

# A Drop In The Ocean: Acool55

Art, Interviews · T.K. Mills







I knew next to nothing about [Acool55](#) when I went to meet him in the East Village. I had been drawn to the artist for his message – his works are imbued with socio-political and environmental meaning. So, I stood in Fresco Gelateria, unsure of who I was looking for.

I noticed two Italian gentlemen in the corner of the coffee shop. One turned and I read his jacket: “Make Toys Not Guns.” We shared some brief introductions and espresso, before Acool55 led the three of us, including Frank his assistant, over to his studio with a call of “Andiamo!”

## OLD DOGS LEARN NEW STREETS

The moniker always struck me – so I opened by asking where it came from. Acool55 is actually a phonetic flip of the artist’s real name. L-U-C-A became A-C-O-O-L. And the digits: “55 is my lucky number... I’ve always used 55, I’ve always played the 55. ... I like the double five. I don’t know why. Maybe one day I knew... but it’s been a long time.” Acool55 said with a laugh.

Acool55 is a mature man, which may surprise those who think art is exclusively a young gun’s game. Before turning to street art, Acool55 had established himself as a professional fashion photographer,

among other specialties. It was his work in fashion that led him to the streets.

*Glamour Italia* hired him to do a story on Libby Schoettle, known best for her character Phoebe, the darling of New York streets. For their interview, they worked together, taking photos and rocking the shoot. Later when Libby came by Acool55's studio, she asked if he had done photography outside of fashion, and he showed her some of his environmental and experimental pictures.

Libby loved it. She told him to make some prints, and to meet her in Red Hook at two in the morning. Dutifully, he complied. On his first late-night pasting, Libby taught him the basics, and he put his piece up next to her Phoebe. After, he more or less forgot about it, until a few weeks later Libby gave him a call:

“Do you see what’s happening?”

Their Red Hook expedition was blowing up on Instagram. While much of the focus was around Phoebe, chatter in the comments was buzzing about who this new artist was. Acool55 felt this positive energy was a sign; "I learned a long time ago that nothing happens by accident. There is always a reason.”

In the past, Acool55 had collaborated with major organizations around the world such as the United Nations and UNICEF. However, the bureaucracy of big institutions means that art produced through them experiences a dilution – the meaning is watered down.

“Here I am, struggling to send a message out about taking better care of the planet.... [when] I can write something on the wall, and people will actually come by and take pictures of it.”

Acool55 was inspired. He started coming up with concepts and ideas, moving his photography and art more in that direction. May 5th of this year, Cinco de Mayo, will mark the 2-year anniversary of his entrance to streets. In this time, he has been incredibly productive, flying to cities around the world for his art. What drives Acool55 is both the profound connections he made and the freedom of creation he acquired.

“Your experience as an artist... is a high.” He grinned. “I have no problem admitting it. I’m addicted to street art.”

Acool55 keeps a good sense of humor about his age: “I’m the oldest rookie in the street art world.” At first, he expected to be rejected because he did not fit the prototype. Instead, he was surprised by how warm people were. “There’s a great sense of community and helping each other, teaching each other, getting spaces for each other.”

He smiled. “They make fun of me of course, but I make fun of them too. We throw it back and forth.”

As always, Acool55 wanted to give back. So, he gathered his resources, and set out to help make spaces for artists. He acquired the management of a yellow cab company in Queens, and helped launch what is now known as [“The Great Wall of Savas.”](#) Acool55 manages the walls there, as well as a billboard on 39th street and Queens Blvd that can be seen from the subway. He understands the unwritten rule of street art – pass it forward.

“I truly, truly, truly appreciate the community.”







## “IMAGES ARE GLOBAL”

I noted how photography seemed to play a prominent role in shaping his sense of aesthetics. I asked him about when he first picked up the camera.

“By trade, I’m a journalist,” Acool55 explained, “my natural talent is supposed to be writing.”

He went to university for journalism, however he found it to be somewhat limiting, [given that Italy is the only country that speaks Italian.] One day on assignment, he was paired with a photographer, and while working on the story, Acool55 thought. ‘I want his job.’ With photography, Acool55 was able to reach a wider audience. “Images are global.”

Acool55 managed to make a career through persistence – “I’m very stubborn.” His involvement with fashion came from his natural eye for aesthetics, and that the industry offered the most promising opportunities. Acool55 joked that his relationship with fashion has been both “love and hate.”

Still, his experience has carried over. Acool55 recently came back from Miami, where he was wrapping up one his projects – *The Three Brides*. The Plastic Bride, the Petrol Bride, and the latest, the Polar Bride. Each is meant to symbolize the negative impacts we have on our environment. For the series, he worked with fashion teams to create base images that he would then paint on top of.

Acool55 showed me some of the other projects he created. One of the first was *R.I.P. Air*. A woman in a gas mask holds the world in her hands, the globe drained of color. The piece has a strong message, though he noted it was the last gas mask he wanted to incorporate into his work after realizing the iconography had been overplayed. Still, the piece has a personal touch – the model hidden in the ventilator is a dear friend – Libby.

Other works of his take a more humorous approach to environmental catastrophe. *GMH - Genetically Modified Humans* is a play on GMO. The series depicts a baby with a turtle shell, crawling away. The meaning is intended as a satirical look at how our destruction of the planet will force us to adapt to the ruins we create. A protective shell is stronger than human skin, and will be necessary to survive the post-climate change world.

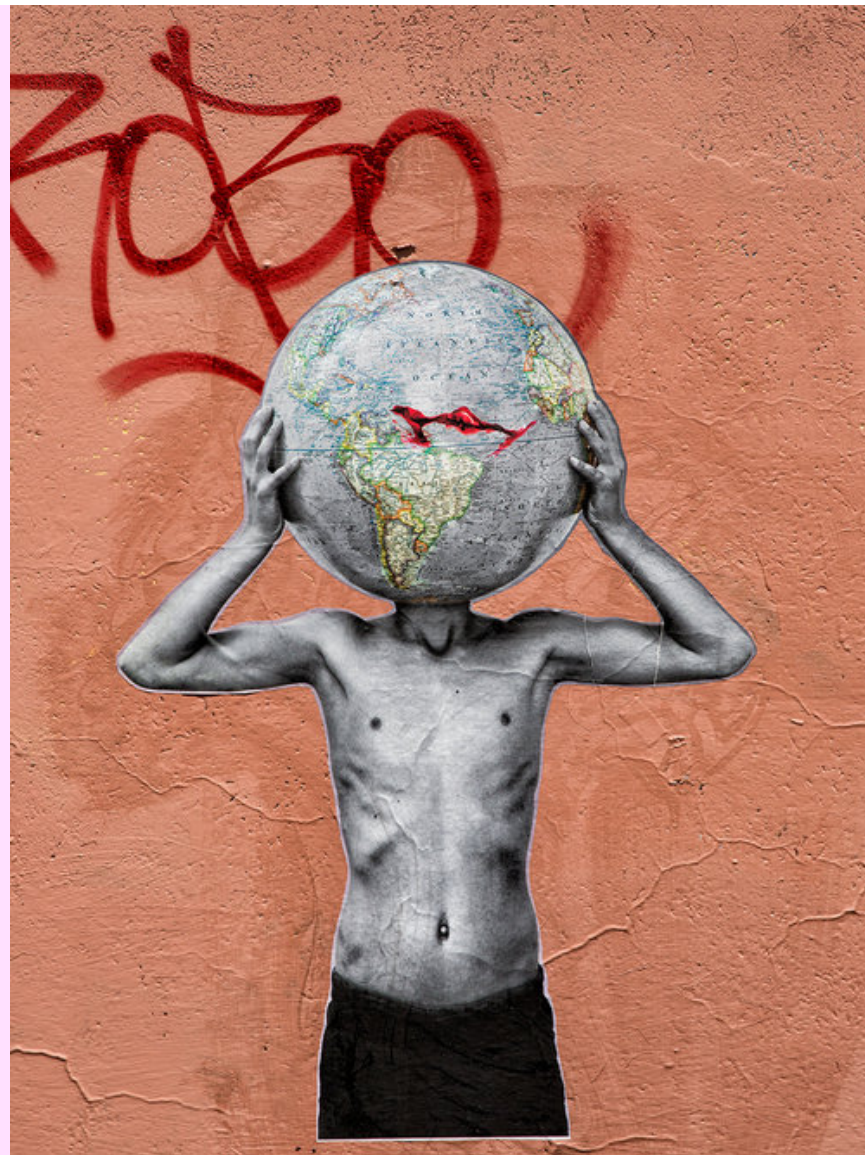
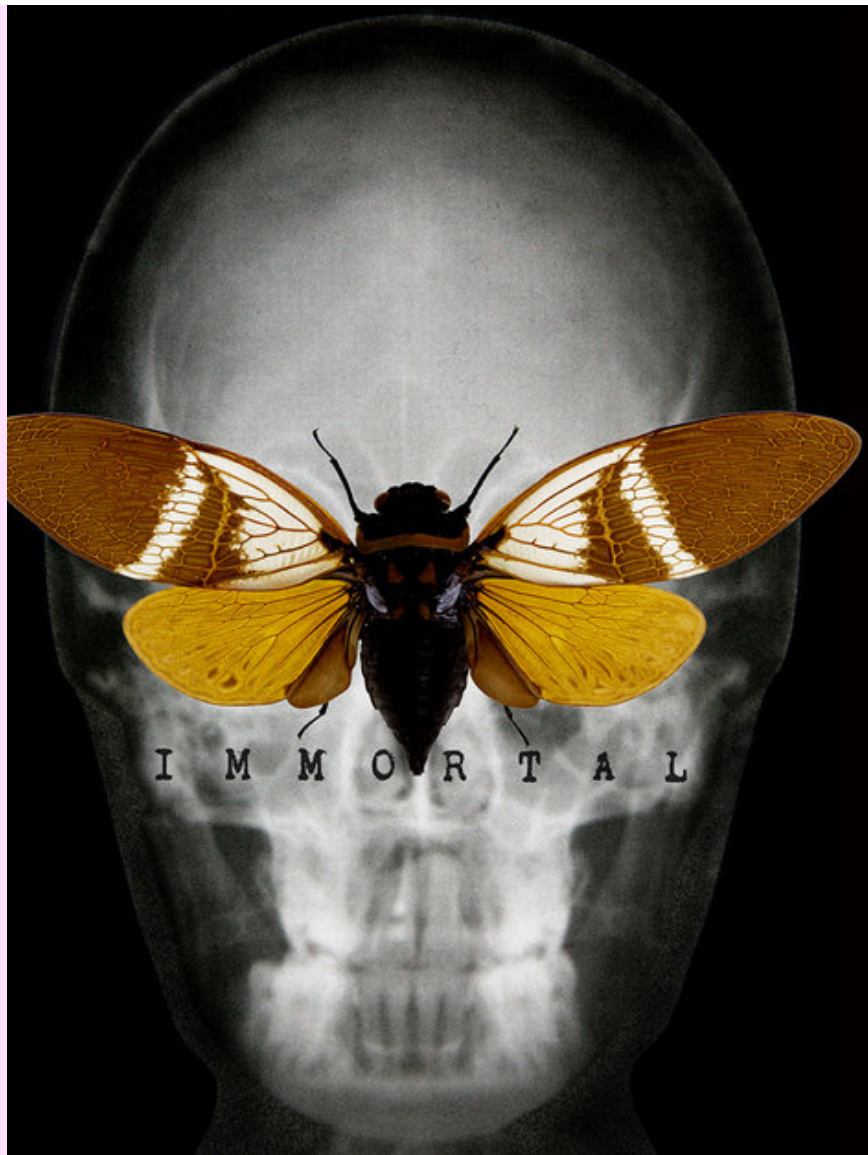
Many of his works feature tag lines, meant to vocalize the message. However, Acool55 is looking to expand on this idea. In the future, he wants to incorporate poetic elements.

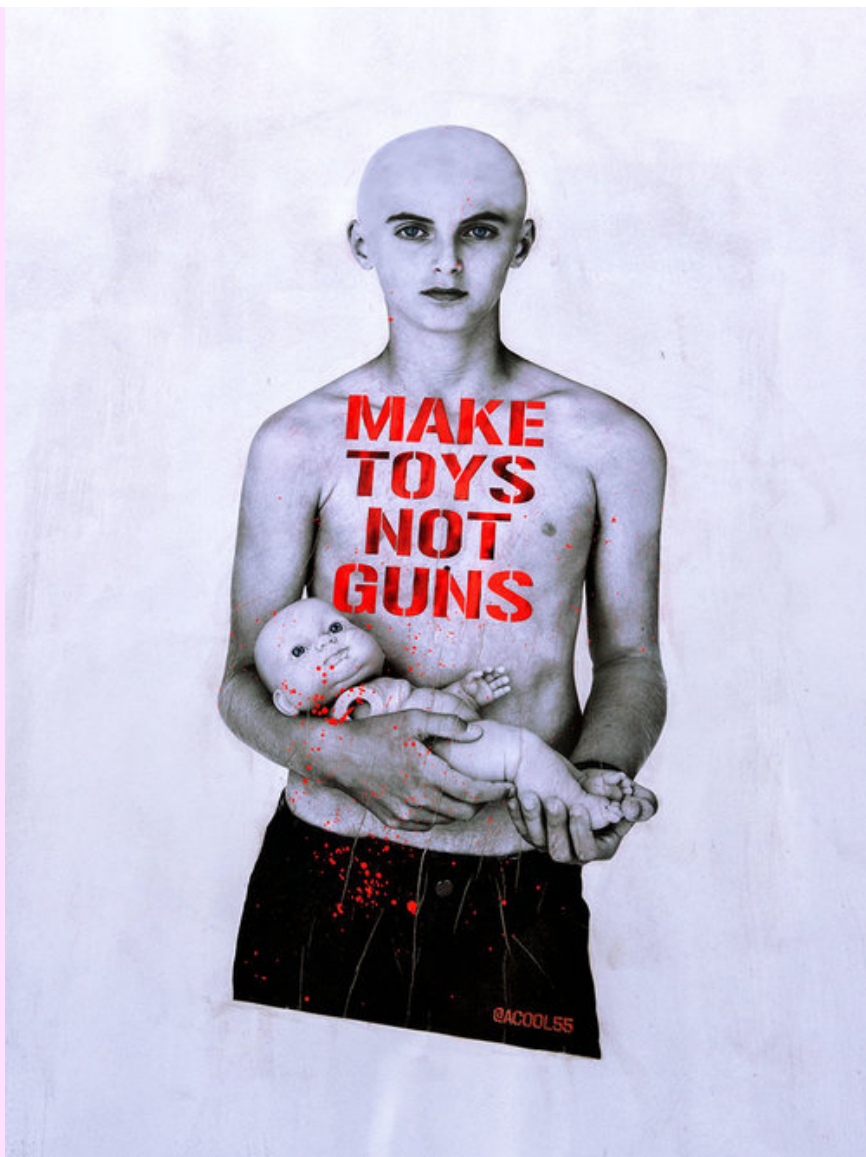
“I think the haiku format is very good for street art. It’s short and to the point. But it also has a musical quality and a rhyme structure.” He added, “and it’s not a tweet — which is dry and ugly.”

An upcoming project is titled *SPACECOWS: MISSION TO MARS*. From what he told me, I can tell the creativity will be out of this world. Acool55 gave some thoughts on pushing creative boundaries:



“There’s a lot of messages and signs out there... you need to be in good harmony with yourself and your environment. You need to be able to transmit art and receive art.”









# A LOVE OF THE SEA

Acool55's connection with the ocean has made an impact on his art – and his philosophies.

He began, “let me tell you why this is embedded in my DNA.”

Acool55 grew up in Genova, an Italian city on the north coast of the country, near the border with France.

He joked that it was the Italian version of California.

“I’m like an Italian beach bum, basically.”

As a kid, he spent more time on water than on land – his days were scenes of scuba diving, swimming, boating, “always doing something with the ocean.”

Through his water-borne adventures, Acool55 befriended many fishermen and their families who taught him “how beautiful the partnership between humans and the sea is... but you know how the rest of the story goes. We trashed it.”

Spending so much time with the ocean made him painfully conscious of the adverse effects that humans, particularly through the form of plastic waste, have done harm. “Water is my element... the degradation made me very sad.”

"In the back of my mind, I always said 'If I care so much about this, I should do something about it.'"

The turning point came by way of opportunity. In 2010, Acool55 flew out to San Francisco to photograph Plastiki. A riff on the original Kon-Tiki raft, *Plastiki* was a boat made out of 100% recycled plastic. The boat would then voyage across the ocean, as the original did, to bring awareness to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a floating cluster of debris the size of Texas that has had devastating effects on the ocean.

Also known as the Pacific Trash Vortex, it is composed of non-decomposing materials that poison fish via micro-beads of plastic. Marine life absorbs the toxic pollutants, and the effects reverberate through ecosystems. *Plastiki* was created to bring attention to the issue — a project led by David de Rothschild.

After witnessing first hand David's ambitions with the project, Acool55 wanted to get more involved. He started flying out to San Francisco whenever he had a free weekend to continue documenting the construction of *Plastiki*. The boat achieved its goal of being made from 100% recycled plastic, and set off on its maiden voyage. Acool55 joined on the second leg of the journey, as the *Plastiki* crossed the equator, spending over a month and a half sailing.

"I owe it to David for reinforcing my environmental beliefs."









## THE MESSAGE

During our interview, our conversation expanded beyond street art, to contemporary issues. Acool55 is socially-conscious, and continues to push himself to improve, so he can “walk the walk and talk the talk.”

However, unlike some strands of progressive thought, Acool55 is very practical and open-minded.

While speaking about his “Make Toys Not Guns” campaign, we discussed gun ownership. Although Acool55 never wanted a gun, he ended up with one. Acool55 was living on a mesa in New Mexico, in the wilds of the desert. Many of his neighbors pushed him to buy a gun, for safety and self-defense. Acool55 actively resisted these pleas, until a close encounter with a mountain lion, several attacks on his farm by coyotes, and other scourges of the desert made him reconsider.

“So, I got a gun.” He said with a sigh and a chuckle.

In all his years of ownership, he only fired it once — into the sky as a warning shot, to scare off some wild dogs who were attacking his dog. To Acool55, the solution for the epidemic of gun violence in the United States is to stress education, and to institute smart regulations that limit who can buy guns — such as restricting access for the mentally unstable. He noted that while the NRA may pump out its counter-marketing whenever there is an attack, it is a battle they will lose in time, comparing it to the fight big tobacco had over cigarettes.



We discussed differences of culture between America and Europe, and the former's leaning toward puritanism and witch-hunts, which makes honest debate difficult. However, as Acool55 noted, "no country is perfect." He cited some of Europe's troubles in the past. Though Europe may be more progressive in some ways, it was often because historical circumstance forced them to face it earlier. Acool55 "hates it when Europeans stand on the podium and preach."

*"Bullshit."* The word rolling off his accent.

A similar point can be made about progressivism in general — it is better to reach people on their level, rather than talk down to them, if you want to inspire true change. This is a major part of his attraction for street art. "It's art for the people."

Acool55 has long been involved in causes. Even before he took to the streets, he worked on various philanthropic ventures. As he wasn't wealthy enough to make donations, he liked to dedicate his time and talent to charitable missions. Whether it was documenting the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, or anti-malaria initiatives in Sierra Leone, he tried to bring positive change. Acool55 has taught workshops on photographic communication, providing people with the tools to express themselves.

Progress moves slowly, but it moves. In today's world, it is impossible to take a stance without people criticizing — those that accuse you of doing too much or not enough. As we wrapped up, Acool55 offered some advice to other socially-conscious artists: