I first meet Jamian Juliano-Villani at her Ridgewood studio in New York. Before I could properly see her, I heard her voice. She was cursing, running down the stairs, apologizing for being late. She excused herself in advance for having a hard time articulating herself that day, and started listing the things we’d find in her studio. When we arrived, the heat was almost unbearable. Fans were placed everywhere. Paintings, in various stages of process, lined the walls (some of these will end up on the street—here, if things don’t look right, they get thrown out). While we took photos, Jamian tinkered with a piece featuring the Pillsbury Doughboy masturbating in a designer armchair. On another wall, a work-in-progress sees what appears to be a cockroach/man hybrid crawling through a bathroom, his face obscured by masking tape, yet to be filled-in. It’s hard to imagine what likeness will occupy that space, so impressively diverse and obscure are Jamian’s many meticulously-mined references.

Jamian’s work is, in one word, absurd, yet just exactly as absurd as the world we live in today. There’s an obvious social response that echoes throughout her practice, demonstrating a strangely comforting consciousness that surrealism is our new reality. Her work possesses an evident fascination with advertising, slogans, brands and their logos, topped off with an awareness of a technologically-advancing world, and the impact that has on contemporary society, pop-culture, and politics. Jamian is playing with ideas that are somehow inherent to the entire human race, yet often slippery to define, or translate into a concrete state. Instead, she renders the ideas just as abstractly as they are, and her art emerges as collaged, hyper-real extensions of our reality, altered specifically to suit her aesthetic and comedic needs, her asinine compositions inexplicably so acutely modern.

**Katja Horvat**
Jamian Juliano-Villani

**Are you more interested in telling stories or telling a truth?**
I am into the genuine idea. Does that make sense?

**A little bit, but explain.**
If I wanted to tell stories I’d actually tell them, be a writer or an illustrator. I’m interested in something that clicks to me. Ideas and stories don’t often translate well onto canvas/paper.

**Hitchcock once said that the execution of an idea is boring, and that the only real exciting part is the idea.**
And oftentimes that is the case.

**How does your process begin?**
With something I found in the garbage that I love, or credits from a TV show, or a drunk joke. I like starting out with something relatively stupid, and then going back and forth until it cancels itself out with something actually meaningful.

**What is the main lesson you’ve learned regarding your work?**
If I don’t care, no one else will. For me, especially in art, I would rather see someone try really hard and have the thing still look like shit, than to deal with someone that does not try at all. I am not ok with people that are just aloof, people that are OK with more or less everything, that just settle for whatever is most comfortable and easy to reach.

**I once heard someone say that an artist has to submit themselves to wasting time before anything becomes purposeful. What is the longest you’ve gone without sleep?**
Four or five days. I stopped doing that though. Have you ever done that?
No, never. I think the most was like two days, and I was out of it. My perception of reality was more or less nonexistent. Totally. I was so delusional. I remember walking home from my studio, and all the air conditioners on the streets sounded like Lil Jon saying “WHAT?!” and “YEAH!!!,” and the garbage bags I walked past were melting on the ground. It all depends on what is keeping you up. I stayed up every other night for three years and now my brain looks like Swiss cheese.

How do you know when a painting is finished?

I have so many paintings here that are pretty much done, but they lost their energy in the first couple of days. I don’t have a problem throwing things out, you can’t force things to happen. Sometimes I’ll force a painting, and 80 hours in I’ll have a few drinks, look at it on my phone and realize, “This painting just sucks.” For a painting to be good, in my opinion, it has to have three different levels. Any more than that it becomes a pile of junk, and any less than that, it is just like a one-liner.

How much time do you spend on research, and how much time on the actual making of an artwork?

Research, and even coming up with an idea, that takes forever. Once I know what I am doing, I move fast. I often write my ideas down in a bar, on a piece of paper, like I am doing ad campaigns or something.

What’s an idea you have on your mind right now?

Lobsters, apparently, can live for 300 years. When you order your lobster roll for lunch, it was probably around 35 years old, but it seems so inconsiderate considering it could have potentially seen all your grandparents die, the invention of the telephone, the end of the Civil War. In movies when you are about to die you see your life flash before your eyes—I’d like to make a painting of a lobster about to be boiled with a timeline of the past 300 years of everyone else’s life.

I can’t even envision how you would paint a timeline. Do you ever think about working with video?

All the time, but not in the sense of art. I want to make a commercial.

What would be your dream commercial? For what product?

Slinky. I am obsessed with them. Such an old-school toy. No one plays with it anymore, but to re-brand it as a toy with history and longevity, unlike trash like the fidget spinner. I see advertising in a very similar way as I do painting. Both are all about manipulating people to like and buy things, to the point that [they] see something that isn’t even there.

What did you do before you became an artist?

I did information technology. I was writing dissertations on prison design, but then I got into art, which is kind of stupid, as I am generating garbage all day, every day. But it’s fine, I can’t do anything else, really.
Have you ever heard of Michel Majerus? He was known for the recycling of images previously used by his peers, idols, etc. It’s been said his “sampling” practice lead to the idea of the artist as a DJ. That feels similar to your approach, using characters, logos, references from so many different sources. I know that in the past you have been caught up in debates over authorship/plagiarism as well.

Claiming ownership over just about anything is pointless. I never say something is just mine—what you see is my reinterpretation of things that stimulate me. But you know, it is almost more challenging to work with something that already exists, than to make something out of nothing. How do you surpass what is already there? You have to be way more creative to do such a thing, and to find a different narrative for something that already has a life cycle.

True. One artist who also does that is Genieve Figgis. She is known for her reinterpretation of already existing works, and she describes this idea of sampling as a form of karaoke.

She is right! And there’s a big commitment behind what you pick. All these decisions are being made, and it’s figuring out what speaks to you most, etc. But also, if something is good enough to have one life, why would it not be good enough to have more? Things need cycles.

**What’s your favorite movie?**

Dracula by Bram Stoker. That movie wastes no time in being dramatic. All the special effects were done with older techniques—no CGI—which gives it an operatic cheapness that is beautiful.

**That’s an apt choice, given its many cycles. What is the last book you read?**

Peru by Gordon Lish.

**Was it any good?**

He is basically insane. It’s so good that when you are reading, it oftentimes feels like you can’t breathe. But my number one love is still Stephen King. I love how he makes mood boards for his book covers that look like collages. I’ve been trying to find those, to buy them, but no success so far.

**What’s the best party you’ve ever attended?**

My 30th birthday. I rented out China Chalet, as that is the last age you can still go there with self-respect. It was during a blizzard, three hundred people came, and I blacked out 20 minutes in. Damn, I can’t believe my favorite party was my own.

**What is the most stressful part of being an artist?**

Coming up with something that’s better than your last painting.