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Duke Riley, Artist & Owner Cherry Bomb Tattoo

by [Mindy Bond](#) in [Arts & Entertainment](#) on Oct 5, 2005 6:01 am

Boston born artist Duke Riley currently finds his home in Brooklyn. Owner of [Cherry Bomb Tattoo](#) parlor, Duke has a fondness for tooling around (and swimming in) the East River with artist [Marie Lorenz](#).

Duke is also one of four artists that participated in "book," a 36-week transatlantic collaboration between two artists living in New York and two in Belfast. Sort of like a game of telephone, a standard artist's sketchbook was sent between the artists and each was given 5 days to contribute a two-page response to what they viewed on the spread previous. No discussion took place between the artists until the project was done. The result of their labors is currently on view through Sunday, October 9 as part of What Comes After: Cities, Art and Recovery presented by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. For more details go [here](#).



Gothamist spoke with Duke about "book," tattooing and other distractions.

What is “book” about?

It begins as an assignment using two inefficient means of exchanging ideas. As a process, it’ becomes a visual “choose your own adventure” that feeds on miscommunication and as an end product it is a voyeuristic glimpse into a conversation between four people and their own life occurrences that directs the conversation.

How and why did you get involved with the project?

I went to RISD with Mac Premo, who already knew the guys from Belfast. According to Mac, he asked me to be involved because he had liked my work and was looking to collaborate. As the four of us—Mac, Rory Jeffers, Oliver Jeffers and me—continued our collaboration, we formed the artist collective OAR.



So how well did you know the Jeffers brothers when the project began?

Mac had known the Jeffers from a summer camp they had attended as kids. He gave me their phone number when I was in Belfast a few years back. So I called Rory up one night and met him at a pub for a couple of pints. Oliver I only met briefly just before the project began.

When it came to be your turn with “book” what was your process?

I usually went with my immediate response and began sketching and collecting materials within the same hour I received the “book”.

What sorts of things were going through your mind?

I felt that if I spent too much time thinking about my response I would become overly concerned with the final audience, and I didn’t want to lose the intimacy and spontaneity of a sketchbook.

How was it determined when you got the “book”? It doesn’t seem to follow a strict order...

We planned the schedule ahead of time, but you’re right, it doesn’t follow a strict order.

Did you feel the urge to be argumentative or political with your responses?

I feel the urge to be argumentative about pretty much everything, even when I agree. Personally speaking and as an artist, it would be irresponsible for me to not concern myself with politics right now.

Can you talk about the political themes and/or conflicts that the piece evokes?

New York and Belfast have both experienced traumas of some sort, and all of us have been through those times. There is still violence in Northern Ireland and we in New York are constantly made to fear something. "book" never overtly communicated these events on the page, but these experiences definitely informed our work.

In your opinion, what is it that makes "book" work?

As much as I hate the sound of my own voice, I think the audio component helps give the viewer a more sympathetic understanding of each page and helps tie the whole experience together.

What was the most difficult or frustrating part of working on this?

For the audio component, I was asked to read out loud the limerick I had written for the last spread. Dyslexia has always made reading anything out loud a horrifying experience for me, even when it's a simple phrase of my own writing in the company of friends. And I had even consumed two bottles of whiskey by then.

What was it like to sit down with the other artists after the "book" was done?

I didn't realize the level of familiarity we had developed for each other's work. It was the first time we were in the same physical space since "book" was completed, so there were a lot of questions and reinterpretations.

What's next for "book"?

The exhibition is going to visit Los Angeles and Washington at some point in the next year. The four of us are now collaborating on our next project, BUILDING, which opens this month in Belfast.

Let's move onto your other work. You own a tattoo parlor, Cherry Bomb Tattoo. How did you come to be a tattoo artist?

I had been fascinated by tattoos since I was a little kid. I started tattooing friends with a machine I made for a sculpture class my freshman year at RISD. Shortly thereafter, I started training with some professional tattoo artists.

Say I came into your shop and wanted a tattoo, what would the process be like?

It varies. For the most part people come in for a consultation where we'll sit down and discuss their idea. I encourage people to bring in images they have collected. It might inspire them, even if the final image turns out to look nothing like the tattoo. I do some sketches and try to narrow it down to what it is they're looking for, and when we come to an agreement we set up an appointment for a couple of weeks later where we'll get together again to review the final drawing. We make minor adjustments, if necessary, and then proceed with doing the tattoo. Of course we also get some folks that prefer to do things the old-school way: they come in, pick a design from a flash sheet and sit down in the chair. I still have a lot of fun doing that stuff too.

Any client anecdotes to share...

Everybody always wants to hear about this guy I tattooed once who wanted a unibrow tattooed on his face, but I'm just so tired of telling the story. You will just have to use your imagination ... or look around for him.

I was reading that tattooing was illegal in New York until 1997, which was when you moved here. Were you in New York before it became legal? What about in Boston? Did that make tattooing more or less appealing?

Any opportunity to combine creative and illegal activity is looked upon with glee, but tattooing isn't one of them. When it was still illegal in Boston I tattooed out of a girlfriend's kitchen and it was a big pain in the ass. When I moved to New York I sold my equipment. I had aspirations of becoming one of those guys who paint the advertisement murals on the sides of buildings.

You are also program director of Oyster Arts. What is that organization about?

We organized and taught art classes in several domestic violence shelters in Brooklyn and Manhattan. The classes were for young kids, teens and adults. To be clear, it was not an art therapy program. Instead, it involved more complex and challenging long-term projects that gave the participants a chance to develop some new skills and end up with something they could enjoy.

What other projects have you been involved with recently?

I participated in another show put on by the LMCC in September called "[A Knock At the Door](#)." I also pirated aboard the [Smithson floating island barge](#) last week with Marie Lorenz and Lann Twazan.

What's next for you?

I have a show of drawings opening at Sarah Lawrence College on October 17th. I leave the following day for Belfast to finish work on the BUILDING show which opens on the 27th. When I get back to New York, I will be spending the next couple of months preparing for a video installation at Magnan Projects in January.

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