

NORMAL BOB PRAY FOR SATAN

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Prologue

I first came across Normal Bob's work while doing research for a paper I was writing as an undergraduate. This paper was a final essay for one of my art-history classes and would come to be the writing sample I would use when applying to grad school. It was to be a culmination of my thoughts on religion's reflection in the zeitgeist vis-à-vis contemporary art. In particular, I wanted to talk about work that explicitly dealt with atheism. After a few failed Google searches, I finally conjured the right words to spring me into a magical website: jesusdressup.com. I was delighted by this magnificent find: a Web-based work that addressed my thesis better than I could have dreamed. "Now it's time for Jesus Dress Up!" is stated prominently at the top-left corner of the screen. Jesusdressup.com is an HTML drag-and-drop game in which the objective is to adorn a crucified Jesus Christ (who's permanently wearing underwear, for decency's sake). There are plenty of wardrobe options to mix-and-match, such as a coconut-shell bra, a pair of overalls, a devil outfit, and a pair of platform shoes. The game even includes different signs you can nail above His head, with phrases like "NO PAIN, NO GAIN," and "HANG IN THERE BABY!" Clicking around further, I noticed a vertical bar of thumbnail images to the left-hand side of the page. I hovered over one

and the word "CELEB" appeared. Clicking on it, I was launched into another version of Jesus Dress Up! that came with options to dress Jesus as such offbeat celebrities as Andy Warhol, Austin Powers, and Elvis. In total, the option bar includes twelve different themes of Jesus Dress Up! Below it, at the bottom-left corner of the page, a hyperlinked-bouncing graphic reads "Normal Bob Smith.com."

When I clicked on that GIF, I had no inkling of the familiarity and friendship that I would form with Normal Bob in the years to come. At the time, I was not prepared to talk extensively about an unfamiliar artist with no peer-reviewed essays written about him or any sort of academic stamp of approval. I didn't even bother to reach out to him. Ultimately, I ended up writing an interpretation of some mainstream artworks with a more secularist bent. But I never forgot about Normal Bob, Jesus Dress Up!, or what I wanted to say about it all. So here I am, trying to convey what I find so delightful about this work and what I think it means for contemporary discourse.



Photograph of the artist dressed as in his Devil outfit.

Intro

Normal Bob (Bob Smith; Robert Hain) was born on June 24, 1969, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1979, when he was ten, his family moved to Denver, Colorado. Bob is the youngest of three boys; his brothers, Rick and Chris, are respectively ten and eleven years his seniors. Like many Americans, Bob was born into a working-class Christian home. His parents did a good job instilling the fear of God in him and he spent his early life as a true, albeit passive, believer.

From an early age, Bob showed an interest in drawing. He quickly became obsessed with rendering an image and giving it character. He would draw his favorite celebrities, and ladies he had a crush on, trying to crystallize what he found captivating about them.

Socially cast as the proverbial dweeb, Bob remembers being a target for school bullies. Feeling abnormal seemed inescapable. It wasn't until he was around fifteen or sixteen that the clouds parted, revealing to him a scene he could define himself by: punk rock. Punk embodied the rebellious, radical individualism that Bob was searching for. It relished rejecting the mainstream. It offered an identity and mindset conducive to a skinny, pale, weird kid: it was a culture that made Bob feel normal.

After graduating high school in the spring of 1988, Bob followed a girl out to Los Angeles, California, with punk and young

love in his heart. He cherished the flavor of his rebellious-punk concert-going carefree dream for the short time it lasted. Unfortunately, the girl didn't fall for the boy and Hollywood didn't work out. LA was a good experience for Bob, though; he roamed in the wild and had souvenirs to remember it by. Bob went back home to Colorado and in the fall of 1988, with the encouragement of his parents, he enrolled in the Colorado Institute of Art.

Normal Bob: Pray for Satan is an online exhibition and catalog that explore the art Normal Bob created from his time in art school to the present. Over the decades his career spans, he often revisits subjects over and over again, making serial pieces connected by common threads. His subject matter turns the deeply personal into the universal. Normal Bob's work is unapologetically raw, a true depiction of his perspective that doesn't pull punches. The bareness of his art elicits questions about morality, social equity, and autonomy.

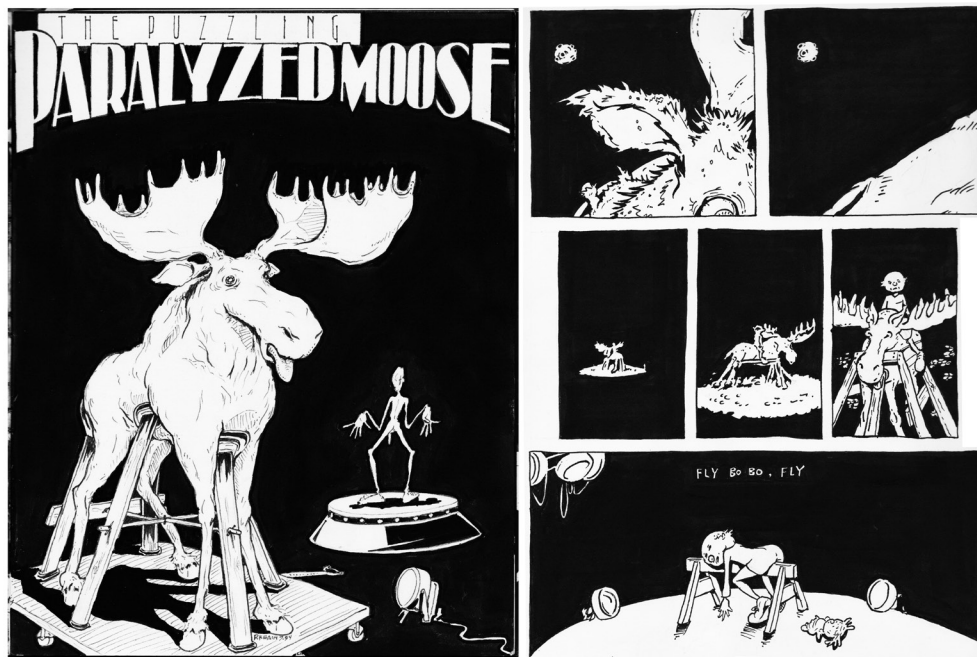
In many ways, Pray for Satan is a case study in art's existence outside the mainstream.

Without any gallery representation or museum exhibitions, Normal Bob has been able to support his practice and gain a cult following. He is an underground icon of the New York City art scene whose recognition is long overdue. More than just significant for

its methodology, though, Normal Bob's work also shows how contested subject matter can exist in contemporary art. The content of his art is a thought-provoking challenge to normalcy. Regardless of its popularity, and perhaps because of its provocative unpopularity, Normal Bob's work evokes an individualistic understanding of morals. This is most evident in his art about religion. While freedom of religion is a liberty in this country, freedom of speech is a liberty too: You may believe whatever you want, but I can also say whatever I want. These two protected rights clash in a meta-sense, and Normal Bob brings this rift front-and-center in his work. Criticism of religion is an important area of social discourse that is too often overlooked. As our collective consciousness becomes more acutely aware of social justice, the problematic dogma of religion seems to be harder to ignore. Normal Bob fills this uncomfortable void in discourse with satirical and witty artwork. Normal Bob has made plenty of waves with the controversial topics he touches. His uncanny ability to cause conversation is one

of the things I find so fascinating about him. Moreover, viewer participation is part of his art. Digestion, reflection, and reaction are the magic of Normal Bob's work. Further, through an analysis of his career, I hope to expose the messiness of contemporary discourse. What is too risqué to say? Is anything too sacred for satire? Why are we, as a society, afraid to discuss these issues? With clever simplicity and whimsical flare, Normal Bob sheds a bright light on these fears. His art dances through the dichotomous relationship of right and wrong to expose the lack of clarity that exists in life.

This online exhibition and catalog organize his artwork in an easily digestible format for longtime fans and the unfamiliar alike. On the website, visitors can explore Normal Bob's art by clicking through different categories. Some of the works are games, videos, and stories, while others are stand-alone pieces to admire. In the 3D online model, Normal Bob's portraits and Creatures of Neptune series (1993–1998) can be observed like artwork in a museum.



"The Puzzling Paralyzed Moose" N.D.
Pen and ink on paper. Part of the series, "Creatures of Neptune" 1993-1998

In this catalog, I will walk through the series that encapsulate Normal Bob's entire body of work. I see his art as falling into three main categories: Jesus Dressup!, Amazing Strangers, and portraits. The drawn image appears in all three of these sections, but the conceptual tone of each is focused on very different things.

In the works I dub "portraits," Normal Bob seeks to express the beauty and uniqueness of his human subjects. He considers his illustrative prints his "true" art. His other bodies of work go beyond the gallery wall, but this work is made to live there. His portraits are precious works to be admired, whereas his other works are a lot more rough-and-tumble. Jesus Dressup! has taken on three forms: paper, website, and magnet set. Normal Bob has reimagined Jesus Dressup! in these mediums over and over. Jesus Dressup! is a huge project, and art I categorize under it goes beyond the series itself: Normal Bob has made comics, pamphlets, postcards, writings, and a performance that continue its inquiry. These works are an exploration of religion and an expression of radical criticism.

Work I group under Amazing Strangers is largely made up of the video series by that name, but Normal Bob has also produced postcards, illustrations, writings, and a match game related to this series. All of these works deal with the frequenters of Manhattan's Union Square, and with recognizing the spectacular moments codified in the unexamined lives of complete strangers. They humanize the people you try not to make eye contact with while walking down the street.



"Jake Loves Boys" 2018
Digital illustration.

Creatures of Neptune



Symbol for "Creatures of Neptune" N.D.
Digital illustration.



"Dobbleganger BIG TOP HARBOR Freakshow" N.D.
Pen and ink on paper. Part of the series, "Creatures of Neptune" 1993-1998

One of Normal Bob's oldest series, *Creatures of Neptune* (1993–1998) is a group of comics showing imagined freakish characters living peculiar lives. These drawings in black pen on white paper boldly depict figures with intense and often grotesque definition. The stark contrast of their black and white creates an eerie aura, as if these people came from another time and place. Each character in *Creatures of Neptune* is reoccurring. Normal Bob starts by drawing them on a white stage against a solid black curtain. The comic strips drawn subsequently weave a complex story of their origin and the way they interact with one another.

Creatures of Neptune started in a sketchbook as an exploration of artistic style. Having graduated from the Colorado Institute of Art in the spring of 1990 with an Associate's degree in Visual Communication, Normal Bob soon landed an unexciting job at a One Hour Photo Developing Lab. For three years, he made it his mission to saturate a sketchbook with illustrations, keeping his creative mind sharp. In 1993, he moved to Chicago, Illinois, with his brothers, Chris and Rick, and took a job designing graphics for a Pull Tab & Bingo game manufacturer. Bob finished filling the sketchbook in Chicago. This was the first time he'd had direction with his drawing and he was

happy to see the book completed. On the last page he drew something distinct from his other pieces: with a fine black pen, he formed two ghostly white figures on a stage against a solid black background. The linear details of these grotesque humanoids are meticulously placed, boiling their features down to their most graphic forms. One figure is a self-portrait drawn as a clown Bob named Bobo. Next to him towers an enormously obese nude person whom he named Erdnahn. To their left is a jar with a conjoined fetus floating inside. Bobo holds a doll as both figures stare intensely at the viewer.

These creatures were inspired by an episode in Bob's life. He had gone out with a woman he liked quite a lot. They lost touch, but a year later she reached out to him. Excited, he went to her apartment only to see she'd gained 150 pounds since the last time they'd spoken. He stayed to be polite, but the more time he spent in her apartment, the stronger her advances became. He broke down and explained that he did not find her attractive. This awkward experience made Bob speculate what a future with her would be like: Here he was, lonely, and the only female actively pursuing him wasn't what he wanted. He immortalized their lost souls and twisted fate in the drawing on the last page of the sketchbook. Bob showed his finished work to his brother, who encouraged him to make more. He bookmarked it with a drawing of Jesus he'd been using for years and went out to buy a new sketchbook that he would devote to these freakish black-and-white creatures. All of the characters in *Creatures of Neptune* are born from a personal story or dream. The comic strips that feature them shed light on their odd lives. Some of the stories seem nonsensical, like a metaphor that cannot be placed. *Goldblatt Superhead* and the *Three-Legged Hog* (n.d.), for example, is a six-panel comic showing the huge, wrinkly head of another character, Goldblatt. An alien on a saucer comes into focus over five of the panels as it whips

around Goldblatt's head. The final panel shows the lower half of a three-legged pig. On its own, this comic is hard to decipher, but read with other comics, it builds a larger narrative.

In 2000, Normal Bob converted a selection of these drawings into an online format. Here viewers can see the creatures lined up on a long stage. Clicking on them, the viewer is redirected to a page that shows their accompanying comic strips. This online version offers an easy way to view these works and weave an understanding of their narrative. *Creatures of Neptune* online is one of Normal Bob's earliest experiments with disseminating his work through the Internet, a clever and simple solution to the problem of sharing his art with those who cannot see it in person.

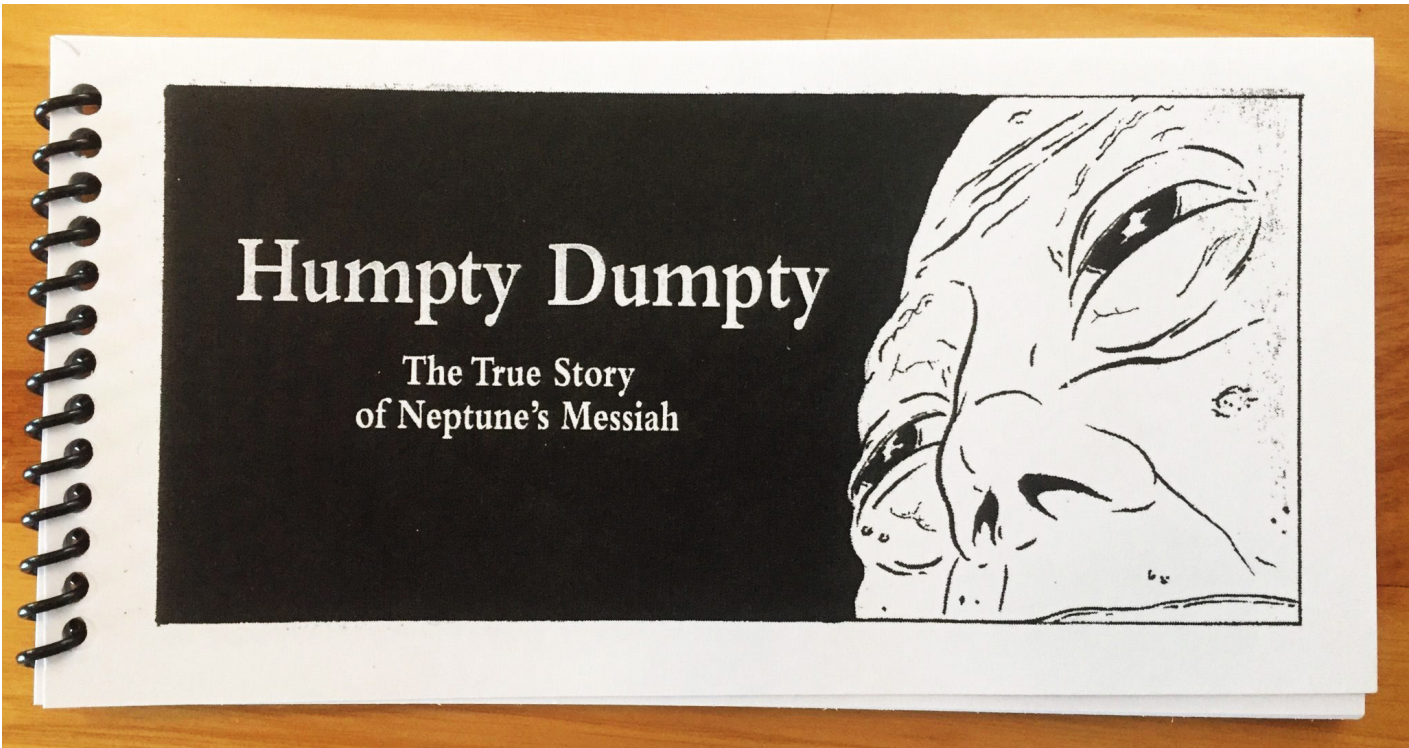
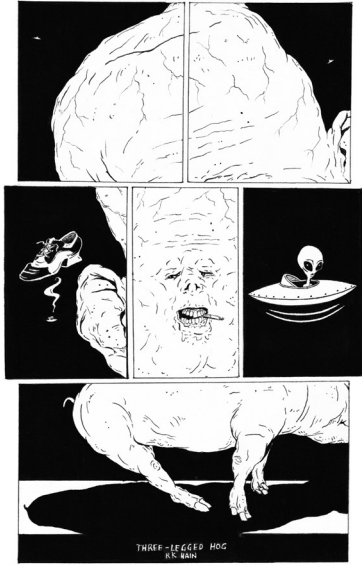
Despite the disturbing appearance of this series, Normal Bob drew *Creatures of Neptune* with his faith in Christianity intact. *Humpty Dumpty: the True Story of Neptune's Messiah* (n.d.), the longest comic strip in the series, could certainly be read as a snarky depiction of religion. In this comic Humpty Dumpty sits on a wall overlooking a city whose people he mocks: "They began to realize; He was hard to avoid; The wall circled the city; And he lived to annoy." The imagery of a tyrannical omnipresent ruler seems obvious, especially since the word "Messiah" appears in the title. Even so, it wasn't until several years after he created this drawing and uploaded the comic to his web page that his lifelong battle with belief became apparent.



"Erdnahn, Bob & the Two Headed Embryo in a jar" 1993
 Pen and ink on paper. Part of the series, "Creatures of Neptune" 1993-1998



"Goldblatt Superhead" N.D.
 Pen and ink on paper. Part of the series, "Creatures of Neptune" 1993-1998



"Humpty Dumpty: the True Story of Neptune's Messiah" front page of limited edition printed booklet, 2020.
 Part of the series, "Creatures of Neptune" 1993-1998

Losing Faith

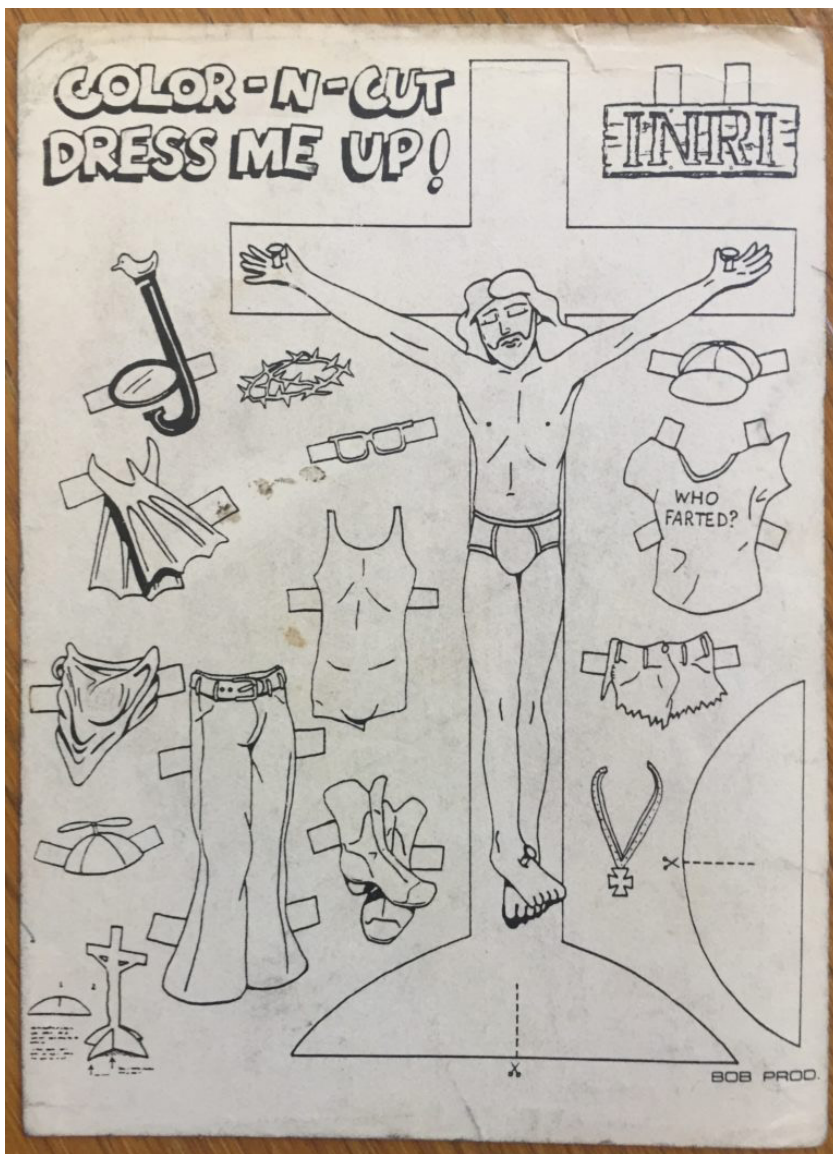
Until 1993, despite his doubts, Bob had stood firm in his Christian belief. Even while ogling nude women, experimenting with mind-altering drugs, and poking fun at a crucified Christ, he hadn't seen (or perhaps hadn't acknowledged) any contradictions between his interests and his faith in God. He had always been able to rationalize the world as he saw it against the word of the Bible. His brother Rick would challenge him in this.

In a coffee shop somewhere in Chicago, Bob and Rick were having a conversation when the topic of religion reared its ugly head. Bob spoke glowingly, as he always did, about his belief in the Lord, but Rick pushed back, asking Bob why he believed so strongly. Bob quickly defended his faith: If I don't know that God is real, how do you know He isn't? They went back and forth until the conversation sputtered out. You believe one thing, I believe another. Bob kept a poker face but quietly stewed, mulling over the one statement of Rick's that had struck him hardest: It doesn't have to be the way the Bible says. It had never occurred to him that there could be any other way of life besides a devout one. If you don't believe in Heaven and Hell and eternal glory, then what do you believe in? Bob had never considered that you didn't have to believe in Christianity, or in anything, for that matter.

Bob still considered himself a believer over the three years that followed this conversation. Around 1998, though, he was becoming more and more anxious about getting older. He was almost thirty and there were three major things he hated about himself: he was unable to find a romantic relationship, his job was creatively destitute, and he was questioning his faith. He felt defeated on all fronts, unsure how to right the wrongs in which he found himself immersed. For the first time, the sky truly felt empty. There really might not be anything up there. Bob began to have panic attacks.

One night, on his way up to his apartment, he noticed that the light in the hallway at the top of the stairs was burnt out. He staggered through the darkness, searching for the doorknob. As he fiddled to fit the key into the keyhole, it slipped out of his grasp and into the black. His heart began to race as a panic rose up and through his body. He felt emptiness. He was lost in the dark with no direction, no help, and no light. He thought this was what it felt like to live without God.

This incident altered Bob. It was the razor-sharp moment that cut through to the core of his dilemma. It became abundantly clear to him: He no longer believed. This anxiety shook him awake. He could no longer make



The original drawing of "Jesus Dressup!" 1990
Pen and ink on paper.

believed. This anxiety shook him awake. He could no longer make excuses or nullify the contradictions. God had died. He had to accept it.

As Bob began to pick up the pieces of his demolished worldview, a new movie, *The Filth and the Fury*, a documentary about the punk band the Sex Pistols, hit American theaters. Bob went to see it. The band's lead singer, Johnny Rotten, spoke directly to the demons Bob was battling. Bob experienced another life-altering moment. As he gained inspiration from the Sex Pistols' humble beginnings, Bob conjured the words that would define his new identity: Fuck it. Fuck it! Fuck everything and embrace the authentic Bob. His mind was firing on all cylinders, excited to have finally found some resolution. That's when he thought back to a decade earlier, when a much more naïve Bob had drawn that devilish Jesus drawing. That was some radical shit.

Jesus Dressup! Online

One day in 1990, while Bob was still at art school, he was rummaging through old boxes in his parents' Denver basement and found a vintage Marilyn Monroe paper dress-up doll. A vividly colored accompanying booklet came with pages of glamorous ensembles to cut out and attach to Monroe's figure. Bob was musing over the find when suddenly, all of his ideas merged in a flash of inspiration. With this paper doll, his drawing skills, and his nascent doubts about dogma, Bob generated a work of art to soothe his turmoil.

Bob sat at his desk and began a simple drawing. On a white sheet of paper he outlined a caricature of Jesus Christ on the cross, in briefs, with a cutout wardrobe surrounding Him. Bob stared at it on his desk: the idea was so clean, so straightforward, and so rebellious. Taking the likeness of the Lord and portraying Him in tighty-whities? And defiling Him with silly outfits, to boot? Could defiance get any bigger than defying God? It touched everything Bob was pining to grasp and it wasn't big, it wasn't messy, it needed nothing more: It was perfect.

As Bob sat admiring his creation, unbeknownst to him his mother walked into his bedroom. Behind him he heard her wail out, "Oh Bobby, no!" Caught red-handed, Bob immediately reacted by flipping the picture

face down. His mother had already stormed out of the room, leaving him paralyzed with embarrassment. He gathered himself and shoved the drawing in the hiding spot next to his bed where he kept all his other dirty pictures.

The image he had conjured haunted him. If it could make his mother shriek in horror on sight, there was obviously something to it. He brought the drawing to some of his art-school friends. Every reaction was visceral: Some were blown away; some were paranoid and wanted him to hide it before anyone around them saw; some couldn't believe he'd be so brash; some couldn't believe that he really drew it. Bob felt affirmed—there was something special about the drawing—but he didn't know what to do with it. He soon bought a brand-new sketchbook to fill with creations and used his Jesus drawing as a bookmark. It would remain in this sketchbook, untouched, until many years later.

Bob reflected on this drawing after losing his faith. The Internet was still in its infancy, but he had a leg up: he'd already become familiar with creating digital images from his years of making slot machine designs. He'd always relied on both his hand-drawn images and the digital programming skills, but now he wanted to do something more complex. In 1999, Normal Bob taught

himself how to build HTML pages that could bring this doll to life.

Originally titled Jesus Dress Up!, now Jesus Dressup!, the project underwent an evolution on its web page. Jesus hangs crucified in nothing but His underwear and is surrounded by an eclectic wardrobe to mix-and-match. As with Creatures of Neptune, viewers can experience Normal Bob's work anywhere with an Internet connection. This was an important step in his way of working, not only for the visibility of his art but also in gaining a platform that could host unsavory topics.

On the Web, Bob saw free real estate. He could share his work with the world and could declare his disbelief openly. But he didn't feel completely free. As a newly born atheist, he was still cautious about exposing himself fully, so he published his artwork under the name "Normal Bob Smith." It was as Normal Bob that he began to share with the world his newfound critical dissent. He created a place—normalbobsmith.com—where he could vomit back the lies he had had shoved down his throat.

The website received instant traffic. During

the day, Bob would work on tedious and uninspiring designs for gambling games, and at night he would spend hours crafting witty responses to the half-baked arguments and death threats his site received daily. He was happy. Finally, his artwork seemed to be drumming up something, anything, to disrupt the monotony he was experiencing. Normal Bob slowly began to fill the three areas of his life that he felt were barren: his creativity, his relationships, and his disbelief. Normal Bob continued this pattern for several years, perfectly content. It wasn't until September 11, 2001, that he noticed New York City. 9/11 stirred up a flurry of political conversation about religion, in America and globally, and New York became a beacon for Bob. A year later, in 2002, he went there to cat-sit for a friend. That week he spent his time walking the city. He had never experienced a culture so alive and so proudly peculiar. In the final days of his visit, he knew what he had to do: he had to move there. He brainstormed the ways he could make money off of his website with merchandise and freelance work. He figured it all out. He could really do this.

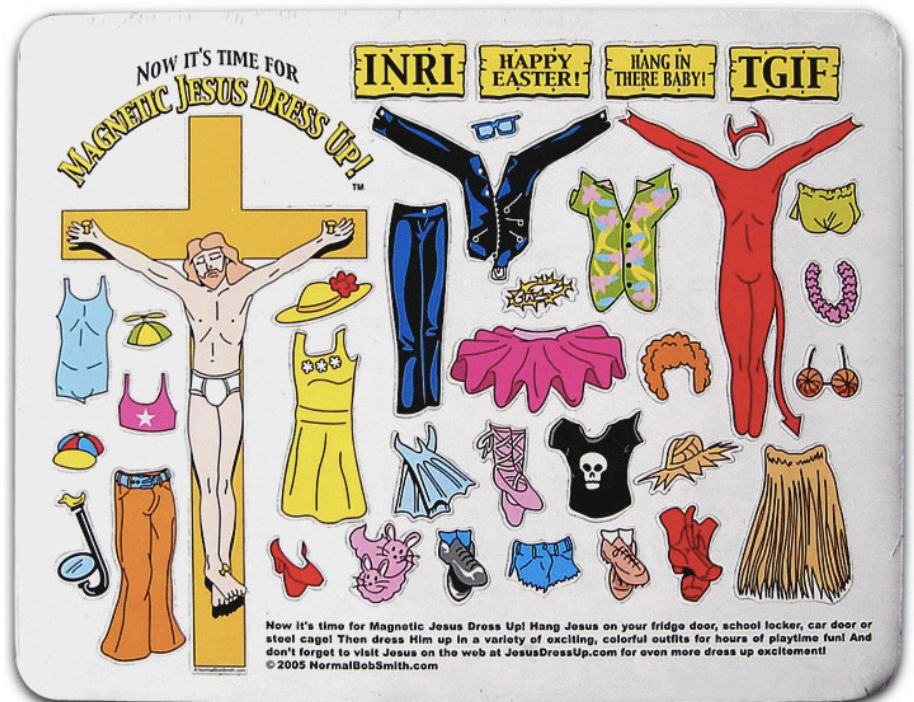


Screengrab (2020) from jesusdressup.com
Online game.

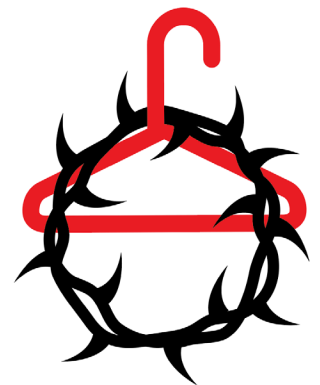
Jesus Dressup! Magnets

Normal Bob settled in New York with big ideas for Jesus Dressup! He knew that the city would facilitate his dream of making this work into something greater, and had an idea how he could make some money, too: he wanted to translate Jesus Dressup! into a set of fridge magnets and go into business selling them. Pretty quickly, though, he hit a snag. He would call a die-cutting company, place his order, and send a deposit; within a week or two, he would be told that his design had been rejected and he was never to contact the firm again. Every company he went to refused to work with him once it saw his idea. He was at a loss, but never gave up on making Jesus Dressup! into a magnet set.

Bob filled his first year in New York by walking around and finding weird, offbeat shops that might consider carrying his imagined toy. That's how he stumbled on Toy Tokyo, on 2nd Avenue in NoHo. The store was filled with odd objects and unique collectibles; it seemed the perfect place to house Normal Bob's controversial toy. After Bob explained what he was trying to accomplish, the owner showed him a windup toy of a saddened and cartoonish Jesus Christ carrying the cross. This was it: Normal Bob had found an in. The owner arranged to have Normal Bob's design printed by a Hong Kong magnet-set



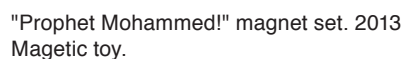
The first design of "Jesus Dressup!" magnet set. 2003
Magnetic toy.



Symbol for "Jesus Dressup!" N.D.
Digital illustration.

At the same time, Normal Bob kept up with his online presence, posting daily responses to the hate mail the page received while also generating new content for it. One reoccurring incoming message, especially after 9/11, challenged Normal Bob to create a Prophet Mohammed version of his dress-up game. He wouldn't dare to insult Islam, would he? These requests seemed fueled

With the help of some friends, Normal Bob hand-packaged each set of magnets



to Urban Outfitters' exact specifications. A truck came to pick them up, and by the fall of that year, 61 Urban Outfitters across the country were stocked with Normal Bob's work. He frequented the store's location on Manhattan's 14th Street and Sixth Avenue, absolutely giddy to see Jesus Dressup! lining its shelves. That Christmas, Jesus Dressup! was one of their top-selling toys. The joy that washed over him didn't blind him to the reality of his art: he was happy to have a major outlet sell his work, but he was also aware of the hate mail that already flooded his inbox. This triumph was sweet but he knew it wouldn't last.

He was right. On March 14, 2004, an NBC affiliate station in Philadelphia broke the story of an angry letter it had received from a local man called Gerry. Urban Outfitters, Gerry wrote, had shrugged off his complaints about how offended he was to see Jesus Dressup! in its stores. Within a day, the story grew to gargantuan proportions and major broadcasting networks such as MSNBC and Comedy Central started covering the story. It just so happened that Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* was booming at the time, and news anchors couldn't resist contrasting this unapologetically Christian movie with Normal Bob's magnet set. As the public worked itself into a frenzy, Normal Bob sat back and watched the money roll in. He was in heaven: hanging out with the radicals and fringe characters at the park every day and earning thousands of dollars every night. His online sales were the highest they'd ever been, which was great, for the moment. While Normal Bob filled out thousands of online orders, the American Family Association, a group of Christian activists, launched two Web-based campaigns, onemillionmoms.com and onemilliondads.com. They flooded Urban Outfitters with over a quarter of a million complaints in just two days. On March 17, Urban Outfitters issued a public apology and canceled an earlier order of 3,500 sets of magnet toys. Two weeks after the initial uproar, another online campaign, Laptop-Lobbyists, bombarded Normal Bob's hosting website with complaints about the content of normalbobsmith.com, and on

March 28 his website was shut down. He quickly found another willing host. Normal Bob was the farthest thing from surprised. The public scandal worked in his favor even better than he had imagined: The noise generated from news coverage had stores across the world calling him to place orders. In fact, the British branch of Urban Outfitters bought 5,000 more magnets after the American branch had canceled its order. The upset that Jesus Dressup! caused was a natural progression in Normal Bob's evolution. It was the next phase in a truism he had held dear ever since first showing Jesus Dressup!, in 1990: any publicity is good publicity.



"BDSM Jesus Dressup!" 2008
Magnetic toy.

Bob Smith, USA



Screengrab from clip submitted to Neil Abramson. 2005
2 minutes 6 seconds

After the Jesus Dressup! scandal, Normal Bob got a message from a man named Neil Abramson. Abramson was working on a film examining the average American, contrasting similarities and differences among seven individuals who shared a common name: Bob Smith. Normal Bob met Abramson for a coffee and was immediately enamored with the project. It was as if Abramson had written the plot of his film with Normal Bob in mind, touching all the aspects of identity that he'd been battling for decades.

"Normal" was the sarcastic adjective he'd chosen to prefix his name, specifically to highlight the subjective messiness the word carries. In the same sense, "Normal" actually described him quite well: he was an average person who dealt with the same existential dilemmas everyone faces, such as death, sexuality, and individualism. This dichotomous interpretation of "normal" was the same question this documentary was seeking to explore. Bob Smith, USA was released in 2005. The following year, Normal Bob was invited to speak at Arizona State University's Secular Freethought Society.

Devil Bob

In 2002, soon after Normal Bob came to New York, he met up with a burlesque dancer, Amber Ray, who had contacted him some years earlier as an avid fan of his website. The two quickly became friends. Ray took Normal Bob to happening clubs like Webster Hall, introducing him to some of the most amazing performers and artists partying in the East Village. One Halloween, while Ray was getting ready to go to a party, Normal Bob decided he wanted to put on a costume too. At the time, he'd become really fond of the image of Satan, whom he regularly drew in an online comic series, *Satan's Salvation* (2002–10). The series shows interactions between Jesus and Satan, with Satan trying to trick Jesus into saving his eternal soul. That night with Ray, Normal Bob decided he wanted to physically embody the cunning devil he imagined outsmarting the Lord. Ray wanted to turn Normal Bob into a glamorous Dark Lord, but Bob imagined the character the way he imagined all his drawings: unassuming and simple. Big and gaudy just isn't his style. He painted his face and shaved head red; horns and a black suit fulfilled his vision. After the party, Normal Bob felt an undeniable attraction to the character he had made. He wanted this devil to exist as a mark of his work. The devil outfit embodied the punk rebellion he had become known for on his site. It was a way

to bring his atheistic cynicism to the streets of New York.

Bob began to think more carefully about what this devil outfit would look like. Thinking back to high school, he remembered this dorky punk kid who'd always wear a tuxedo that was too small. Normal Bob couldn't imagine a more perfect concoction of punk, camp, and to the point. The first thrift shop he went to had a tuxedo one size too small, along with a red ruffled shirt. It was as if a grand plan were unfolding as prophesied. He rushed home to put on his new clothes and a pair of platform shoes he had in his closet. The Devil was born.

With a good friend, Venessa Nina, Bob would go around the public hot spots to pose for pictures as the Devil. He soon had many photographer friends taking pictures of his Devil Bob persona. He regularly began attending parties around Manhattan dressed the same way. LIPS, a famous drag queen-themed club in east Midtown, always allowed the devilish Normal Bob to cut to the front of the line and would clear the window seat for him and his date. This look got him exactly the type of grassroots recognition he was looking to cultivate.



Photograph of the artist dressed in his Devil outfit reading from the Bible. N.D.



Photograph of the artist dressed in his Devil outfit displaying Jesus Dressup! magnetic set. 2007



Photograph of the artist dressed in his Devil outfit with a friend.

Pamphlets

At this same time, around 2003, Normal Bob began hanging out regularly in Union Square. Located in Manhattan between 14th Street, Broadway, and Park Avenue, Union Square Park has been a public gathering spot for 181 years. It is a historic hotspot of activity for tourists, homeless people, native New Yorkers, and visitors alike. The place appeared to Bob like a watering hole of social exchange, entangling strangers in a flurry of exciting encounters. There, he ran into someone who would become a lifelong friend and co-conspirator in his new identity, a man whose name is also Bob but who goes by Shaggy. Shaggy was born and raised in the city and was seasoned in the outsider culture alive in Union Square. He was one of the older skateboarders who would cruise around the park daily. The outspoken Shaggy and the reserved Normal Bob bonded over their mutual love of people-watching.

Through Shaggy's established street cred, Normal Bob was given an immediate insider pass to the skater kids who hung around the park. This subculture welcomed Normal Bob with open arms. They became even more enthusiastic when they learned of his website and devil outfit. Soon Normal Bob found himself spending his free time relaxing with his new friends at the park, watching the people buzz by and taking

photos of the amazing new world around him. As he became accustomed to the park's ebb and flow, he also became familiar with the outlandish frequenters of this public space, such as street performers and missionaries. One day, a woman passing out religious pamphlets approached Normal Bob and his friends. The pamphlet read "GOD IS REAL," to which Vennesa retorted by throwing down the paper and crying "GOD IS FAKE."



Photograph of the artist dressed in his Devil outfit reading from his pamphlet. 2007

A flash of inspiration jolted Normal Bob. He went home and crafted a pamphlet out of stock photos and witty wordplay. The next day he headed back to Union Square with his prototype in hand to show his cohorts. They loved it. On the cover in big bold lettering, “GOD IS FAKE” hangs above a black and white photo of a happy couple with two children. The graphic is stark and simple, bordered by a black rectangle with the name “Normal Bob Ministries” at the bottom of the page. Inside, mock question-and-answers with cynical responses fill the two pages. The back of the pamphlet features a small sarcastic blurb that drives the atheistic message home. A logo of a crucified devil and Normal Bob’s Web address stamp the bottom of the back page.

This pamphlet, much like Jesus Dressup!, was a sarcastic and rebellious response to religion being shoved down Normal Bob’s throat. It embodied the confusion and backlash that he had suppressed his whole life. Where Jesus Dressup! engaged an anonymous and enormous mass of online strangers, the pamphlet was more like his devil outfit, confronting viewers in the real world when they least expected it. This was an evolution beyond the 2D surface or the digital screen.

Normal Bob became aware that, much

like the missionaries handing out their pamphlets, if he wanted strangers to take his work he needed to have good distribution. That’s when he got the idea of employing some of the skaters’ girlfriends at Union Square. He printed out hundreds of copies of the pamphlets and gathered the ladies under the moniker “Unholy Army of Catholic School Girls.” Dressed as Satan, Normal Bob gathered this army, his friend Venessa, and Venessa’s camera to parade around the city. The army handed out pamphlets to the people who passed by while Venessa documented the cross looks and interactions that unfolded. The army soon became a fixture on Normal Bob’s website, with blog posts, photos, fan mail, and even a dress-up game.

As Normal Bob acclimated to his band of kindred spirits in Union Square, his online presence boomed. Some combination of hanging in the park, passing out pamphlets, becoming Satan, trying to make Jesus Dressup! magnets, visiting storefronts, and his sense of newfound belonging gave him the momentum he needed. The daily traffic to normalbobsmith.com included mountains of hate mail and fan mail, but mostly hate mail. By 2003, Bob was already blogging updates so fans could track his progress.



Several pamphlets by the artist. N.D.

Amazing Strangers

After the Urban Outfitters controversy subsided and Bob Smith, USA was released, Normal Bob hit his first wall since moving to New York. Opportunity after opportunity had landed at his feet, but now it was over. As he had for the past seven years, he continued responding to hate mail and updating his website. He was trying to figure out his next move when one hate letter caught his eye: an angry woman berated Normal Bob as a one-trick pony: Had he nothing else to do than make fun of Jesus Christ? He reflected on the snide remark, thinking through all the things that had inspired him. When he first became a regular at Union Square, he and Venessa had taken photos of visitors to the park. He had hours of footage and tons of pictures that sat untouched in his hard drive. He knew that there had to be something there.

Up to this point, normalbobsmith.com had been a shrine of antireligious writings along with the tongue-in-cheek humor conveyed in HTML games and comic strips. Now, Normal Bob added another element to the page: he came up with the title Amazing Strangers, under which he began posting photos and descriptions of the oddballs he saw in the park. One of his first Amazing Strangers works, The Dog Molester (2006), gave a detailed account of an infamous man who hung around the park and fondled dog's

genitals when their owners weren't looking.

In late 2006, Bob's artistic voice changed with the rise in popularity of YouTube.

Before then, video had been next to impossible to share online. YouTube gave Bob a way to post the hours of footage that he'd taken and easily share it. His start was clunky: he didn't have a nice camera and knew nothing about editing video.

He persisted in uploading and learned how to navigate this strange new world through trial and error. Slowly he began fiddling with iMovie. As he mastered this program, Amazing Strangers became more complicated than the raw footage it had been. As the years passed, Normal Bob began putting together multiple clips and layering sound. A fan of the series eventually sent him a gift of a decent camera. Amazing Strangers transitioned from a pet project to a full-on mission.

In 2009, Amazing Strangers began to look much more like the series it is today. Normal Bob would spend his days in Union Square, chilling with Shaggy, the crew, and his camera. He was fluent in the language of the park, pulling out his camera whenever activity began to pick up. Normal Bob filmed everyone and everything, but most of Amazing Strangers centered on the people he knew intimately. This was mostly due to the fact that his friends were the people

who would come up to him and start a conversation. He never hid the fact that he was filming. Amazing Strangers isn't about staring at unsuspecting victims; it's about shining a light on those in the dark. Normal Bob made sure that participants were aware they were on camera. He did little to nothing to coax people into doing interesting things; he just absorbed what was happening in front of him. Then, at home, he pored through what he had captured in order to piece together videos. Over the years, he held on to as much footage as he could just in case inspiration struck and another Amazing Strangers video was born. For unknown reasons, the first Amazing Strangers YouTube channel was blocked in late 2011, taking many of his early videos with it. In 2012 he reopened the channel and still runs it today. Marrying his love of drawing, people-watching, and Union Square, The Amazing Strangers of Union Square Matchgame is a postcard Normal Bob handed out at the park and currently sells online. The front of the card shows an aerial photo of the park. Different sections are circled and labeled to describe the social breakdown

of Union Square, with titles like "Skaters" and "Panhandlers." On the back is a grid of illustrations contrasting with a bright-yellow background. These illustrations depict some of the most popular people on the Amazing Strangers channel, such as Wendell the Garbage Man, Dusty, The Lotion Man, Roman the Fart Smeller, and Signs the Bum. To the right is a box of forty-one names and eleven labels. The object of the game is to match each drawing with the correct name and label. The only way to know who's who is by watching Amazing Strangers and becoming familiar with its faces.

In 2010, Normal Bob and his friends picked up on a gross trend forming at Union Square: they noticed men casually posing around unsuspecting women, trying to get a glimpse up their skirts and down their shirts. Some men would stare while others concealed cameras inside everyday items. Normal Bob did as he always did and documented every pervert he caught in the act. He gave them the name "peepers" and started posting about them online. Some four years later, the New York Times picked up on the epidemic. Soon after, NBC's Inside Edition contacted



Screengrab from "New York I Love You, but.." video. 2012
5 minutes 51 seconds.

Bob: it wanted to film an interview with him; it also wanted to try to catch a peeper on camera for themselves. The story was aired and went viral, causing a very unexpected upset.

Soon after, furious peepers contacted Normal Bob, outraged that he had posted their faces online. Bob shrugged off these perverts: Who were they to demand privacy when they couldn't respect privacy themselves? But the peeper story brought Bob another wave of angry people. A group of activists began to bombard Normal Bob at the park. They were upset about Amazing Strangers, which they saw as exploiting homeless people. On a few occasions they got in his face, pointing a pink camera at him while shouting vile names. As quickly as they gathered, they would disperse, never to be heard from again. But the upset these activists expressed echoed similar complaints Amazing Strangers had received over the years.

This series is about examining the unexamined life, but where do we draw the line between public and private? Amazing Strangers tests this limitation, but not with reckless abandon. Normal Bob never intends to exploit strangers, which is the main reason he refuses to monetize his YouTube channel. What makes these videos intriguing works of art is the philosophical question of self and other. The activists opposing Bob were clearly unfamiliar with Amazing Strangers; if they were, they would have known that Normal Bob always makes his camera visible, doing everything he can to let the subject know that they are on camera. Moreover, if they were familiar with the series they would know that the odd and the forgotten souls of Union Square are what Amazing Strangers is all about. The moral question of what is and is not exploitative is part of what makes Amazing Strangers an intriguing series of social exploration.



Symbol for "Amazing Strangers" N.D.
Digital illustration.



Screengrab from "Normal Bob Smith EXPOSED!" video. 2014
9 minutes 47 seconds.



Screengrab from "True Believers (part 2)" video. 2017
6n minutes 29 seconds.

Portraits



"Inna" 2015
Digital illustration.

Normal Bob's entire time in New York was sustained by the profits from Jesus Dressup! and freelance art commissions, but some thirteen years later this model started to crack. Rent was getting higher and sales were falling. Normal Bob started to grow sick of New York. It seemed that so many familiar faces had left Union Square, stripping the park of the spirit that once had thrived there. Normal Bob was becoming less enchanted by the city and less productive in his art. In 2015, he decided it was time to go. But this didn't mark the end: though not with the same frequency, Normal Bob continued to make Amazing Strangers videos from the mountains of unused footage he had saved. He also continued to come up with new Jesus Dressup! magnet sets and online games.

The biggest shift in his art, though, came in the form of portraiture. He would now spend hours laboring over a singular image, first drawing it by hand, then scanning it and translating it to a digital illustration. His portraits center on the cathartic manipulation of an image until it beautifully captures a likeness. Normal Bob had been drawing portraits even before he went to art school, but now they became more than doodles: they are works unto themselves.

NORMAL BOB

In works such as Inna (2015), Normal Bob illustrates the uniqueness of a friend from Union Square. Her flowing white hair frames her nude, tattooed body. Her bright blue eyes pierce through her dark eye-shadow. This is a graphically bold image with bright, cleanly defined colors. Refining his drawing on a computer, Normal Bob elevates these portraits to a beautiful crispness that emphasizes the individualism of his subjects. Inna exudes a curious gracefulness as viewers ponder the story of this beauty. For those familiar with Amazing Strangers, this portrait crystallizes the confident charm that Inna is known for.

In other works, such as Julia Fory (2019), Normal Bob seeks to portray the elegance of celebrities he admires. Julia Fory is a female bodybuilder, as is evident in her depiction. Bob's full-body portrait shows her against a deep-red background, boldly defining her muscular figure. Her towering body exudes power while her high heels and bikini show her graceful femininity. She strikes the viewer with direct eye contact yet her beautiful eyelashes emphasize her womanly charisma. This androgynous mixture of allures is something that Normal Bob is drawn to and expresses effortlessly. Normal Bob's portraits are a series in which he can capture the beauty he finds in what others often ostracize. Unlike his other

series, his portraits stand alone and need no context. They are free to be admired for the elegance they exude. They can be read for a deeper criticism of social standards of beauty: strippers and bodybuilders aren't usually considered pinnacles to admire. But these works don't require a cynical eye to appreciate them.



"Gwen" 2000
Digital illustration.



"Wanda Woodward" 2018
Digital illustration.



"Julia Fory" 2019
Digital illustration.

Pray for Satan

All of Normal Bob's art contains elements of narration and reflection. He tells stories in his work through the figures he depicts, but he also invites the viewer to participate through game-play and interaction. In *Jesus Dressup!*, the viewer can directly manipulate the image, while with the *Amazing Strangers* videos and postcards, viewers narrate their own understanding of the characters based on how much or how little they interact with the work. Bob's art leaves plenty of room for the viewer to digest and reflect. The nonchalant and whimsical appearance of the work ensnares its viewers in uncomfortable thoughts about faith, sexuality, and self, coaxing them to examine how these ideas map onto their own lives.

Normal Bob's clever satire, skilled drawing, and computer savvy free his work to exist in many forms. The unifying factor in every aspect of his art is his Web page. His original website, which went online in the fall of 2000, contained only one version of *Jesus Dressup!* Over the past two decades his online presence has grown enormously. His current website, normalbob.com, contains writings, photography, videos, hate mail, fan mail, merchandise, original prints, HTML games, and an embedded link to his first Web page, normalbobsmith.com. In addition, he maintains a YouTube channel dedicated to *Amazing Strangers*.

The Internet and the computer underlie Normal Bob's work in more than its dissemination; in many ways, they have become the artwork itself. The Internet is a necessary element of *Amazing Strangers* and of the HTML version of *Jesus Dressup!*; in his illustrated portraits, technology becomes a paintbrush, a billboard, and a virtual gallery. But I would also argue that his website has taken on a more meta-artistic vision. The Internet is a window to the world that Normal Bob utilizes by adding comment sections and an e-mail address. He invites viewers to participate in whatever way they see fit. Normal Bob has transformed Internet chatter into a poetic piece of social commentary: an artwork unto itself.

Normal Bob carefully crafts the controversy his artwork provokes. This is key to his artistic practice: setting up the dominos and waiting for a breeze to push them over. The way he has folded controversy into his practice is ingenious. Propelled by both lovers and avid haters of his work, he has survived outside the constraints of the museum and the gallery. Generating noise draws attention not only to him but also to the issue at hand. It's more than a publicity stunt, it's a tangible social engagement. Normal Bob wields these tools benevolently, crafting thoughtful retorts to the inanity of the world.

When I began to imagine what my thesis would be, I knew that this would be a milestone in establishing my curatorial voice. With this in mind, I knew I needed to talk about religion. Religious critique is at the center of my practice. I am fortunate enough to live in a time and place where social critique is on everyone's lips. Yet I look around and find many such critiques shallow and misguided—most of all, those surrounding religion. Someone needs to speak out against the inane confusion we as a society have when it comes to faith. I want to build my career on this exploration of belief's impact on the here and now. As a progressive intellectual, I am dedicated to studying and exposing injustice where it goes unnoticed. I want to be a voice that breaks the silence on this unquestioned oppressor because I believe it is crucial in achieving genuine social equality. Writers such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett have made plenty of noise when it comes to criticizing religion. I see my concerns as a continuation of the types of questions these freethinkers have asked. None of them is an art curator, and I have yet to meet a curator who specializes in this area. As you can then imagine, there is a severe lack of contemporary-art writing that deals with criticizing faith. So in this obvious way, I hope to fill a major void in the contemporary-art discourse. But it's not simply that no one has ever done it: someone needs to do it. Serious and critical engagement with religion is a very unpopular discourse indeed, which is why it's so necessary. Religious apologists and moderates hold tightly to the claim that religion is a personal belief and as such beyond criticism, but I couldn't disagree more. Religion should not be given a pass when it comes to rationality. Any good idea will withstand criticism. The guard built around religion is evidence of how terrible an idea it is. Given those concerns, Normal Bob was the first artist to come to my mind for my thesis

exhibition. As I started to collect information on his art, I became aware of how much work he's produced. It wasn't just Jesus Dressup! Normal Bob has several series of works, each series containing dozens if not hundreds of pieces. I fell into the rabbit hole of his online presence, viewing piece after piece and getting sucked into the story each told. It became evident to me that Normal Bob wouldn't be one artist in a larger show: he needed his own stage. His entire body of work spoke directly to my gripe with what I find rampant in the highest levels of discourse: a lack of diversity.

The story of Jesus Dressup! and the Urban Outfitters protest articulates the battle between religious freedom and freedom of speech quite poignantly. In the making of this exhibition, however, an even sharper and more contemporary example of this battle appeared. Normal Bob's work Prophet Mohammed Dressup! created controversy long before it hung on the gallery wall. As I was preparing this exhibition, I was asked to write a defense for Prophet Mohammed Dressup! I mentioned that Pray for Satan will feature multiple versions of Jesus Dressup!, including one with an Adolf Hitler outfit and another with penis-pump high heels. This point was shrugged off. Of course you can make fun of Jesus, but Mohammed? That's too much!

But why? Is it because Islam is some other religion that belongs to another culture? In a Christian-majority country, wouldn't it be more likely that this exhibition will insult an Evangelist more than a Muslim? Drawing Jesus in this manner can be inherently understood as a justifiable objection to religion, so why isn't the same true for Mohammed?

This politically correct double standard is not only tiresome but also, ironically, racist. Geographical origin and racial affiliation have no bearing on whether or not an idea is inane and oppressive. Ideas are not a race. Westerners' sheepish unwillingness to engage critically with injustice globally is a testament to how shallow contemporary

discourse truly is. Under the caliphate, unveiled women are raped, homosexuals are stoned to death, and apostates are publicly executed with divine conviction. And yet, in a free and democratic society, I am being asked to defend an image. A drawing of a religion's prophet is not more offensive than the systematic brutalization of those trapped inside a theocracy. The irony is that in an effort not to be racist, "progressive" discourse is mute to oppression imposed and justified by problematic ideologies, blind to the lack of liberty beyond Western society. Fear of another Charlie Hebdo event seems to overshadow speaking openly about social justice.

The true brilliance of Prophet Mohammed Dressup! is the completely unassuming and, frankly, flattering way He's drawn. He appears as a fit, handsome Middle Eastern man standing stoically, a halo of light crowning His head. What exactly is so obscene about this image: the fact that it depicts a prophet whose religion forbids Him from being drawn? And why is this more offensive than Jesus in a latex catsuit with huge breasts? Normal Bob gets to the heart of Western religious discourse with this handsome rendition of Mohammed. The upset generated by this piece coaxes a critical and uncomfortable conversation about how the zeitgeist handles ideology, one that is more than overdue.

Normal Bob isn't taking up popular political talking points. He speaks about the overlooked outliers that do not fit neatly in a box. He is interested in exploring the murky parts of moral propriety rather than the clearly contested ones. He isn't concerned with the trendiest motifs that galleries, museums, and collectors are craving. He makes art that challenges conceptions with striking graphics and even more striking wit. Furthermore, his art thrives beyond the traditional modes of fine art. By creating his platform online and on the streets, Normal Bob engages the viewer on an individual level. In this way he has developed an artistic practice that engages the common

person. It isn't work for rarefied academics to theorize about in relation to the ideas of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler; it is the mirror that Normal Bob holds up to the mystifying world around him. He is an exciting enigma in the echo chamber of contemporary art.

Normal Bob is my glass of water in this desert. His artwork engages so critically and openly with religion. In my effort to examine dissent from religion, I can't think of a better and more deserving artist than Bob. He is the perfect case study, not only for his own atheist views but also for his examination of the people's views. His website is an archive of voices screaming at the mere mention of religion. His work demands that viewers react to their own personal beliefs, and Normal Bob diligently collects all the responses he can. In and of himself, he is a wealth of information on the attitude to religion in the zeitgeist.

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