

'Beauty School Gave Me Brain Damage' Seth Bogart's obsessive fandom

The Wacky Wacko store on LA's Sunset Boulevard – you never knew what you might find there. One time, it was completely covered in brash, red, Wotsit-shaped splotches with candy-pink plinths dripping in aqua-blue paint and a giant, shambolic papier-mâché bottle of Chanel No 5 looming in the corner. Later, it was full of *Flintstones*-esque furniture with a pair of huge, green hands reaching towards a ceiling covered in yellow fringing and a big leg hanging from a doorway. Lips, tongues, suggestive bananas, handcuffs, cartoon eyes with extra-long lashes and gigantic toothbrushes abounded.

All of this provided a kitsch setting for the artist-designed clothing sold at the store – the T-shirts, sweaters, miniskirts and swimming trunks on their flamingo-pink hangers, with slogans that yelled out: 'MEN MUST DIE! (AT LEAST A LOT THEM)', 'SISSY BOYS UNITE', 'GRRRL POWER', 'BAD TASTE', or 'NEED A PLACE TO HIDE THAT WIG?'

The tiny shop was really two shops in one: the Kansas-based artist and fashion designer Peggy Noland's self-titled store and Seth Bogart's Wacky Wacko. Interested in how a retail space could function as art and, according to the blog *Revising Loneliness*, 'playfully questioning the hierarchy of galleries, commerce and performance', the artists created a collaborative environment that was at once a gallery, studio and store showcasing their crude brushwork, papier-mâché sculptures, wonky ceramics, zines and clothing designs. And since the two artists collaborated and influenced each other, their work came together to form a cohesive vision. Bogart tells me that he loves collaborating because of the silliness it inspires.

Although the Peggy Noland store continues with a similar sensibility, Wacky Wacko left the premises last summer so that Bogart could focus on other things. It still occasionally 'pops up' as a physical space – in an explosion of brashly painted cartoons at RuPaul's DragCon last September, for example – but it's all about wackywacko.com for now. The spirit of irreverence continues online, from the jagged music that plays as you enter the site to the lipstick-red command 'YOU MUST BUY!', salivating tongues and peeling bananas that flash on-screen as you peruse the items on offer. And although artist friends contribute images for T-shirts, this is clearly Seth Bogart's project.

Crowned 'the new king of camp' by *Pitchfork*'s Quinn Moreland, Seth Bogart started Wacky Wacko as a record label but, since 2014, it has been a clothing and accessory line featuring drawings of his various obsessions:

an eclectic mix of girl punk, LGBT and other pop-cultural icons, cosmetics, kinky sex, products and packaging. 'That's what I want to put out into the world,' he told *LA Weekly*. 'Just stuff I love, tributes to my favourite pop stars.'

Take the 'Grrrls Do Everything Better' long-sleeved T-shirt. It's a collagistic homage to Bogart's fave punk and Riot Grrrl bands: Kleenex, Free Kitten, Bikini Kill and Wayne County, to name but a few. 'To me, punk is women and gay guys,' he told *Bullett Media* last summer. 'They're the only people that can be punk any more. And obviously trans people – that's what punk is to me.' Hand-drawn copies of album artwork, portraits of pop stars and badges are cut and pasted together, along with band names and song titles. Like fan art or the pages of a Nineties pop zine, it's both appealingly crude and carefully observed – and drawn with the kind of loving attention to detail that only a true fan could give.

All of Bogart's works for Wacky Wacko are essentially zines in the form of clothing. It makes sense, then, that his graphic style developed from his early zine-making and his involvement in various music scenes. 'I made zines as a teenager because, thankfully, there was no social media,' he tells me. 'So it was my only way of reaching out to other weirdos around the world.' Wacky Wacko even has its own self-titled magazine, risographed in red on bubble-gum-pink paper. The theme of the current issue? Obsession! 'Obsession is fun and I don't know how else to be,' he says.

Bogart's punk DIY sensibility goes beyond his zine aesthetic. He is self-taught and runs his own business (although he has also lent his designs to big brands such as Saint Laurent). 'I think art school would have killed something inside me. Thank God I didn't go!' he tells me.

Raised in Tucson, Arizona, the 36-year-old was known first for music rather than art. Since his teens, he has been touring in garage rock and electro bands such as Gravy Train!!!! and Hunx and His Punx, and more recently as a solo act. 'Instead of going to college, I toured and made records and I think that taught me more about life and creating than any school would ever have.' Rejecting art school as expensive and boring, he made artwork for albums and designed T-shirts and costumes. 'I was always into the visual elements of being in a band,' he says. It was making sets for music videos that got him into making sculptures and installations and led him to develop a multimedia approach.

Bogart's work often revels in the details of branded packaging: the different kinds of lettering, product names and slogans that get used. In items such as the 'Condoms' cotton pants or the 'Tampons' T-shirt, he seems to parodically celebrate the sheer variety of designs and abundant

consumer choice available for these intimate yet essential items. 'I think aesthetically, I've always been drawn to packaging and products, combs and blow dryers, all that,' he told *LA Weekly*. 'Beauty school gave me brain damage. And product obsession,' he tells me, referring to his previous life as a hairdresser in Oakland.

His fascination with branding is also apparent in his mock-promotion of imaginary products such as 'Lather Daddy Bodywash: For Daddies Only', 'Manty Hose' (like panty hose but for guys) and *Hollywood Nailz*, an online variety show that he launched in 2012, which featured absurd commercials for galactic fetishes. But it especially shows in his personal branding as 'Seth Bogart': 'I've become obsessed with branding myself ever since I saw this psychic a few years ago who told me I needed to put my name on things I make,' he told *Iheartcomix.com*. 'Until then, I had never used my birth name on literally almost anything. Now I'm addicted. I love overdoing it.'

This tendency found its fullest expression with *The Seth Bogart Show* in 2015, which was both a spectacular variety-show style tour to promote his new album (titled *Seth Bogart*) and a multimedia visual art show at LA's 365 S Mission Gallery. The exhibition was like a Wacky Wacko interior but it offered Bogart a lot more space to play with, and it was also a homage to the late-eighties CBS children's programme *Pee-Wee's Playhouse*. (It even featured a version of Chairy from the show.) Bogart was inspired by the props he was making for the videos used on his musical tour, which screened from a giant TV in the gallery. There was also a hair salon and hand-made versions of some of Bogart's favourite things, from grooming tools to a giant tube of Crest. 'I realised that I really wanted to make my own world that someone can walk into,' he told Moreland. 'I wanted it to be overwhelming rather than going into a white-walled gallery where you look at three things.'

Bogart has been obsessed with *Pee-Wee's Playhouse* since childhood and also admires the work of Gary Panter, who designed many of the show's sets. His other artistic influences include Claes Oldenberg, John Waters, David Hockney and Pierre et Gilles, but it was seeing the work of Magdalena Suarez Frimkiss that made him want to make ceramics. 'I LOVE making things with my hands,' he tells me. Bogart clearly has fun with his materials as well as his subject matter. But it's the attitude that comes across in the botched-looking craftsmanship that's most important: 'I love if a thing looks kind of like shit and has the person's personality and handiwork,' he told Moreland, 'I don't know why everyone tries to be like everyone else or just tries to make it to the top, when they should be themselves and do their own thing.'

Critics have noticed Bogart's intense focus on aesthetic in his music. In her essay 'Notes on Camp', Susan Sontag suggests that camp is a sensibility rather than an idea – a sensibility that revels in artifice, stylisation, theatricalisation, irony, playfulness and exaggeration, rather than content. In Bogart's work, the sense of playfulness that comes across in his choice of subject matter and its schlocky rendering *is* the idea – the 'content', as it were – as his friend and collaborator Peggy Noland explained to *Noisey*: 'I feel like it's maybe all novelty. On purpose, though. Not as a gimmick, but just as a sincere appreciation of novelty.' Bogart's work reminds us to be true our crass loves and to challenge hierarchies of taste and other 'norms'. But above all, it makes me want to get out a Sharpie and go wild.

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www.wackywacko.com