

VAM STUDIO

TATEE GARCIA – Down the Rabbit Hole

Recently, I was standing next to Soho House, trying to take an artsy picture for my Instagram, when I was approached by a man with a baby strapped to him. He tried to sell me his mixtape. He had nothing to do with the artsy picture that I was taking but I did get him to stop and appreciate the mural after I calmly declined his aggressive self-promotion. The mural was a hot pink donut-eating-creature, surrounded by others like it in day-glo shades of turquoise and yellow; they had both a whimsical and haunting air about them. I took the picture, got a pretty decent amount of likes (because social media validation is everything), and decided to tag the artist. Soon enough, I received a comment back, and thus began a torrid relationship. Just kidding, I asked for stickers and then an interview.

To my surprise and pleasure I discovered that Elloo Elloo, aka Tatee Garcia, is not only a female artist, but also a badass.

A lifelong resident of the neighborhood Pilsen, which is known for its intricate murals, rich culture, and edgy street art, Tatee began to hone in on her skills as an artist. After doodling aliens in high school, she picked up ink and began to thrive. I am speechless when she tells me she was once afraid of using color and really only did so after people nagged her to touch up the dream-like creatures she was spewing from her pen. Now, everything is bright, cheery, neon, and filled in.

When you look closely, the monsters swirling through Tatee's universe have black, beady eyes, and scraggly teeth. Almost all of her work has this consistent detail and when I ask what's up with that, she explains her secret tooth fetish. *Oops, guess everyone knows about it now.* Tatee laughs and tells me about a far-off goal she once had of being a dentist, and how that didn't pan out exactly as planned.

"Honestly...I sucked at everything else. School wasn't for me. Art was what I had the potential to be good at," she says when I ask her about her direction in the creative world.

It was at UIC, where Tatee studied graphic design, that she switched from doodling in pencils to doodling in ink. Nowadays, she does everything from graphic design to painting small sculptures, and molding her own brand of teeth onto willing vinyl victims. Currently, a plan for a t-shirt design is in the works.

“Donuts are sexy,” she tells me, underlining her love for sweets and the general theme of eye candy in her work. Somewhere along the lines, she started doodling donuts to feed her alien friends and turned it into the confectionery conglomerate of work that she has under her belt. Her Snapchat and Instagram feed is like a vision board of every raver in the 80s and 90s. *Bright, neon, happy, and fucking weird.*

At an event in Little Village a few years back, a vendor asked Tatee to collaborate with some other artists on a wall. This sparked a hunger (for something other than donuts) and created an itch to decorate more vast spaces. I stopped briefly to picture what Chicago would look like doused in Tatee’s work; the powerful industrial skyline slathered in foamy, fluffy acid-trip induced donut monsters. I’m not mad with what I imagine. If only the city truly was a canvas, right?

In Back of the Yards, on a small wall on 49th and Ashland, one can see a mural Tatee did. It’s the first wall she did solo and one of only a few pieces that has been featured throughout the city. She also had a mural at Chicago’s Soho house for a month, as well as a collaboration with live art installations at North Coast Music Festival. Other large scale pieces can be found off of Hubbard and Morgan.

The dream is, obviously, to cover the world. In small pockets of the West Loop, one can look closely and see treats and monsters peeking out to say hello. Or rather, Elloo, which is Tatee’s street moniker based on a whimsical faux British accent that she is sort of in love with.

While we dance around the subject lightheartedly, I finally ask what it’s really like being a woman creating street art. Art is supposed to be inclusive, interpretive, and most importantly, provocative, yet street art is still a male dominated practice. When one sees a large-scale public piece and the identity of the artist is unknown, almost any given person will assume it was done by a male.

“I used to be intimidated. It’s like...a man’s world. Everyone’s out here trying to do the same thing though. I feel good to be representing female artists, and I feel like I’m making us look good. But sometimes I just wish I had support from fellow women.”

The need for empowerment is beyond real in a cutthroat, subjective world like art and it’s clear that this takes a toll on the community. Tatee combats this by working with [After School Matters](#), a nonprofit that focuses on shaping kids to have an outlet in the art community. Not only is Tatee painting the world, she’s saving it.

I ask what the end goal is. It’s harder to envision a 10 year plan when you’re not sitting behind a desk and climbing the corporate ladder. With Tatee, things are simple: make a living, become recognized, help others on their way up, or down into the donut hole.

-Lizz Evalen