

“Meet the Artist who Made Miley’s Psychedelic VMAs Slide”

Alice Newell-Hanson / September 11, 2015



Miley Cyrus' art-making is well documented on Instagram. Her preferred mediums are glitter and rainbow sprinkles, and her practice often involves kittens and avocado face masks. One time she made a skull out of cake and filled its empty eye sockets with sugar stars. And in June, she auctioned off a triptych of Caitlyn Jenner Vanity Fair covers remastered with her own sparkly brushwork. But when it came to curating her VMAs spectacular last month, Miley enlisted LA-based multimedia artist Jen Stark to provide the visuals.

Stark's art, says Cyrus, is “trippie a\$\$ hippie sh!t.” Working mainly on paper, Stark paints biomorphic neon shapes in hypnotic, radiating concentric bands of color. Sometimes she takes her forms into the third dimension, creating sculptures from layers of metal or paper in highlighter hues. They look like swirling rainbow vortexes that you want to jump into - or out of, as Cyrus did at the VMAs. For part of their collaboration for the MTV awards show, Stark built the singer a giant technicolor slide which she used to make her grand entrance onto the stage. “The wormhole slide,” Stark calls it over the phone from her studio in LA's Chinatown.

“It was a weird cosmic serendipity,” the artist marvels when I ask how she and Miley joined forces. “I had met Wayne Coyne from the Flaming Lips, who is pretty much her best friend. He’s a very friendly, psychedelic guy and we started texting. One day he said, ‘You should come to Miley’s house right now and meet her.’ I went over, she was really cool and she liked my artwork. Then two days later she texted me with a photo that MTV had sent her of a mockup VMAs billboard with her posing in front of my work. She asked, ‘Is this something you’d want to do?’ I was like, ‘YEAH!’”



*Cosmic Shift, 2015*

And just like that Stark's work was on a four-story billboard in Times Square, in a TV awards ceremony watched by 9.8 million people, and -- most visibly of all -- on Miley Cyrus' Instagram, for all of her 28.3 million Smilers to see and like.

While Stark's work was a perfect visual match and vehicle for the emancipation of post-Disney Miley ("it was sort of like a birth," Stark says of Miley's VMAs entrance), Stark also has plenty of her own projects on the go. Next spring, she will have her first-ever solo exhibition, in New York, at the soon-to-be-opened Manhattan outpost of Eric Firestone Gallery. This fall she'll be working on a 40-foot-high mural on the side of a new building in Culver City in Los Angeles. And in December she'll go back to her hometown, Miami, to show at the Untitled fair at Art Basel.

Stark left Miami in 2012, seven years after graduating from the Maryland Institute College of Art. "I just felt I was reaching a plateau there. It's a really awesome place for artists to start out, but I felt like I needed to grow and LA seemed like the perfect fit," she says. Definitely. Stark's work often explores spirituality - especially the tradition of creating mandalas - and she speaks about her own spirituality with a warm, California openness. "I've done Transcendental Meditation for about a year now and I feel like I'm just starting to tap into all of these ideas swirling around in the universe and catching onto them," she tells me. And creating mandalas, something which she likens her own process to, is historically a form of meditation itself. The laying of intricate lines of sand lulls the artist into a kind of trance. "When you stare at them they almost start to pulse," she muses.

Does Jen's bright and colorfully vibrating future contain more projects with Miley? "We threw around a couple of other ideas," Stark answers. "So I'm sure I'll keep working with her. She's a rad girl. She's gone through so much stuff in her life that now she's like, 'I don't want to be a puppet any more. I just want to be myself. She's smart and she commands a lot of attention. But this was such a big thing, I think I'm going to lay low for a bit.'"