



portrait by
GIASCO BERTOLI

All works courtesy of the artist

Top: *Bushwick*, oil on wood panel



JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME

The private life of the ironic French fashion illustrator is one of a literary writer and a painter of elegant cityscapes.

interview

by

OLIVIER ZAHM

even know illustration existed as a profession.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In the '70s, there was a whole slew of alternative magazines and fanzines in which illustration was extremely important. JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — Yes, I think they were mostly comic books or political cartoons.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Well, illustration was a significant part of magazine vocabulary at the time. JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — Yes, and I dreamed of being part of that world. At the beginning I thought I would create a different kind of comic book — graphic novels before they existed. The daughter of the art director at *Rock & Folk* magazine, Philippe Koechlin, was working in my *atelier*, and one day she told me to go in and show him my work. And for me, *Rock & Folk* was the absolute trendsetter, the top magazine.

Koechlin was in his office with two or three other guys. They were listening to a live album by Serge Gainsbourg on the largest speakers I have ever seen. I mean I was expecting a member of the Rolling Stones to walk into the office and tap me on the shoulder. Koechlin was very nice to me, he looked at my drawings and he did publish some of them in the magazine. They were little black-and-white drawings, quite simple, with humorous comments about the musical culture at that time. They were maybe only 1.5" high, but they made quite an impression. Anyway, then I went to the Arts Décoratifs school thinking I would do some painting. That was at the very beginning of street art: a few artists (Les Ripoullins) were slapping up posters around Paris. For me it was an interesting mix of the '50s posters I had always admired, by Raymond Savignac and his crowd, and the "savage" painting, all that graffiti. I totally got the poetry of street painting. It was back when there were the cars covered with graffiti in the New York subways and the beginning of rap music, that whole culture.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Were you influenced by street art and the emerging graffiti scene? JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — There was a book by Bruce Davidson, *Subway*, which I had found at the Arts Décors library, that fascinated me. It was also visually exciting because it showed photography and painting at the same time — it had photos taken in the New York subway in the '70s, with these deep, intense colors, with three or four angles visible at the same time in the images. You could see people's faces standing out against the giant graffiti on the walls of the cars, like paintings by Jackson Pollock, and on the windows there would be other graffiti, as well as a view of the cloudy skies or the burnt-out landscapes of the Bronx and Harlem. It was all there. Street art has always been a source of inspiration for me. I quickly realized that what I liked most was creating images for printing, for publication, a part of our daily setting.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So you didn't go into illustration as just illustration. You chose a slightly diffracted medium instead of framed painting, which then brought you into illustration. JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — It was also a way of earning a living, but what I enjoyed most was the fantasy that my images were traveling — I remember something a graffiti artist who painted the subways said: "I wanted my name to travel everywhere." The day I read

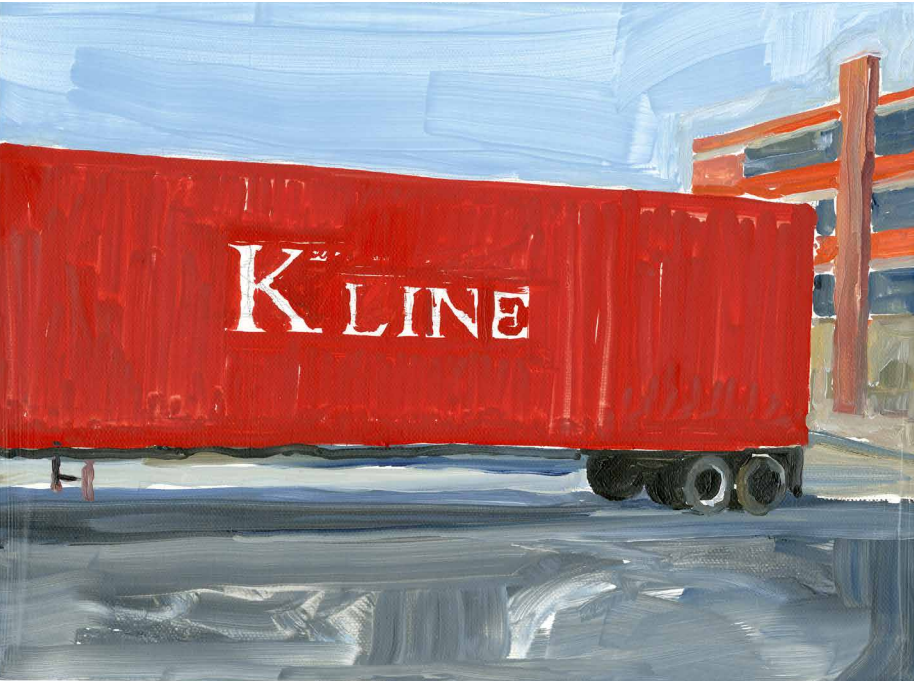


Top: *The Motorcycle Painter #2*, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches

Bottom: *M/SC*, oil on canvas, 9 x 12 inches

Opposite page, top: *Kline*, oil on canvas, 9 x 12 inches

Bottom: *Tribute to Yves Klein*, oil on canvas, 60 x 72 inches



that line, I thought it was what I was trying to do with my images.

I like thinking of my illustrations as the equivalent of a song or a music clip, which can be heard anywhere, on a taxi radio or in a store somewhere. It can be perceived as a noise, an annoyance, or it can suddenly touch us.

It's part of the commercial system and at the same time it's poetic and unexpected, something you can pick up, something you find. That works with the printed image too — I prefer it to the idea of a painting.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Painting intimidated you a little, maybe?

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — An image that is to be printed is by definition deconsecrated, I prefer that. “Low” art can be saved, but “high” art, if it isn't really high art — even if no one realizes it, can be appallingly pretentious.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You're a child of the '80s, a time when interest in the media was just beginning to take off. Cable TV, video clips, posters, advertising ... a whole world of exciting images. Whereas in the '70s it was all about being *opposed* to the world and the media, which was supposedly government-controlled. In the '80's, the artists took over, introducing the independent radio stations, et cetera. Even advertising became a new kind of self-expression...

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — True, there was a period, rather short, when advertising was like that. Some ad execs and publicists came across as real artists. They would

appropriate and have things created instead of creating them themselves. In fact the most impressive component in their “artistic” undertakings was the finding of the funding for the work. However this did not apply to Jean-Paul Goude, whose productions were truly artistic, filled with fantasy and poetic improvisations.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So you thought you were going to be a poster designer? JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — I don't know why, but I had this romantic idea about doing posters. There are the two verses of “Zone,” a poem by Apollinaire, which I read when I was in high school, and which I still interpret as a kind of encouragement, or is it poetic justification? Maybe it's because when I was a kid I lived in the suburbs, and when we would drive into town in a car, I would look at what was written on the walls.

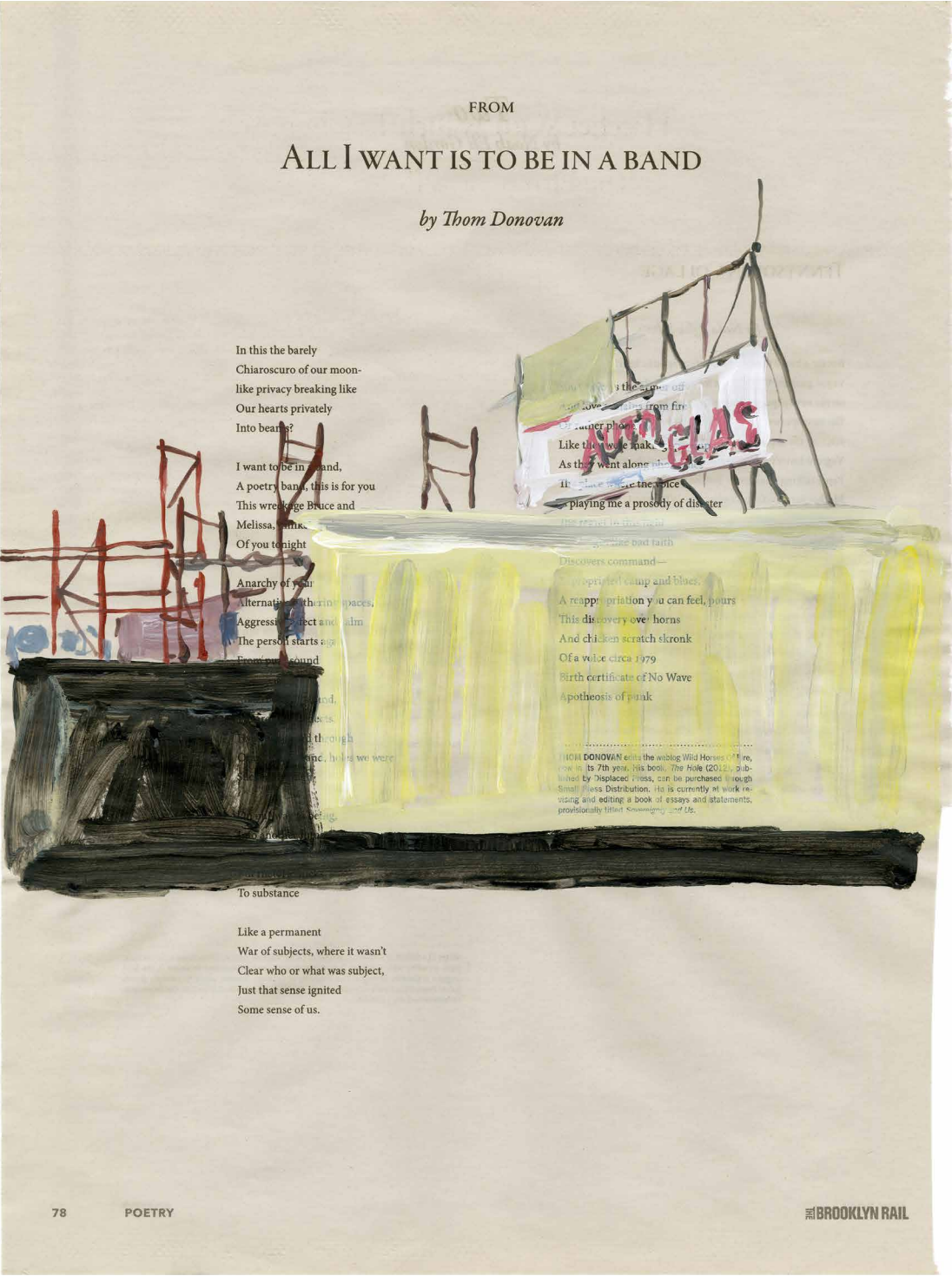
OLIVIER ZAHM — You chose to work in magazines. You became known in the late '80s for your successful “Polaroids de Jeunes Filles” column in French *Glamour*.

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — They gave me a double page, and I had the complete freedom to draw and write what I wanted in a fashion magazine, the only requirement being to make people smile. I did portraits of young girls, using Polaroids, with these little captions, you know, “What I do with my life is...” I used the little paragraphs they would put on the magazine's contributor pages, those nice little blurbs they put in, they're meant to stroke the occasional contributors instead of paying them what they're worth. I was also fascinated by Polaroids. The Polaroid was a kind of staging for the self, like Instagram is today. Obviously people didn't have Instagram accounts then, but they would stick Polaroids up over their desks: shots of them on a commercial set in Arizona, on an airplane, hanging out with someone famous, partying, etc. And the somewhat uncertain quality of the Polaroid was like another filter that made everything more fragile, more interesting. I was doing these parodies of Polaroids, in gouache; a lot of them were conceived as imaginary self-portraits of young girls, like selfies before they even existed.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why did you decide to make fashion the principle subject of your drawings?

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — Fashion, but not only that — anything staged, meaning design, art, traveling, the books you're reading. Everything that is specific and makes us interesting in a certain cultural context.

Auto Glas, acrylic paint on *The Brooklyn Rail*



but there are also others where you feel like you're stuck in a kind of real-estate collection, a series of real-estate agencies, lacking a certain transcendence.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Channeling a bit of Richard Brautigan there...

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — Exactly. I am making fun of all that kind of literature, of my obsession with that kind of writing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's done with a great deal of taste, and the drawings in it make it seem quite precious; you are working on two levels: quality and mockery.

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — The idea was that the character of the writer would have his book illustrated by a fictional old friend, Fourroux, a painter from Montparnasse who only paints nudes.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It is also a portrait of a playboy.

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — Yes, I am amused by the character of the playboy, especially when he takes himself so seriously, as this writer does.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Have you always needed a certain distance, a certain solitude in order to do your work? You seem like a solitary person, even when you're traveling?

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — When I travel, when I am writing or looking for ideas, I do kind of need to isolate myself.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So what is it that pushed you into literature? Is it a serious endeavor for you?

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — Yes, it's a serious activity, even if I am only trying to write novels that will amuse my readers. I don't write every day, just during certain periods, when I have an idea for a novel. For me I think it is a more profound means of communicating than drawing, but I think that less and less these days. When you draw, you have no idea what people see. Perhaps it's not really necessary.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So for you, literature follows the same path as drawing. You seem to have lost your inhibitions when it comes to painting, in spite of its historical weight, its presence.

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — There are so many reasons to be intimidated by the historical weight of painting, its lack of usefulness. So yes, this is why I work with prints, it's because painting is not that easy. In general I prefer doing "lighter" things than a painting on canvas. Some of them are large format. Having done so many things in the areas of humor and culture, I became interested in painting things in an entirely different register, free of all that.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why haven't you integrated text in your paintings, as you do in your drawings?

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — I've been tempted to use words in my paintings, but I try not to. Words irradiate things immediately in one sense, becoming a little too facile and predictable. They're usually portraits, landscapes, or images, things I have seen, like the "truck paintings," or they're constructions, references to other artists, like my "motorcycle painters." I never do stuff that would be laborious to paint.

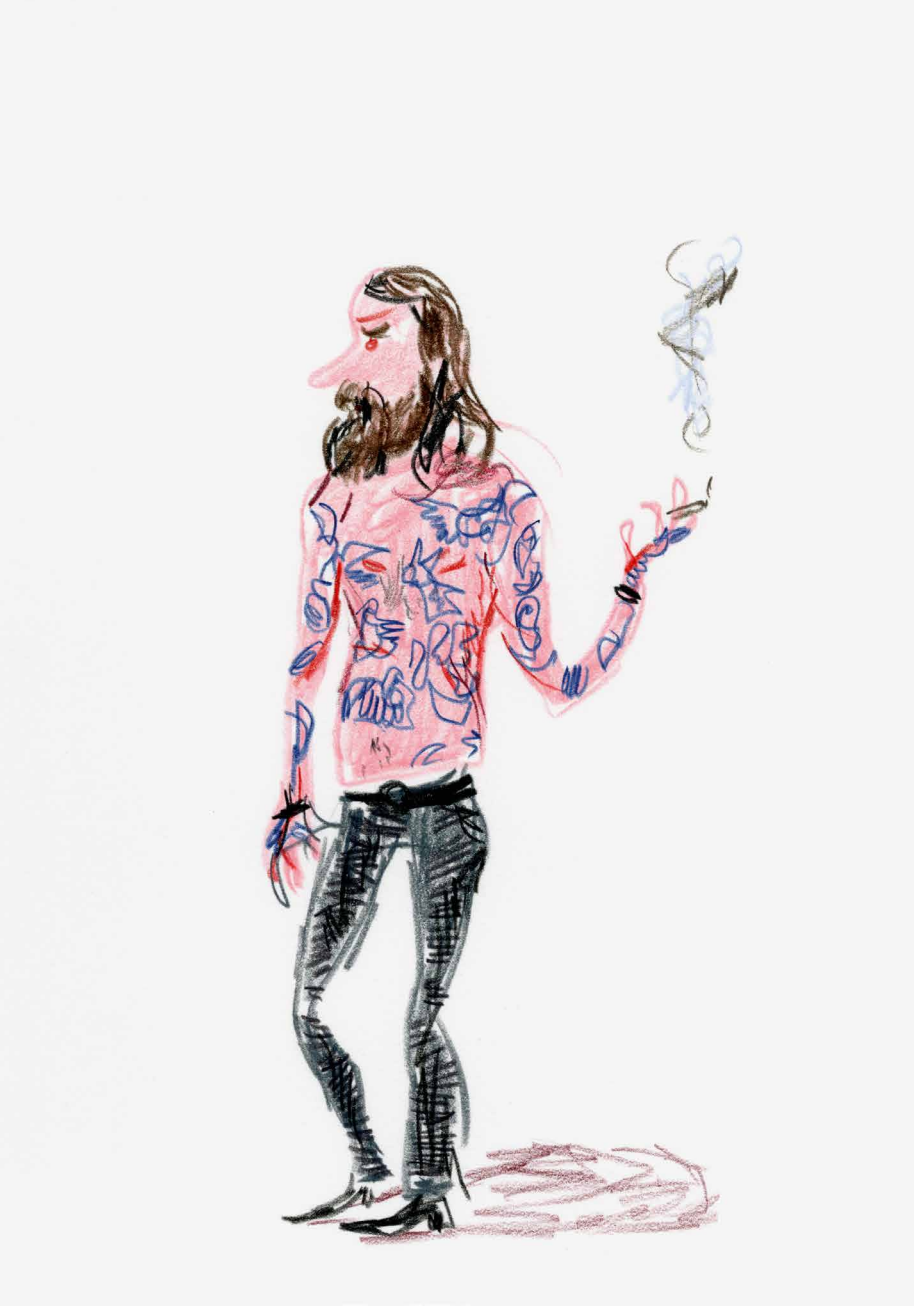
OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you explain your constant success? Most illustrators seem to be prisoners of their own time, then they fade away. Whereas you've been around since the '80s, and you're still here!

JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — I think it's the same as it is for photographers. Some photographers belong to a specific era: Doisneau



Top: *Bushwick*, oil on wood panel
Bottom: *The Collector (Self portrait in the studio)*, oil on canvas

Opposite page: *Dash Snow*



in the '40s, for example, or the great William Eggleston: people are more comfortable when he shoots an old model Chevrolet or a corner of a 1950s cafeteria. And there are a lot of illustrations that are decorative, which relate to a particular style of graphics, or which perpetuate them, as in *Monocle*, for example — I've just tried to see how things change and are characteristic of the time in which we live.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I think it's also your sense of humor, the way you portray the ridiculous; even if you manage to avoid caricature.
JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — I like keeping things a little off-balance, putting them in different perspectives. I consider humor a defense against too much seriousness and being obsessed.

OLIVIER ZAHM — This is one of the reasons you have been successful for more than three decades.
JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — Humor is also a way of distancing yourself from society.

We are constantly being asked to attach ourselves, to join things, to venerate commercial or cultural icons. And the refuge of the counter-culture is — alas — gone.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You say that your work is a way of protecting yourself, of undoing all these cultural imperatives and obligations...
JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — Yes, it's about hitting the ball back, not allowing myself to drop into the role of the docile cultural tourist. This is why I sometimes like art shows in which not everything is controlled, where some things have escaped the curators' taste.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What magazines interest you these days?
JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — For a long time, I bought lots and lots of magazines; they were my source of inspiration. The artificial perspective they offered of society fascinated me, and my reactions to them generated plenty of ideas for drawings or texts. But these days it seems more difficult, probably because the excesses are immediately absorbed by the all-encompassing commerciality of things. It's the same thing for fashion magazines: it is rare to find something in them that is poetic, touching, even a little sexy. And it's even more difficult to find a magazine in which you feel a sense of freedom. Happily I still find this in *Purple*, and I am still inspired by your fashion spreads, maybe because they're never just about fashion, they're also about the women wearing it. The women in *Purple* seem to me to be more interesting, more real — and yet they must also be the models appearing in other magazines?

OLIVIER ZAHM — The magazine as medium is a vector for your work. What do you like about magazines today?
JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — A magazine is exciting when you can feel in it an intuitive sharing of intelligence, that there's a place where people are having fun, where they feel free to cross the lines. We need a certain freedom in our choices of subjects, interests, and surprises, which never happens in the "institutional" magazines where nothing is gratuitous, in the sense that nothing stands against the requirements of advertising or the commercial world of that moment: objects, the films they want us to see, the latest creations of the latest fashion designer.

OLIVIER ZAHM — When do you accept to work for magazines?
JEAN-PHILIPPE DELHOMME — The question is more about approaching the commissions in an interesting way. Answering the request by proposing something more. But it is true that with books or blogs you are working without limitations. That's where I feel the most free.

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