lot of projects I do something different just because I want to try something new. Like for Badly Drawn Boy, I had to do a caricature of him but I really wanted to add color. Up to that point, a lot of my stuff was monochrome.

GR: The video you made for Death Cab for Cutie's "I Will Follow You Into The Dark" is almost like anti-animation, with a hand turning pages of a book.

M: Yes, and yet it is animated because we shot it with a still frame camera so it's all pixilated. When I was contacted to do that project, it was pretty much like, "We've got a really small budget but we really like your work, so do whatever you want." At that point I wanted to stretch and do something different. Also, with the time and money available, I didn't have the resources to do it all. So I thought I'd shoot something live.



Still from video and development sketches for "I Will Follow You Into The Dark" (Death Cab for Cutie, 2005).

I wasn't interested in reliving my Catholic school days.

GR: Was it difficult to not just depict the lyrics literally?

M: That's always tough, but that song was especially tough because of the way Ben Gibbard sings it. The lyrics are really clear and succinct, and it was hard to push them aside. In the early stages I had drawings of nuns and crosses. Then I thought, "This isn't working." I went to a lot of Catholic schools and, to be honest, that was a reason why I considered not doing the song. It was a little too obvious and I wasn't interested in reliving my Catholic school days.

GR: Can your videos be personal even though they're for other people's songs?

M: They're all very personal but nobody would ever know. I pull a lot from myself into them, and I think that's why they work emotionally and effectively. I'm good at getting an emotional hit out of a song.

GR: Are you very selective about the songs you pick?

M: I haven't turned down a lot of work. And I've pitched a lot of stuff that people would probably not consider to be up my alley but didn't win for one reason or another.

GR: Something like Mariah Carey?

M: No, nothing like that. I used to joke that if Avril Lavigne wanted a video, I'd be game. I know that with the bigger names there's more interference, but it's a challenge to try to make it work. I attract a certain type of artist so the mesh is usually there to begin with, but not always. Like Los Campesinos! was a bit of a reach. I love their music, but their style is very different from anything I had done up to that point. So the video is very different than what I had done before.

GR: So where does Sesame Street fit in?

M: I don't even know how they found me. They approached me a while back to do some animation about interrelationships between kids, hygiene, and how they should share.

GR: It must be freaky to work on an institution that affects so many impressionable kids.

M: Yeah, and the people at the Sesame Street Workshop are the types of client you want. They give you hard feedback and it never seems like it's coming from nowhere because they have opinions about what they think works and doesn't work.

GR: Is it different than working with a client like Sony?

M: That's different. Sony had an art director and a writer and they had an idea of what they wanted before I was hired. My input was about timing and making sure the jokes worked.

GR: Do you draw every day?

M: I draw every day, but I draw more on some days than others. It depends on my workflow and inspiration.

GR: Do you draw in sketchbooks and make personal work on the side?

M: I have a lot of sketches and have the tendencies to sketch on 8 1/2" x 11": papers, which I have everywhere. I keep them because you never know if a random sketch will become something later.

GR: You work at home?

M: Yeah, I can draw pretty much anywhere, but I have a space separate for work. Cintiq just came out with this 12" tablet where you can draw shit on your monitor. It's a little pricy, but it's worth the investment if I can put it in my bag and go to a coffee shop.

GR: Sometimes it's good for a freelancer to shower, put on clean clothes, and go outside.

M: Sometimes I have to force myself to shower, put on clothes, and work at home.

GR: Where did the name Monkmus come from?

M: I don't even know where I got it anymore, but nobody knows I'm Asian. Well, now they do, but for a long time they didn't.

GR: Some of the bands that you've worked with are whiter than white. Do they ever say, "Whoa, you're Monkmus?"

M: Everybody's been cool, but I did kind of like that nobody really knew my ethnicity so there was no preconception about my work.

GR: I think it must be cool for someone who works in the geekiest of professions to get to work with bands, go backstage at shows, and eat off their spreads.

M: And I think I've been working with the geekiest of musicians, so it kind of translates well. 🐱