



FIRST CLASS GIRL SKETCH



# Outside the Box

**Nelson De La Nuez, the King of Pop Art,  
built a career out of creating unique art**

WORDS BY VANESSA PASCALE · PHOTOS COURTESY NELSON DE LA NUEZ

"It was so serendipitous because I get a call from my PR firm saying you wanted to interview [me] and you would only do so, if I come to New York, right?" Nelson De La Nuez asks with a laugh. This is true, I only conduct interviews in-person. "And it's just so weird that I was going to be here!" Nelson's publicist reached out to me back in July regarding his collab with TCG Toys (the company that released jigsaw puzzles showcasing four of Nelson's iconic pieces of artwork) and I kept it to follow up, and I just happened to reach out days before he was scheduled to be in NYC (where I reside) to visit an art gallery that represents him, DTR Modern Galleries. It all worked out *serendipitously* —as Nelson said— especially since he is rarely in Manhattan.

Nelson and I are in The Plaza Hotel's Champagne Bar. The King of Pop Art is dressed in dark jeans, a light blue button-up, and a navy blue blazer with a white pocket square. "We came here to take pictures with my

artwork, but they sold it all... I've been doing 17-hour days for the last two weeks, so it's just been nuts... I can't keep up with the demand," says Nelson. Not a bad problem to have. "Not a bad problem to have! After this meeting I had today with the owner, it's going to get even crazier, so I'm going to need to really, really step it up." Nelson's artwork is showcased in DTR Modern Galleries' West Palm Beach, Boston, Washington, D.C., and New York locations. "Next week, we're doing Chicago and that's through Bruce Lurie [Art] Gallery in L.A. Every time we do an art show in that caliber, you get about 100,000 people that show up, so I can easily sell 8-15 pieces. So between that and the galleries, it's a challenge. At this point, if anyone comes in and wants my work, we're just going to have to put them on a waiting list." Next year, Nelson will begin to roll out a number of exciting new projects that will put him on another level. "I'm really, really excited about that."

Nelson has been doodling ever since he can remember. Born in Havana, Cuba, his parents moved the family to the United States when he was 7 years old. "I come from a country where I rarely watched any TV and I was basically just outside living a normal life as a kid, riding my bicycle. And then I come here, and got to experience everything—it was the mid '60s—the music, the movies, advertisements... it all just really hit me." America's pop culture fueled his creativity. "My art from the very

beginning was kinda cartoonish, kinda pop, but not like it is today."

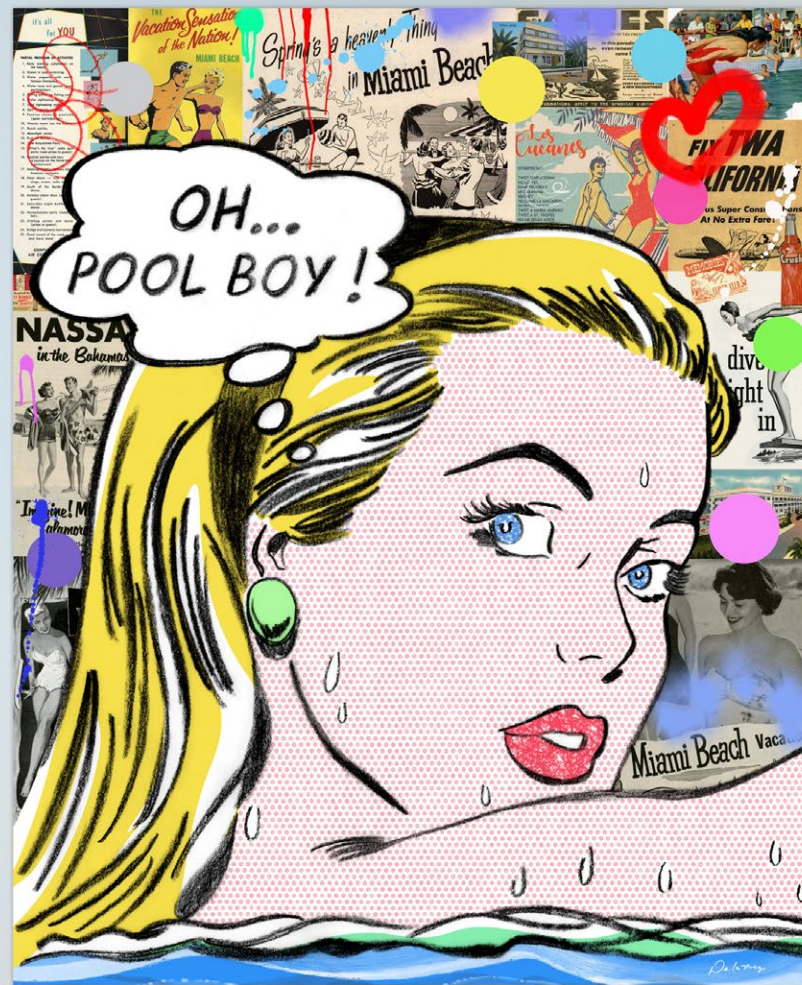
Before Nelson pursued a career as an artist, he had "all sorts of weird jobs" He obtained his real estate license at 18, then went into the title insurance business. "I just hated those jobs. The thing is, I followed the money." In the mid-'80s, he quit his job and threw himself into art. "You can't buy happiness. No matter what you're doing, you just gotta be happy. When I started this,

it was never about the money. I just want to do this." He worked 18-hour days for six months. Four of his mixed media collages were taken to a gallery and sold in less than two weeks. "Pieces like, *Bitch, Bitch, Bitch*, *Cocktails from Hell*." The artwork varied in size and sold for around \$1,500-\$1,800, Nelson guesstimates. "It gave me a lot of confidence, because they sold."

Nelson credits his success to the pieces' titles, the imagery, and

**COMMISSIONS**

"I did ShoeDazzle; it's Brian Lee and Kim Kardashian. Brian Lee approached me and said, 'Hey, we love the Material Girl piece; the *Darling, all I require are fabulous shoes.*' It was a commission. It's in their lobby. It's: *Darling, all I require are dazzling shoes.* I do commissions every once in awhile. It's not my thing because it takes away from my creativity. I just did one for Azul Airlines.... I put together a pilot and a stewardess kissing and the plane in the background says, Azul Airlines with the thought bubble. Here's another concept I did." He shows me his watch. "Corum is a Swiss company known for their bubble watches. I created three new pieces for them. I've done very high-end luggage, Heys. I've done shirts. I try to brand my art with high-end ticket items. I just finished a deal with a Canadian company to do a line of high-end puzzles. I'm very picky as to who I partner with. Delta Airlines bought a lot of art from me for their New York hub, L.A. hub, and Atlanta hub. The next project I'm doing with Delta is Miami. They saw me from a gallery. Everything, again, is like: I do business with this person and then this person sees it, and then this person tells this person. It's all word of mouth 'cause we have never advertised. I feel blessed. I feel happy. I feel that I'm at a point in my life where I'm just living what I always wanted to do. It's taken a long time to get here."



**WORDS OF ADVICE**

"If you truly want to achieve any success in life, you've gotta know who you are, and then you gotta know what you want to do. And the third thing is, you just gotta go for it.... Everything you've ever wanted is already in you. You just gotta get it out of you. It worked for me and I think it will work for anybody."



LET'S FLY AWAY

composition. Ultimately, his work was much different from anything anyone else was creating. "You have to do something to catch peoples' attention if you're ever going to make any money." These satirical/parody works of art can be found on his Museum of Humor Art website. Clever and familiar, Nelson's early artwork features fictional characters (The Jetsons, Mickey Mouse) as well as historical figures (Vincent Van Gogh, Jesus Christ, Albert Einstein)

placed in unexpected situations. Take his piece, *Cereal Killers*, where cereal box mascots are being held up at gunpoint. "I was collaging, taking different periods of time and juxtaposing. I did that for about ten years, and became very well-known for that. I went from that to my King of Pop Art and my pop culture series."

Nelson wasn't an overnight success. It took time for him to build the following he has today. "I started within my community,

I started doing shows. I would do the Beverly Hills show twice a year, and I started getting celebrities buying my work: producers, writers, and what have you. It was kinda word of mouth... Somebody came to visit a Hollywood star or producer and they saw my work and they contacted me. Carrie Fisher probably bought over 200 prints from me. She would buy them and give them as presents." Nelson's collectors include, Britney Spears, Sarah Jessica Parker, Paris Hilton, Howard Stern...



SUMMER TO REMEMBER

In 2009, Nelson's career really took off. It was the 70th anniversary of *The Wizard of Oz*, and Warner Brothers invited him to be one of a handful of artists to create art for the momentous occasion. [One of the producers was a collector of Nelson's work.] Being that *The Wizard of Oz* is one of Nelson's favorite movies, he jumped at the chance. Each artist was asked to create one piece of art that would tour the world. However, Warner Brothers loved Nelson's piece so much that they asked him to create as many pieces as he wanted to. "I ended up doing around 6 or 7 pieces for them. It got me to a point where people were talking about me. And the one piece I did, *Ditching Dorothy* from my satire series, actually made it to a stamp."

This same year, the King of Pop Art met the King of Pop, who purchased three pieces from him. "It was sad because I had met Michael Jackson in May of 2009, and then I went over to his house to deliver the artwork around June 15th, two weeks before he passed away. Michael loved my work

and he wanted to come over to the studio. He wanted to buy my Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band because he owned The Beatles library. Between *The Wizard of Oz* stuff and the whole Michael Jackson scenario—which is crazy to say the least—it kinda put me on the map."

Recently, Nelson completed and sold a massive 24-donut sculpture. "I'm always trying to just think outside the box. When you're a creative individual, after awhile, you just want to keep expanding and pushing and pushing." He would like to create more sculptures, and just created some large clipboards. "That's kind of experimental... Sometimes I will take something that's very mundane that people will never look at and be inspired to make that into something, like a matchbook. I'm always looking for the next idea." To spark his creativity, Nelson relies on music and scent. "I'll put on a candle and music to get me going. Lately, I've been listening to more books. My three loves: I love art, I love science, and I love music. So while I'm creating, I'll listen to Brian Greene's *The*

*Elegant Universe*. I'm always trying to reach a high level of consciousness." He adds that he's not a drinker and doesn't do drugs.

His latest series is called, *My Glamorous Life*. "It's about taking the yacht, going to the South of France, and flying on a really expensive G5. There are a lot of people that want to live that lifestyle and they'll resonate with my art because they want to hang it up and show it off. It's a series that really has hit home with a lot of people." He is also working on a black and white sketch series to show his process: where it starts, what the middle looks like, and the final product. "I feel that there's still a market for people that [think], *OK, that's great. I might not be able to afford the finished product or the sketch, but let me see what he did prior to that.* I'm toying with that."

While Nelson's large-scale artwork sells for thousands and thousands of dollars, he wants everyone to be able to enjoy it. "I have small to medium-sized prints that the average John Doe can afford, and then I have original pieces and I have in-between



YACHT LIFE



#### A DAY IN THE LIFE OF THE KING OF POP ART

"I'll wake up at 12:30 pm, let's just say on an average, right? Stay in bed, watch about a half hour of news, and take a shower, maybe grab a smoothie, and go into the studio. Now it's 1-1:30 pm. I get home 12:30 at night. Sometimes I'll bring my lunch in because I don't have time to go out. Sometimes my wife [Stacy] will say, 'Come home, you gotta eat.' And sometimes, I literally even forget to come home. I lose track of time. This has happened ever since I was a kid, I just get lost in my own world. It's like I don't want to be anywhere else. I just want to be with the ideas and thoughts that are in my head. I pretty much entertain myself. And the other thing is, I like doing it all alone. I don't want to be bothered. I don't want distractions. I gotta be positive all the time. If the weather is gloomy all the time, I get down. I had a great childhood...I live in my own time capsule. I don't drive much. I just got to my house and my studio [which are 3 miles apart]. I don't really socialize much, which I miss. I miss having that interaction. This is just my life. After this, I'm heading to Bermuda, then I'm going to the Caribbean, because I have to take some time off."

## PEOPLE

# WE WANT MORE

Are you attending Art Basel Miami?

"Bruce Lurie, for the sixth year, is representing me at Art Basel, and I am actually going this year. I usually don't go to these shows, because I don't have time. I'm looking forward to going and hanging out and seeing what it's all about. I look forward to that show every year because it's probably the best show for me, not just for me, a lot of people. You have people that go there from all over the world just to shop, and it keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger."

Do you get out to Miami often?

"I do. My kids live in Ft. Lauderdale. My one kid lives in Ft. Lauderdale and the other one lives in Miami, so I'm going to make the trip to see my kids and go to Art Basel."

Where do you like to hang out in Miami?

"I used to like South Beach; South Beach has changed a lot. I always stay at The Ritz in Ft. Lauderdale, that's where we're staying this year. Here's the thing, this is why I don't live in L.A. I live in a suburb of L.A. — I can't be distracted. I gotta live in an area that is just a small, quiet little town where I just go from here to here and I live my own little life. My partying days, I did that for so long that it was a distraction. And I started really getting good when I left all that behind. Don't get me wrong, I love having fun and I wish I could do it more often, I just don't have the time for it. I love what I do, so it's not really work, but I gotta balance me out. I just like to go out and do these kind of trips and just live lavishly, because I deserve it. Life is short. You don't know what's going to happen, so I like to enjoy my life and this is the time to do it, not twenty, thirty years from now."

What would people be surprised to find out about you?

"I've always been a crazy guy. I was like the worst kid. I've been kicked out of school for making faces; I was the class clown. I guess you have to be a little weird and a little quirky to do what I do. I'm the guy, if you dared me to do something, I would do it. *Go over there and kiss a girl*, and I got slapped at a movie theater. I was that guy. I guess that's why I started doing satire, because I wanted to make people laugh through my art. I'm not this serious work-hard-every-day artist, I have a really dry sense of humor. I'm not like this rigid guy, so sometimes that shows in my work."

Who inspires you?

"I'm inspired by everybody. One of my favorite artists was René Magritte, the guy with the top hat and the apple. I've done a few parodies on Magritte, it's on the MoHA website. But I'm inspired by everyone — from Warhol to Magritte to everyone... Art is so subjective. I've always been inspired by color and composition."



TAKE THE MONEY AND RUN

stuff, like my sketches 'cause I feel that art isn't just for the elite. You want to make it for everybody and so with that said, you have to have different price points. And the great thing about that is that you can actually make a pretty good living by selling, not just the original, but all of these prints, like I have on my website. I'm just blessed to really be doing what I'm doing. And it was never about the money, it was always about loving what I do."

Does your home have a lot of your art in it? "Yeah, but not because I'm egotistical — I have it up just so I can see what it would look like on a wall and how I feel about it 6 months to a year later. There's some pieces that I've done for me. I live in a 5,000 square-foot Spanish house... It's like a testing area. The entire house is all my work, from pieces I did 20 years ago to pieces I just did 3 weeks ago. And it's an ever revolving

door. As a matter of fact, I just had a piece that was very unique, a one-of-a-kind. I didn't want to sell it and somebody offered me the right price and I sold it," he says of 12 foot-by-9 foot *Wizard of Oz* anniversary collage. "I had just bought a new home and it had this huge, 18-foot wall, and I did it just for that wall." A collector bought that and another original titled, *A Break in at the Baseball Hall of Fame*. Both were too big for his new house, so it all worked out for Nelson. "Very serendipitous. Very weird. Sometimes the universe has little ways of telling you certain things, so you have to listen... I would have never been here with you if you would've called a week later. The right timing," he says with a smile. ML

For more information, visit:  
[kingofpopart.com](http://kingofpopart.com) | [theMOHA.com](http://theMOHA.com)  
and follow Nelson on  
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