

Doodler Jon Burgerman has a great body (of work!)



By [Giacomo Lee](#) | on February 26, 2020

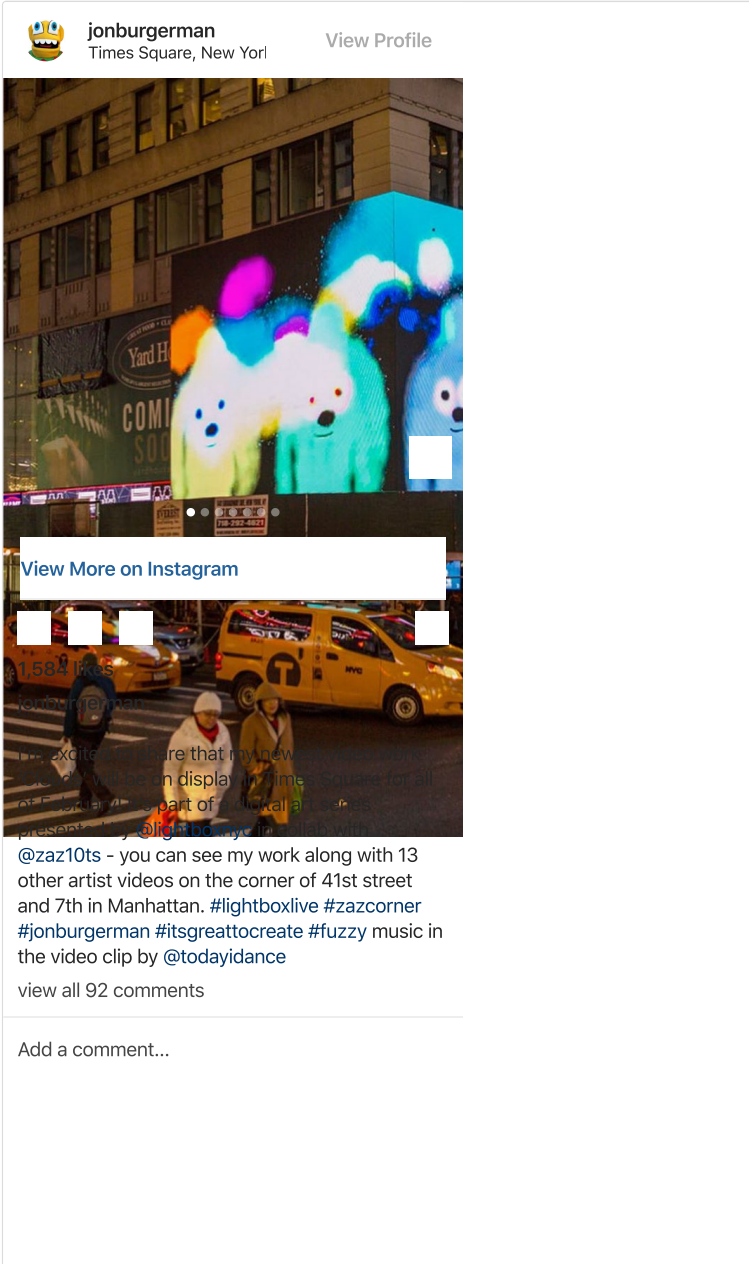
When I grill Jon, he's more of a Whopper than a Wimpy's.

The Brum-born, Brooklyn-based Englishman in New York has long been a master of many things: whimsical doodles, colourful picture books, marvellous murals.

But going to meet Burgerman in his studio on a cold February day, the man has risen to unprecedented heights, with a billboard-sized animation of his introduced to the tourist mecca that is Times Square.

Knocking on his big black door – marked not with a name but a pair of telltale hot dog doodles – I have no idea what to expect. Will a massive ego await, puffed up by managing to get his art into what's essentially the world's biggest gallery, unadulterated by brands or gatekeepers of any sort?

His pure artistic vision is on display for hundreds of thousands of eyeballs. To make matters worse, he's just had a new book released – talk about artistic success.



The image shows an Instagram post from the user 'jonburgerman', located in Times Square, New York. The post features a vibrant lightbox artwork of several colorful, fuzzy, bear-like characters. The scene is set on a city street at night, with yellow taxis and pedestrians visible in the background. The post includes a 'View More on Instagram' button, a like count of 1,584, and a caption that reads: '@zaz10ts - you can see my work along with 13 other artist videos on the corner of 41st street and 7th in Manhattan. #lightboxlive #zazcorner #jonburgerman #itsgreattocreate #fuzzy music in the video clip by @todayidance view all 92 comments'. There is also a text input field for comments with the placeholder 'Add a comment...'.

I ask the same question when inside the studio, a wonderland of Burgerman that's chock-full of prints and canvases. The artist hands me a pink balloon, asking me to inflate it with a provided pump.

This, I think to myself, is the throw down of the gauntlet, the first challenge of a man insane with power. I do his bidding, desperate to please. I pump and pump and pump, before going to knot the sausage-shape I've blown into existence.



As he watches, I fumble, unable to knot. There's too much pressure when you're in the gaze of a man who's invaded the centre of New York, who's influence spreads beyond hipster Brooklynites to a new audience of enraptured children, minds influenced and moulded by charming picture books to become the – gasp! – next generation of Burgermen.

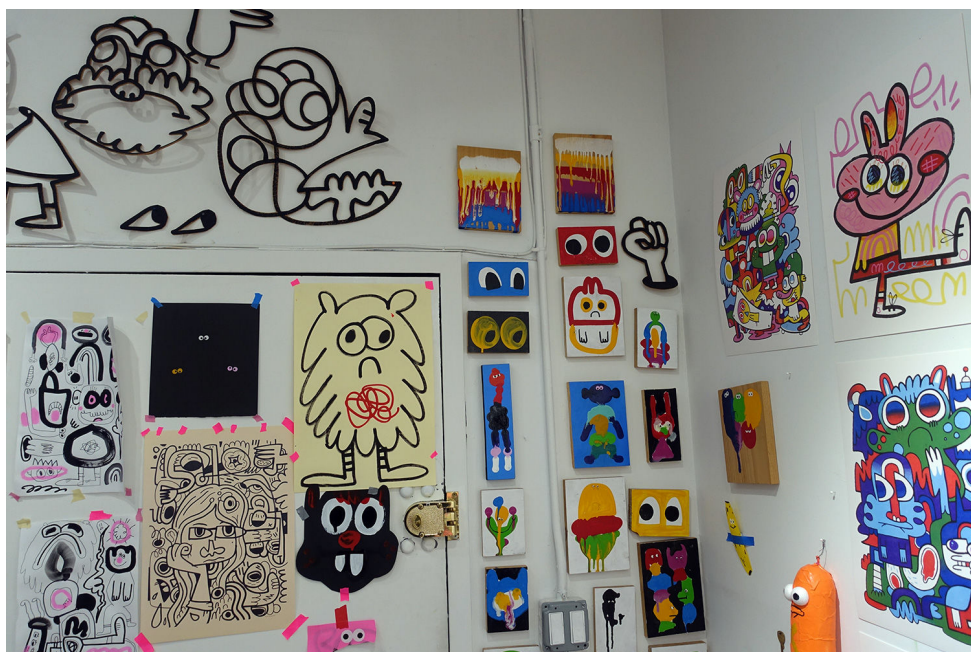
I give up with the balloon, putting my foot down. I need to show this fella who's boss, and it ain't him.

So, turning the tables, I ask him my first question.

"With this Times Square thing, do you feel like you've finally made it big in America?"

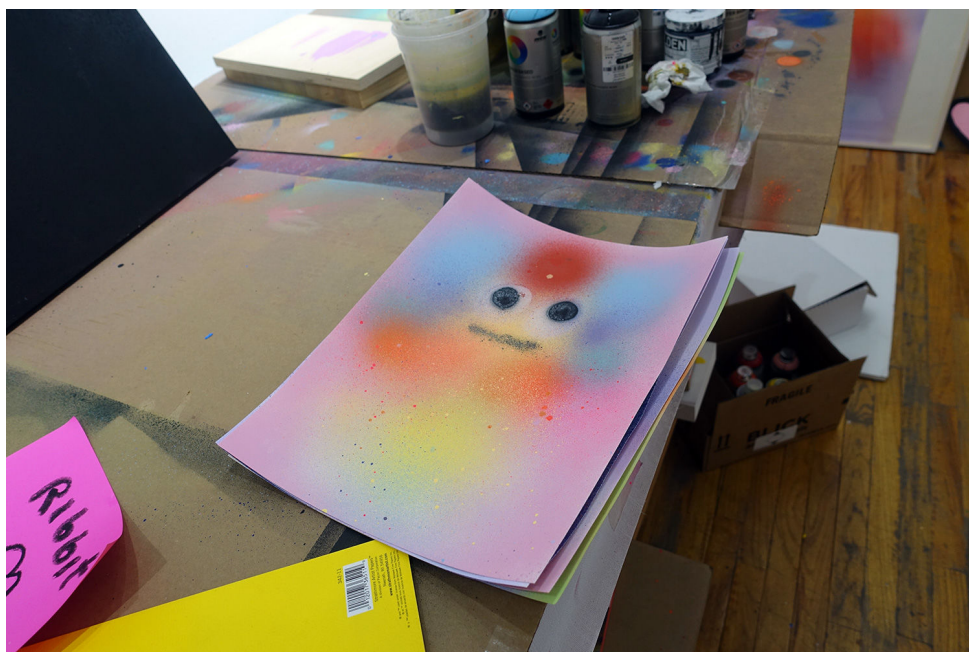
Jon laughs. "There's a lot of digital noise," he points out. "So on one hand, it's absolutely amazing to be up there against giant Hollywood films and huge brands. So yeah, I am really happy because it's a platform known throughout the world, this iconic space where light and sound and noise come together.

"But then, at the same time, it is surrounded by all that commercial stuff."



The trippy yet cutesy animation, *Clouds*, came curated by Lightbox for cultural initiative ZAZ10TS, an NY digital art project that, as Jon explains, helps disrupt the blanket commercialism of Times Square.

"It's really great to be able to offer people something else to look at which isn't trying to sell them something, that isn't trying to make them feel bad about themselves. So hats off to all these initiatives that say, 'All right, let's give an artist a little moment, a little pocket of space.' I wish there was more of that."



I agree, wondering why the hell London's Piccadilly Circus doesn't have anything similar. I also wonder how long Jon's been trying his hand at animation, discovering that he makes his toons with an old version of Procreate.

While artist friends of his are being increasingly asked to make GIFs of editorial illustrations for clients – [something we covered last year on the site](#) – Burgerman is coming at animation from a more experimental approach.

"Though I've worked predominantly in static images for 20-odd years, I've always dabbled a little bit in moving image. It's really nice to be able to push on with that and do a little bit more and see what other opportunities arise."

Jon shows me some loops he's playing about with, scratchy and nebulous patterns that remind of the influential 1940s short *Begone Dull Care*.

Begone Dull Care



Having been around two decades, and covering a lot of ground in that time, I ask Jon how he would describe his practice in 2020.

"Some people introduce me as like, 'Oh you should meet Jon, he's a great animator,' and then I'm like, 'I'm not really an animator,' but they say, 'Oh, but you did this, it's animated.' But I would never say I'm an animator because I'm not particularly gifted at it and I don't do it all the time. It's not my full profession.

"Then they say, 'Okay. Well, he's an author,' and I'm like" – Jon pulls another amusingly uncomfortable expression – "'Well, it's true, I have made some books,' but I'm not only making books. It occupies a big chunk of my time, but not all of my time.



"When I deliver a book I probably don't think about it again for a few months or half the year. So really I'm somewhere in between, and I think that's been a blessing and a curse. No-one likes being labelled, anyway."

Jon's latest book is *Everybody Has a Body*, over 30 pages of the different kinds of human bodies you see on planet Earth. Unlike previous Burger-books, this one has more of a grounding in reality, focused more on messaging than his usual manic merriment.



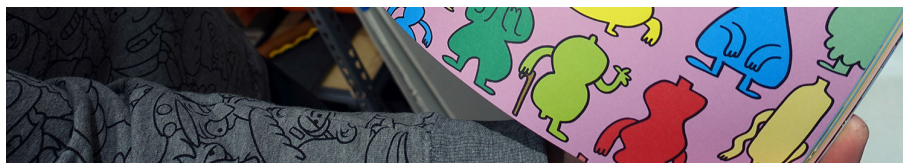
"It's the first book I've made with a more distinct message on how we should talk to and think about others and ourselves," he agree. "It's something that we need to embed in the minds of people when we're quite young.

"In chatting to my friends who have young kids, they tell me what their kids ask them, and you kind of take for granted a lot of things that we just assume.

"A friend told me they were in the park, and their boys saw someone wearing religious clothes, and they didn't know what it was. And they were like, 'Why is that person dressed like a ghost?' And she said, 'It's not a ghost, it's a hijab.' So I thought it would be interesting to have something like that in one of my books, something that celebrates diversity and how we're all different, but also all the same.

"And I thought a picture book is a great platform for talking about kind of serious things, as you can wrap it up in a colourful, playful skin."





The bilingual English/Welsh edition of the book, *Mae gan Bawb ei Gorff ei Hu*

Jon also knows picture books can have a big impact on development, sowing seeds of ideas from an early age.

"And that's why reading in general is so important," he continues. "When I started making picture books, my hope was it would just encourage people to read and be in love with books and they'd be as excited to read a book as they would some other media that's more flashy and modern and stuff.

"You can be just as inventive and imaginative with paper and print."

Looking around his mad lab of colours and cartoon critters, I can't help see what he means. Turning back to the man behind it all, I ask – with tongue firmly in cheek – how he thinks little readers of Jon Burgerman books will turn out as adults.

"They will be efflorescent, bright, colourful, curious, cheeky sparks that will only enrich our society and hopefully focus change for the better for all!" he declares.



I laugh. No doubt Jon was a cheeky spark himself as a kid, but did he ever feel conscious about his own body growing up?

"I was a little bit teased for being skinny," he says after a moment's thought. "I didn't feel different, but I was made to feel different. So, through that, I believed being skinny is a negative thing, though it's an idea that's just given to you.

"How about your body now?" I ask. "What's your least favourite part?"

"Least favourite would probably be my stomach because I've been eating a lot of pizza and stuff recently."

"And most favourite?"

Jon has a think.

"Does my hair count? My wife cut my hair today so that's my favourite part of my body, because it's like I'm wearing a little sculpture.

"She's like *Edward Scissorhands* and she sheared me, and now I feel like I'm sporting her little hand sculpture on my head, and that makes me feel happy."

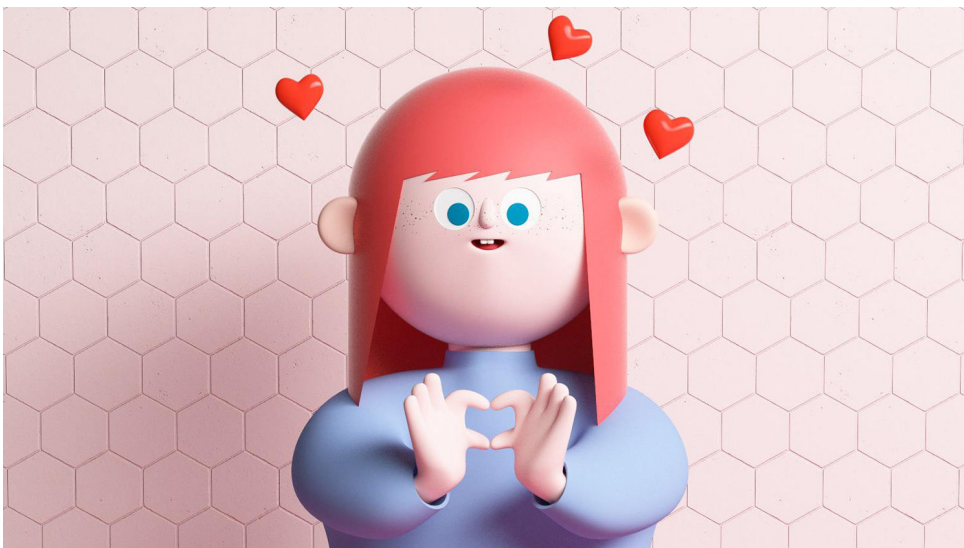
[Jon Burgerman](#), everyone. Big heart, big art – but no big ego.



Catch Jon's *Clouds* installation at Times Square from now until the end of February.

Everybody Has a Body is out now on Oxford University Press.

Related: [How Min Ryu took over Times Square](#)



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