

# Dave White: "Mr. Quick Drawings"

After the Instagram-fuelled boom a few years ago of people expressing their love for sneakers through various art forms, it's hard to imagine a world where typing the phrase "sneaker art" into Google image search would render minimal results, but this time existed and it was actually the norm. It's in this world that Dave White was out in the wilderness making oil paintings of his favourite shoes back in the early 2000s. Before sneaker art existed and when sneaker culture was still living down the side-alleys of society, Dave White did his thing, gained recognition for it, and moved on to other subjects.

Today, you'd be more likely to know Dave for his expressive art pieces depicting endangered animals and featuring precious materials, such as gold leaf and diamond dust. Although the days of Dave White sneaker paintings may feel like a distant past, Dave's love for sneakers hasn't dwindled and he remains an active and important long-time collaborator with Nike, Jordan Brand and size?. His projects with these brands aren't regular, but they push boundaries, from the first Jordan 1 to be released without a Swoosh on it, to his more recent Air Max 95 pack with size? that saw his artwork recreated in detail on the shoes.

We headed to Devon to spend a day with Dave in his newly relocated home studio. With a background soundtrack of old jungle and hip-hop, a lot of coffee, and a mutual love of sneakers, collectables and art, the conversation unfolded and showed no sign of ending. Unfortunately there always comes a time when you have to call it a day - here's the highlights reel...





**Alex Powis** Let's start at the beginning:

You've mentioned before that you were looked on as a bit of a madman when you started painting pictures of Nikes back in 2002. Why did you do it?

**Dave White** Absolutely. The reason it started, is like most people: as a collector, I love 'em like the next guy. Just sitting in the studio one day, looking at a 95 and I wanted to immortalise it – take it out of what it is and present the beauty I saw in them. I did it for no other reason, apart from the fact that I think it is the most incredible looking object on so many levels, with every credit to Sergio Lozano who designed it. I just thought, 'I'm gonna do it,' and they got out there and although a lot of people loved them, there was quite a lot of hate if I'm honest with you [laughs].

**AP** From which community? The art world or the sneaker world or both?

**DW** I don't know, just like, 'What's he doing? What's this guy doing?' It was long before there were magazines and blogs and stuff like that about trainers. It was just this guy who had appeared and was painting pictures of trainers. Some people, I suppose, either do like your style or don't like your style, it's one of those things – I didn't pay any attention to it. I was just doing it, and that's the kind of artist I've always been – if I want to do something, I'll just do it. I didn't have any game plan, I didn't think, 'I'm going to make these things,' knowing that there'd be a phone call and an answerphone message and I'd end up working with brands. I just wanted to make 'em, and that's the most genuine thing about it really.

**AP** That's interesting that you said there was quite a lot of hate towards your work when you started painting shoes. When the whole "sneaker art" thing popped off a few years ago, some of my friends were doing original stuff within that and they saw the same thing – there was often a lot of people hating on it. I wonder why specifically making art



that depicts shoes seems to rattle people?

**DW** I don't know if it rattles people or people think, 'Why would you wanna make art out of something that is there anyway?' My whole philosophy behind it is: if you walked into a classroom today and there were kids who wanted to draw art or use art as a kind of starting point for their career, if you just stick an orange and an apple and a banana in a fruit bowl and then try and get them to be inspired to draw something, or you stick an Infrared, an Air Max 97 and an Air Max 1 in a bowl, I guarantee you people will be far more interested and engaged with that. The world changes and I think that would be far more interesting for kids in a school environment, that you'd switch 'em on straight away, do you know what I mean? There's so many people doing sneaker art now, which is great, anybody that wants to use something that they love and enjoy, as the medium to fuel their passion and creative passion – no problem, enjoy it!

## Am I going to still be doing every single shoe that comes out? That's not who I am as an artist.

**AP** You just mentioned the idea of making art out of something that's there anyway. That reminds me of Duchamp with his urinal – that is essentially the basis of modern art...

**DW** Exactly, to actually take a step back and discover that there is beauty in everything and there is beauty, personally for a lot of people, in very unique things that are not necessarily classed as art. As you say, it's very Duchamp in the sense that you're seeing the beauty in something. Why do people write songs about specific subjects, why do people sculpt certain things, why do people collect specific things? Because they want to, because it's touched them in a certain way, because they feel they need to use that thing as a vehicle to project their inner creativity. That's the uniqueness of being a human being isn't it?

Let's face it, it's a wonderful culture: you can be in Japan or New York or Liverpool, London, wherever, and if you've got a nice pair of kicks on, someone will start a chat with you and it starts a conversation. There shouldn't be any resentment or hate in this game, because we're all in it for the same reasons – we all love shoes, we all love 'em.

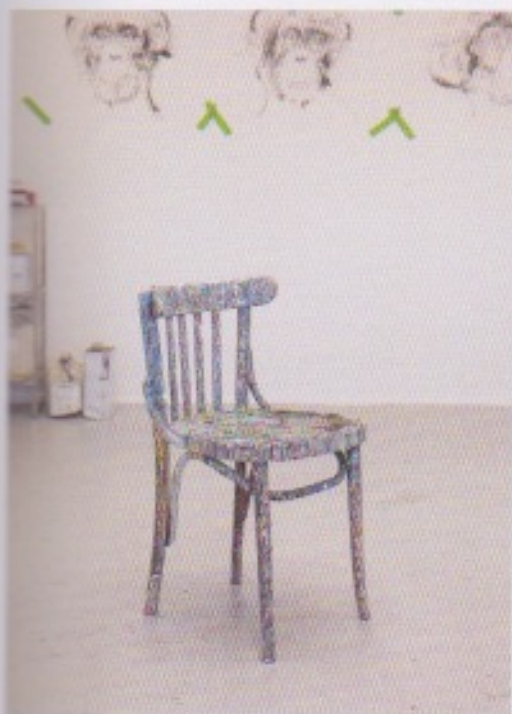
**AP** What was it like watching sneaker art become a thing, having personally done it and moved on from it decades before? It sounds like you may have enjoyed watching that take place?

**DW** It's interesting, there's some great people out there doing some great stuff – you've got your SneakerToons guy, you've got

Josh Parkin, people like that who have got their own distinctive style, and that I think is the best thing. If sneaker art is something that is a vehicle and a platform to get people's passion recognised, and maybe they work with the brands or maybe they get their own collaborations – what's up with that? There's nothing wrong with that, as long as it's unique and says something different than what's already out there. It's people just using what they love and what they do to enhance their lives. That's what any artist does: they pick a subject that they're interested in and they explore it.

**AP** You don't use sneakers as a subject any more and haven't for a long time. How come?

**DW** I ended it because I'd said it all. That hanging there [*points at his painting of the Air Jordan IV 'Fire Red'*], was the nail in the coffin for me, I couldn't top it – there it is, I'd got it how I wanted it to be. The whole ethos of why I made them was basically like... they're things that are throw-away items that are meant to be used for sport. I guess my style is very movement based, there's a lot of spontaneity and dynamism about how I put the paint down, and that kind of contradicts or enhances what they do. They're static but they're alive, if that makes sense? That's what it was all about, personally for me. But I think rather than repeat myself – there's about 50 of them in the world – I'd gone through the greatest hits. I did one show in Spain with Nike, which was called "The Court's a Battlefield", using the Air Force 1 25th anniversary as a bit of a play on words with 'military'. One of the most iconic



paintings was the Air Force Carrier, an aircraft carrier with very distinct iconic Air Force on the flight deck. Even then I was kind of pushing – it wasn't just the side on thing. Towards the end it was like, am I going to still be doing every single shoe that comes out? That's not who I am as an artist. Once I'd said what needed to be said – that's it, I was done. That's why I've never gone back, because I'm always about pushing it forward and that's why I think it's quite interesting with some of the collaborations, especially the last one that I did. It went full circle.

Never say never, maybe an anniversary will come up, maybe something will appear and I'll think I wanna do one. But it would just be mercenary I feel, to do it, and that wasn't the reason that I made them.

**AP** Yeah I agree – those Air Max 95s with size? married what you're up to now with where you'd come from, by putting your current art onto them – is that something you'd been looking to do for a while or was it more to do with the manufacturing

processes becoming capable of doing it?

**DW** Every now and again, every couple of years, we tend to come back together, it's just a completely organic thing. This was for me, the most interesting in the sense that it was a marriage of what I'm doing now with the whole animals thing, which has been my subject for a long while. I did a show called "Albion", based on endangered wildlife in the UK; to me and you, rabbits and foxes, it's like, 'So what?' But if you look at the statistics of how rare and how endangered wildlife is in the UK, things you take for granted, like hedgehogs are going to be extinct in 20 years – it blows my mind. So I did a whole show on that.

Paul Ruffles from size? wanted to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of me working with size?. Then we got Nike involved and Nike sent in the big boys: AK and Jupiter Desphy and Agra from their special projects crew. We had a great meeting and talked about, 'Let's push what you're doing,' and they were very adamant about that. We came up with loads of mocks and loads of interesting ideas of doing a 95 and basing the shoe on colourways and things, but it was like, 'How easy is that?' I mean you're dealing with one of the most famous silhouettes in the world, that's been done a billion times. I'll never forget that meeting because it was like, 'We've got this technology that we can replicate one-to-one a piece that you do.' It was absolutely mind-blowing to think that we could take the paintings and the brush-marks and the texture and the colour and everything and be able to do it seamlessly. We had some original samples where it was on an original 95 with the panels and it just looked clunky and it didn't work. Then this technology came through, it was two years in the process, it was a long time going backwards and forwards. But I can't really put it into words, it's bizarre for me, I started out making paintings of shoes and then the last collaboration is Nike taking my paintings and making shoes with them on it. I can't

really process that information. I come in here everyday and I look at them and I'm like, "Did that happen?" But I worked with an incredible group of wonderfully talented people and let's face it, OK my artwork is on the shoe, but I am one piece of the puzzle; there's also the geniuses at Nike and Paul Ruffles and all of the people that made it all come together. It was wonderful that those guys got excited about it because it was their knowledge and expertise that made it what it was. That's the best part, collaboration is the best of both parties making something new and exciting.

**AP** I find it funny that you're shocked by it. I'd presume that by now you'd be comfortable with the idea of your work ending up on a shoe, maybe not literally your art, but you've designed colourways and collabs for a while now.

**DW** Yeah, I mean they're all incredibly bizarre for me. I'll keep referring back – my first ever dealings with Nike... the original paintings had got out there and one of them got on the cover of Creative Review, which was crazy! I came back to an answerphone message from a guy at Nike in America, "I've just seen your work and we want to do an in-house t-shirt." I thought it was my mate winding me up, I rang him up going, "Are you fucking with me, like?" [laughs]. And it turned out to be legit and Nike made this one in-house t-shirt and that was kind of the start of it really. It could have gone the other way. Let's face it, if I'm doing imagery of intellectual property they could have just gone, "Hang on a minute, you're painting swooshes, you're painting our iconic models, who are you? They could have sued me, that could have shut me down, but somebody embraced it which is phenomenal.

**AP** How important do you think it is that these brands, which are sports brands at the end of the day, are open to embracing the art world?

**DW** I think if you don't embrace what's going

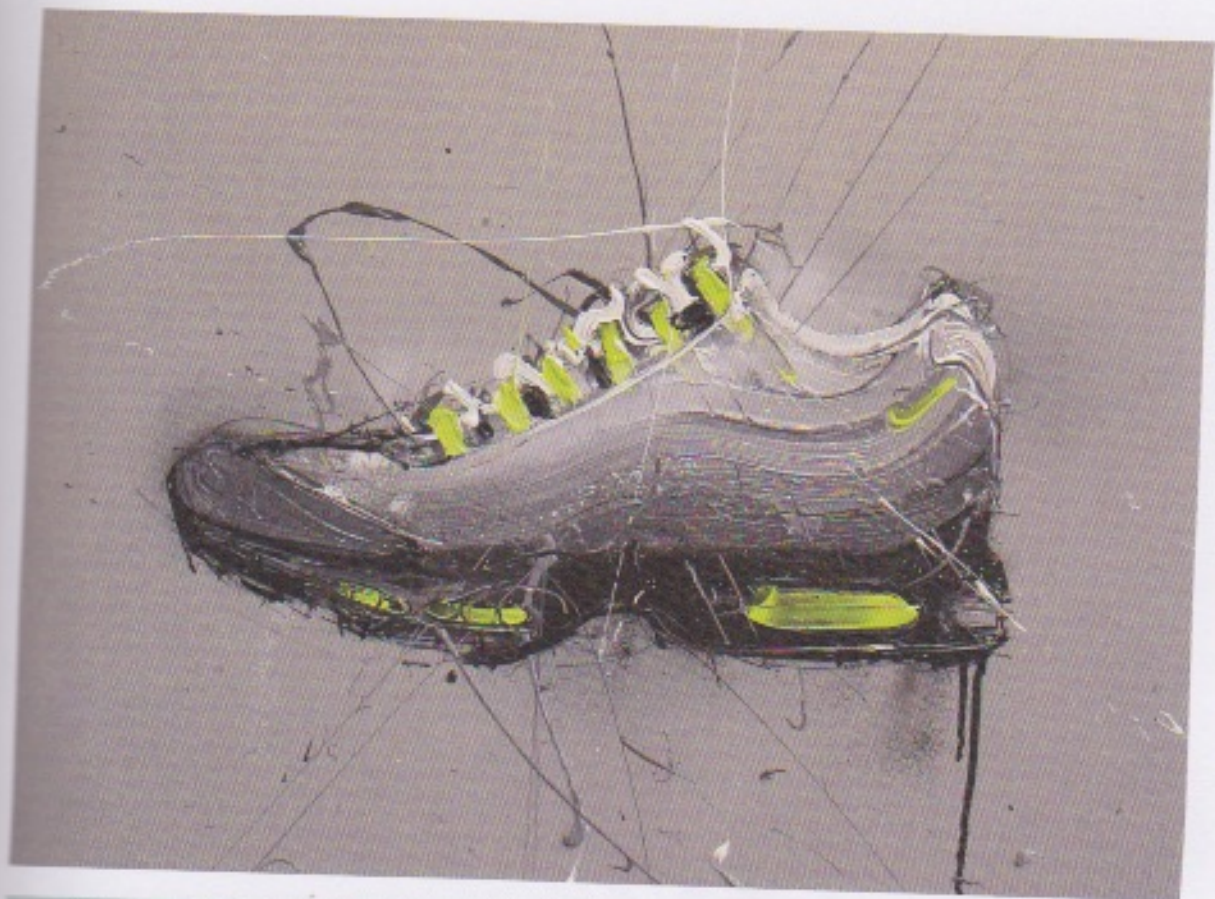
on, if you don't have people on the pulse watching what's creative... be it design, photography, sculpture, music... the worst thing in the world is to stifle creativity. I'm not saying if you go out and you sculpt something, or make something or paint something you're gonna get a sneaker deal – I can't say that, it's not how the world works, but if you are genuinely honest to yourself and are producing things that are good and unique, brands would be foolish not to embrace it. You've got to surprise people all the time, and you surprise people by keeping it fresh and keeping it interesting, that's the way the world works.

I think if things and projects are done with care, honesty, integrity, passion and no limits, I think the best of the bunch come through. Otherwise it's the same stuff regurgitated over and over and over and over...

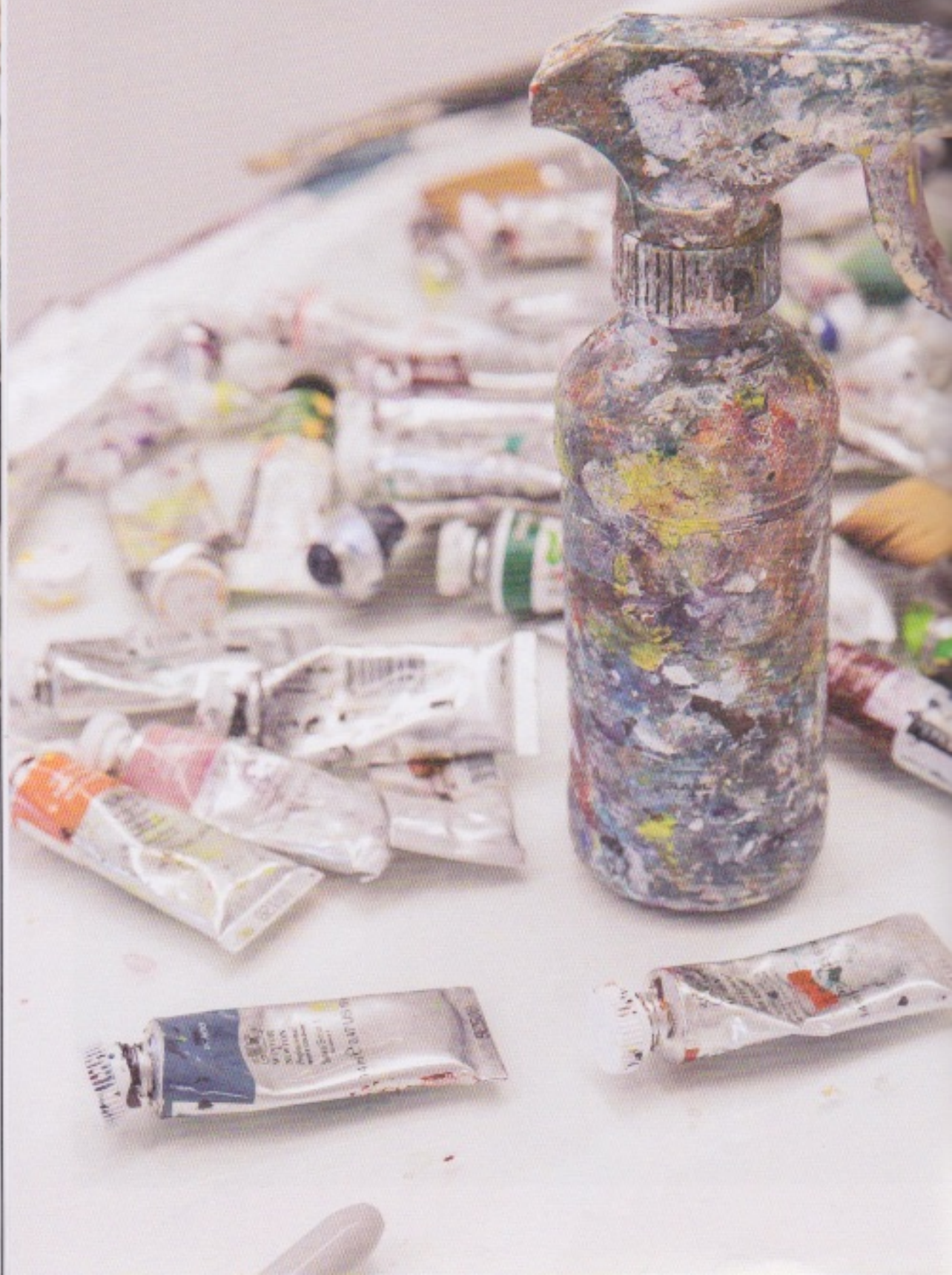
**AP** How about retros then? Something that I've found myself discussing with people lately, is the idea that the current generation of consumers for these brands are young enough that they don't have a personal connection to most retros and we're now starting to see the impact of that.

**DW** I've got an interest in retro things, so for me a retro is like putting on a classic hip-hop album – you put Gang Starr 'Daily Operation' on and it's like buying a pair of Jordan Vs, you know what it sounds like, you love it and every time you will indulge... maybe not every time, but you know what I mean... it's a frozen moment in time that takes you back to a story and a fond memory relating to that shoe.

If you're 16, you don't know who I am, apart from the fact I did Fox and Rabbits. You're not going to know that I painted Jordans near 15 years ago. It's a mad thing isn't it? A lot of people don't know who I am and I love that. That's the importance of the cycle and the importance of our culture, that you've got your Futuras and your Stash's and your Supreme Dunk Lows, and all of that history that is completely







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cemented in time, but kids coming through now might not know that. But if you get deep enough into the culture and you go backwards, it's almost like a library.

**AP** There should be some kind of definitive book, but it would be too big. Who knows, with the 30th anniversary of Nike Air Max this year, maybe we'll see a definitive Air Max book. I'm being hopeful.

**DW** For something as iconic as that, there should be. It's a never-ending machine of stuff, all day, everyday, that's coming and coming and coming. Personally for me, the days of Jason Markk and toothbrushes and freaking out that I've got something on my shoes are over. I remember going into a nightclub, and I'd got Olympic Prestos and it took me ages to get them the first time round, and some dipshit dropped a pint of Guinness on 'em and I nearly had a breakdown in the club. [laughs]

**AP** Was that it for you? The straw that broke the camel's back?

**DW** I was just like, do ya know what, 'Wear 'em, enjoy 'em, love 'em – they're not going to last forever, who cares?' What's better – is it Christmas Eve or Christmas Day? Is it the chase or the ownership?

**AP** That must have been a while back because anyone following your Instagram now, where you openly share your paint-splattered footwear, would find it hard pushed to believe that you ever used Jason Markk.

**DW** Yes! Not because it's a bad product, it's amazing obviously, but I don't know, it's like anything in life, I turn 46 this month and your head changes. Am I going to paint or am I going to clean shoes? What am I going to spend my time doing? Some of the things that I paint in... I've got original Jordan 1s that I've always worn to paint in, since I bought them. I got sent a pair of beautiful Spiridons and I ended up just touching a bit of paint on a painting and dropped a pot on them and then they became my new paint shoes. I'm not going to have a breakdown over it, it is what it is.

**AP** Which brings me to something we've discussed in the past, that you don't like to showcase your collection...

**DW** No I don't.

**AP** Why is that?

**DW** With no disrespect to people that do, it's not who I am as a human being. I'm quite discreet, I'm quite private... what are you going to think of me if I do? You're going to see a lot of shoes aren't you, so what do you wanna see? Surprises? I've got some pieces in my collection that are crazy one off samples and unique one-of-one pieces, but I don't talk about them, why should I? For me personally, I just have them and am grateful to have what I have and I've enjoyed my journey collecting, and I do enjoy visiting them and getting them out and having a good look, like everybody does. But I just don't wanna get them all out for a photograph of me standing in front of them, that's not who I am.

**AP** While we're talking about shoes in your collection, we're sat by a glass display case with various samples of your Jordan I. That shoe became a landmark part of Jordan Brand history when you removed the Swoosh – was that something you had always wanted to do or did it kind of develop and you spotted an opportunity?

**DW** I worked with the most incredible guy called Dave Frank on that project. He enjoyed what I'd done for a few years and he rang me and said, "I wanna do a Jordan shoe with ya," and again I thought it was a joke. I wanted to make something that looked alive, something that looked like it was moving, so as you put your foot down, that paint splat appears with the stars jumping off, then you've got the 3M, when the cameras hit it, it would make them look dynamic, make them look like movement. And then stars have always been an iconography I've used in my work for a long, long time.

But the Swoosh thing... initially the design didn't have a Swoosh and I was like, 'Let's put it through, will it get through?' and then if I'm honest with you, they took a long time to come out and I think there was a point where maybe somebody didn't notice that it was on or not [laughs]. Something in my mind was telling me that maybe it was a bit of panic at the end, but it got through and it got released. It was kind of crazy coz I was like, 'Can we do this?' and they said, 'Let's try it, let's see if it gets through.'

**AP** I like the idea that there must have been an element for everyone involved of 'pass it up the ladder and try our luck.'

**DW** Yeah that's what I'm saying! I don't know if there was a bit of, 'Oh my god, hang on!' But anyway, it did get through. Some people at the time really disliked the fact that there was no Swoosh because the branding's off. Some of the samples have actually got the Swoosh on. Then I came up with this whole thing of velcro Swooshes. At the time I was like, 'What if you got a blank Swoosh or you got a 3M Swoosh and an elephant print Swoosh and a speckle Swoosh,' you'd have the icons



of Jordan and you could remove them and put them back how you want. But we just didn't do it in the end.

**AP** Looking back now you've had time to reflect on that project, which are your favourite pair out of those samples? Is it the one that got released?

**DW** The All Star ones, because the best part that I took from the whole project was working with the kids at Inglewood High. I worked with a group of 20 kids from Inglewood High School, didn't have the internet, didn't have anything and Jordan went in... and I mean this completely honestly, in the sense that Jordan Brand went into this school, which was quite underprivileged and went through like a whirlwind - new computers, new basketball court, renovation - for no other reason than kindness. It was amazing to be a part of that. I worked with these kids for them to produce a mural in the basketball court outside. I've never seen kids with so much passion and love, with so little, in my life. They put

on an amazing school jamboree, there was top-tier athletes there from Jordan and everything, my mind was just blown with that. You made a difference to these kids lives and it was just incredible to see that you could touch someone's life in that way. That mural is still there and these kids are going on to do something. It was phenomenal to be a part of that and just see nothing but genuine love in a place where it's very difficult to exist. Jordan Brand did 23 pairs of the All Stars, Sole Collector auctioned them off through an online auction and the money went to Jordan's charity 'WINGS for the Future'. Amazing. It was incredible to be honest. It far outweighs anything that's in that display case with my name on.

**AP** While working with Nike, you must have met the people who designed the shoes that you painted? You must have crossed paths at some point...

**DW** Nike invited me over in 2006 and I had full access to all the campus departments for a few days. I walked into the Innovation

Kitchen and got introduced to Tinker Hatfield. Mark Smith introduced me – so that's a head wreck as it is – the Laser Dunk and all of that stuff and some of the most incredible things that have ever come out of that place have been down to Mark and the team. It's like a vacuum sealed door, it's like Star Trek to get in. I walk in and Tinker Hatfield goes to me. "Oh it's Mr. Quick Drawings." [laughs]. Dude... I nearly fell backwards! The thing is, when you see his sketches, his original designs are the most iconic things that I think have ever been made – coke bottles, your Bell 47 helicopters, your Air Max 1. He had a fucking Air Max 1 sketch on his wall as I'm talking to him and my eyes are just drifting, it's just crazy when you meet these people, it's unbelievable.

**AP** There's a strange loop there, because the first time you met it must have been in the back of your head that you had gained recognition and ended up in that very position for making art out of his art...

**DW** Exactly! It's bizarre.

**AP** I love that Tinker broke that ice straight away. You could have been stood there thinking, 'I wonder if he knows who I am and what I do with his work?'

**DW** Dude, I'm telling you, he was lightening fast, and for everybody who has had the pleasure of meeting him, he is one of the most genuine, kind human beings, with absolutely no ego. There's no room in Nike for egos and that's what I took from that trip. I went round the whole campus for two days, went to Jordan, SB, Nike basketball and everybody is like, 'waaahey.' There's nobody there clock-watching thinking, everybody has the same intensity of passion and love and... I dunno, it's just a weird place in the sense that it's the most creative bubble of energy, and you feel it man. What I got from it was, it's not, 'I created the Airmax,' or, 'I created the Jordan III,' it's team... always. That's the best part of it and I love that. Like I



said before, with the little collaborations I've worked on, it's a team effort, it's everybody. A good collaboration is the best of the brand, the best of the person who is collaborating, it's not just one thing or one idea or one ego, it's an organic process – and that's what it's like with those guys. It's exciting to be part of that and to see that. It's absolutely amazing really.