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ANIMATING THE AFTERLIFE

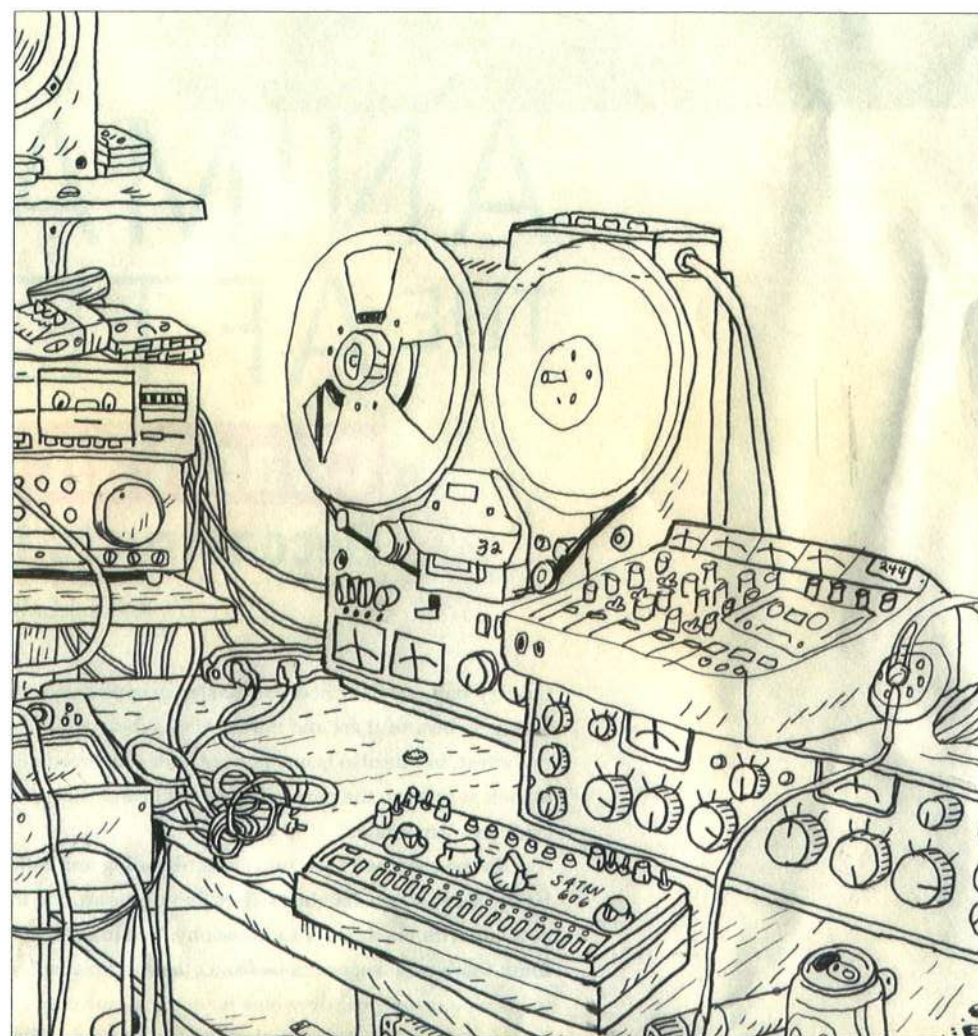
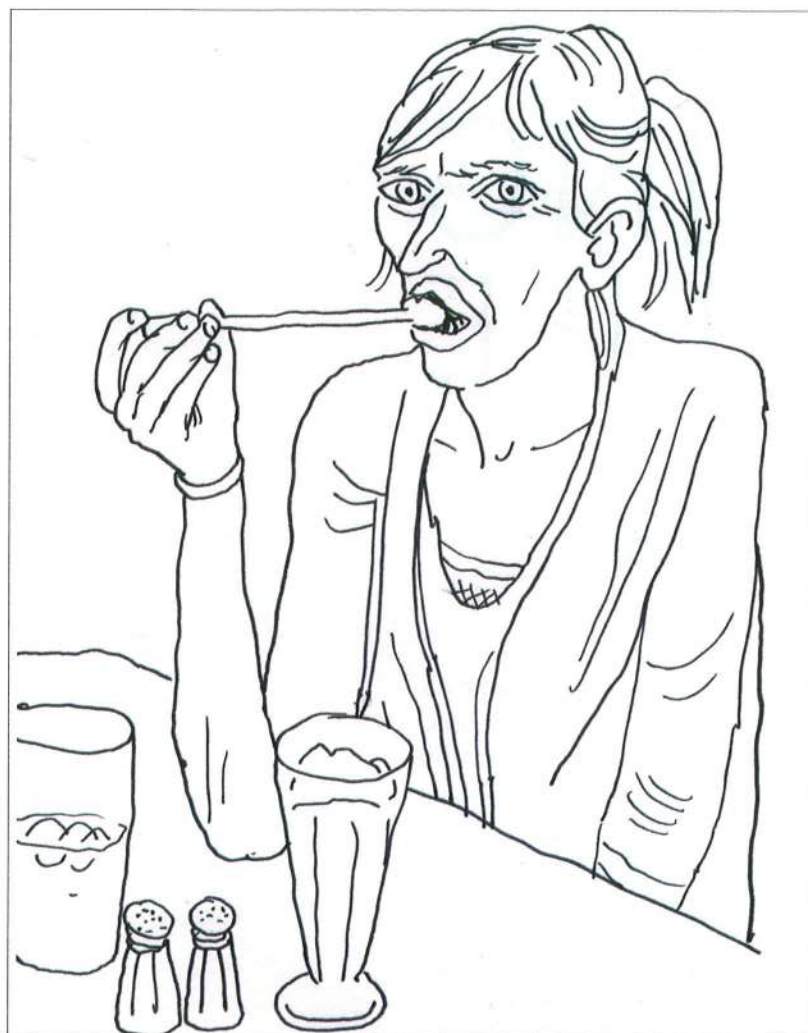
Chad Van Gaalen Deconstructs the World

BY KYLE LEMMON

Calgary-based artist Chad Van Gaalen grapples with the dark voids of the mind's eye through his strangely beautiful art and music. He's a dude who likes to rock, as his latest album *Diaper Island* can attest, but he also is one to peer under the hood of an instrument to see how things tick. "I try to look at origins, the pointlessness of life and the possibility of an afterlife through my music and art," says Van Gaalen.

In the past, he's been into circuit-bending and collecting various found sounds and gadgetries. He's a father of two daughters, does fix-up jobs around the house and possesses an empathetic soul to go along with his tinkerer's philosophy: "I think empathy is the main function of the human mind. I think that's what separates us from other organisms." Van Gaalen's self-taught, D.I.Y. spirit extends to his phantasmagoric drawings for every album cover and music video he produces via the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, through which he funds all of his art projects, including *Diaper Island*—making all artists in the United States extremely jealous.

Sub Pop picked up Flemish Eye, the Calgary "micro-indie" label Van Gaalen calls home, for distribution in 2005; meanwhile, Van Gaalen began working with a fellow Flemish Eye artist, the Calgary art-rock band Women, producing the band's self-titled debut as well as 2010's *Public Strain*. The latter album's production work proved a big transition for Van Gaalen as it marked the first use of his new studio space, Yoko Eno, after years of working like a mad scientist in his own basement. This new setting hugely influenced the sound and art of *Diaper Island*. "My new studio space is much larger than my basement where we recorded the first Women record," says Van Gaalen. "We were kind of soundproofing the place as we were recording *Public Strain*—totally experimenting, hacking stuff apart and gluing it back together. So, a lot of the engineering for that record seeped over into my record."



Musical pursuits aside, it is Van Gaalen's ever-blossoming interest in drawing and animation that remains a stalwart interest since childhood. He studied printmaking for three years in college and taught himself animation and sculpture techniques in-between musical exploits. He claims that drawing comes more naturally to him than music. "Drawing is the easiest technically, maybe not conceptually. Music is easier conceptually, but harder technically." His drawings, like his music, scrape up the dark elements of society and the tranquil beauty of nature and peer at them through a microscope.

One such art piece is the album cover for *Diaper Island*, which portrays Van Gaalen's alien-fantasy version of the nature that surrounds, frightens and inspires him every day. Similarly, an animated video for his song "Peace on the Rise," based on the same series of his drawings

of a waterfall in British Columbia (upon which the album cover was based), depicts an alien planet Van Gaalen envisions to be somewhat like Earth. "The video specifically focuses on these space tourists who have this empathy machine that can suck whatever creature inside the machine they want, transforming them into that creature momentarily to experience life through that creature's mind. And so they travel to other planets to treat themselves for a holiday—they land on a planet and trip out on being another thing."

The alien transformation Van Gaalen dreamt up for "Peace on the Rise" is indicative of something he seeks out with all his art. He's a modern Renaissance man who never tires of exploring his wily deconstructions of gender politics, pitch-black comedy and nature. The coursing waters of his imagination have no dam. »

What are some of your musical and artistic influences? Do they overlap at all?

Chad Van Gaalen: Some of my favorite artists are animators, like René Laloux and Möbius. The video I did for the song “Peace on the Rise” was very much influenced by Laloux’s movie *Gandahar*. I listen to a ton of Polynesian music—a lot of world music in general—and a lot of silence.

Do you remember the first thing you animated?

The first thing I animated was a short, multimedia stop-motion that involved morphological drawings that would follow clay shapes shifting slowly into a cell-drawn piece.

All of your videos have dreamy, spaced-out and grotesque elements. What attracts you to that aesthetic?

I feel like all of the comics I read as a kid, mixed up with my own inability to understand the universe, have taken their toll on my animations. My style has always been very scattered. I prefer not to stick to one thing for very long.

Diaper Island was one of the first things you recorded in your new home studio. How did it go and do you think you’ll return to the basement again?

Diaper Island was a pleasure to make, given that I had way more space to have everything set up all the time. I’m not sure I would ever go back to the basement by choice.

Someone not listening closely could hear “Shave My Pussy” as a lark, but it seems to sincerely touch on a serious gender topic.

The song “Shave My Pussy” is about me observing a woman at the checkout surrounded by collagen-injected ads and looking like she wanted to blow her brains out. Of course, I exaggerated it in my own mind. I have two daughters now, and I feel like the world they are entering into is one that is quite dangerous. The previous generations have had it bad, but they were only primer for what I see happening now. I feel like if they know about it early on they will at least have a fighting chance.

What can you say about the cover and title of *Diaper Island*?

The cover is a drawing I did when I was on a vacation with my family near Nelson, British Columbia. I turned a corner and there was this fantastic waterfall. It sounds even better than it looks. *Diaper*



Island could have been a garbage island or a number of titles; I was trying to imagine what everybody’s trash collection would look like over a lifetime. The best part about drawing for me is doing whatever I want, so I usually use it as something to make me laugh or something to make me sober.

Many of your most colorful art pieces are natural images of foliage and strange creatures. Are you influenced by your surroundings in Calgary?

Indeed. I live right beside a beautiful river valley so I spend a lot of time there. And time itself seems strange when I’m inside of these spaces.

Have you thought about putting out an art book or longer animated film of your work?

An art book would be awesome, it’s just the time to work on stuff that I really need. I have an animated short that is about 13 minutes long called *Bald Static*. I might start work on another longer piece this winter, but it will take years for me to finish anything beyond the four-minute mark. **F**

