



## Jayson Musson The New York Times March 2012

NOTICED

### Biting Humor Aimed at Art

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Published: February 29, 2012

When Damien Hirst's spot paintings opened at 11 Gagosian galleries worldwide in January, critics busied themselves redrawing many of the familiar battle lines that have helped Mr. Hirst become very rich.

Meanwhile, a YouTube video critique featuring Hennessy Youngman, a video character who wears a goofy baseball cap and layers of gold chains, was going viral in the art world, mixing hip-hop lingo and profanity with high-minded art criticism.

"I understand that, as an artist, if you actually touch your own artwork, the value of said artwork is severely depreciated," he says wryly about Mr. Hirst's paintings, which are made by assistants and can sell for millions of dollars.



The video was part of a YouTube series called "Art Thoughtz" created by and starring a Brooklyn artist named Jayson Musson. (The character Hennessy Youngman, he said, is a reference to the standup comic and Hennessy cognac, a favorite reference in hip-hop music.) His roughly two dozen videos on topics like "relational aesthetics," "the sublime" and "Poetic Waxin'" have made him something of a court jester to the art establishment.

Mr. Musson's following isn't enormous: His videos have received nearly 770,000 views since April 2010. But his following is well placed. Art in America described him as "Ali G with an M.F.A." ArtNet, an art market Web site, called him "George Carlin and Paul Mooney rolled into one." The Huffington Post described the videos as work "through which serious criticism flows with a sick beat."

"Everyone sees it as a real, critical performance, and a lot of that is because most of his audience is right here in the art world," said Naomi Beckwith, a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, which has twice invited Mr. Musson to lecture in character. "They get it," she said. "They understand that the character that's speaking shouldn't have access to that knowledge, so therefore there must be some kind of subterfuge going on."



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The videos are funny partly because they are incongruous: insightful jabs made by a hip-hop personality whose faux-outsider perspective is intended to challenge the art world's pretensions and inaccessibility. In his most-watched video, "How to Make an Art," Hennessy sarcastically criticizes his audience for using terms like "talent" with regard to art — while wearing a baseball cap depicting Ernie from "Sesame Street" and an outsize medallion of a pharaoh.

"Hennessy comes out of a specific reaction to graduate school and the academic, fine-art world that I was exposed to at school," said Mr. Musson, who received a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Pennsylvania last spring. The character starts partly from "a place of anger," though, for him, "the relationship between anger and laughter are very, very close," he added.

The blend makes for a poignant critique, said Brian Boucher, an editor and critic at Art in America, who interviewed Hennessy, the character, by e-mail last March. "Bringing urban black language and attitudes to the generally pretty-white world of contemporary art commentary just seemed unbelievably bold, and once he did it, it seemed incredible no one had done it before, at least not so effectively," Mr. Boucher said.

In person, Mr. Musson, 34, presents a contrast to the swearing, swaggering Hennessy. Gone are the heavy gold chains, the puffy coats and hard-core language (mostly). He arrived at a Brooklyn pizzeria in a tan cardigan and an understated knit cap — more Bob Ross than Jay-Z.

Mr. Musson was born in the Bronx and grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., a suburban village with a large African-American and Caribbean population. At 17, he moved to Philadelphia to attend college and stayed for his master's. In August, he moved to Brooklyn.

Though he recognizes that the popularity of his videos somewhat overshadows his other work at the moment, Mr. Musson continues to produce paintings and cartoonlike drawings, which can be viewed on his Web site, [jaysonmusson.com](http://jaysonmusson.com). Like his videos, much of it employs humor to navigate serious issues like politics, race and sex.

"I feel like a big part of my work is always waiting for the joke," he said. "It's a serendipitous way of working, but it's always how I work."

*A version of this article appeared in print on March 1, 2012, on page E11 of the New York edition with the headline: Biting Humor Aimed At Art*