

New York Times **August 3, 2011**

The Art of Being a Character

By Tim Murphy

The art-fashion crowd struck a cool pose at the opening party for "On Shuffle," an indie rock-themed show at the Lehmann Maupin Gallery in Chelsea. Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth nonchalantly stepped around her installation, a circle of glitter on the floor. Cecilia Dean, a founder of the avant-garde fashion bible *Visionaire*, sailed in wearing a black Margiela jersey.

Amid the swans nervously clutching a glass of white wine was the show's unlikeliest darling, a black Southern-inflected, gender-bending, genre-defying video-and-performance artist named Kalup Linzy. Instead of the bad wigs or skimpy dresses that his characters are known for, Mr. Linzy looked positively demure in a beige henley T-shirt and sneakers. The only sparkle was a pair of diamond stud earrings.

"I bought these on clearance at a department store in Union Square," Mr. Linzy, 34, said in his deep drawl, as his 10-minute video, "L'il Myron's Trade," played in a continuous loop. "I can't remember the name. A basement? Feline's?"

It was hard to know if Mr. Linzy was in on the joke, which could also describe the art world's amusement with his work. His raunchy and humorous videos, low-budget affairs that have found their way to MoMA's permanent collection, are inspired by daytime soap operas.

The characters, many played by Mr. Linzy, are typically women or drag chanteuses who lust for sex and fame as openly as they call Grandma. With names like Taiwan, Patience and Labisha, they are his alter egos, portraying a child of rural Florida or an anxious art-world striver of New York.

"He's a multifaceted artist who's become a recognizable figure on the contemporary New York art scene in only a few years," said Klaus Biesenbach, the director of MoMA PS1 in Queens, which has given Mr. Linzy studio space and, last year, included his work in the influential Greater New York show. "He crosses between visual arts, performance, directing, acting and music."

Mr. Linzy first caught the art world's attention in 2005 as the breakout artist of two shows, one at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the other at Taxter & Spengemann, a Chelsea gallery. "A star is born," wrote Holland Cotter, an art critic for *The New York Times*. "His name is Kalup Linzy."

As his fame rose, so did the company he kept. Chloë Sevigny and Liya Kebede, the Ethiopian model, have appeared in his videos. Diane Von Furstenberg and Proenza Schouler have made dresses specifically for his performances. But his best-known and most complex collaboration has been with the culturally promiscuous heartthrob James Franco.

The two met in 2009 at Art Basel Miami Beach, at a party honoring Mr. Biesenbach. Mr. Linzy was performing there as Taiwan, the melancholy drag chanteuse, singing torch songs with a Billie Holiday-like flower behind one ear. Mr. Franco was impressed and asked if he would appear on "General Hospital," the soap on which Mr. Franco was playing a deranged artist known as Franco.

"I smiled and said O.K., but I didn't really think it would happen," Mr. Linzy said. Two months later, a childhood dream came true when he appeared on "General Hospital" as the club singer Kalup Ishmael, singing "Route 66."

It was one of the oddest art pairings in recent memory. "It's a hilarious collaboration," said Hrag Vartanian, the editor of the art blog Hyperallergic. "I don't know whether Franco is using Kalup for art world cred and vice-versa, in terms of Kalup getting pop culture cred."

The incongruous duo performed live several times, including last year at the Rob Pruitt Art Awards at Webster Hall, in which they rapped "Chewing Gum," an X-rated song that features variations on the line, "This ain't no chewing gum."

The collaboration took another twist last month when Mr. Linzy released an EP of dance-oriented songs, "Turn It Up," with spoken-word contributions from Mr. Franco.

A soap-opera-obsessed artist in a haute-concept art world, Mr. Linzy has been described as the heir to artists and performers as diverse as Cindy Sherman, RuPaul and John Waters. His low-budget videos, which he not only stars in but also writes, directs and produces, feature seemingly simple narratives that slyly upend conventional notions about race, sexuality, class and art world pretensions.

In "Da Young and Da Mess," Taiwan is taking a bubble bath while consulting with a telephone psychic about a marriage proposal. In another, "As Da Art World Might Turn," a hysterical Katonya grows increasingly anxious about her art opening and collapses in front of her gallerist.

The campy humor belies a deeper meaning. "The timing of Kalup's work is a little bit off and causes a delay that is really funny," said Thomas Lax, exhibition coordinator at the Studio Museum in Harlem. "All his characters are trying to approximate an ideal, but they're just behind or ahead of it."

As for Mr. Linzy himself, he stays well ahead of his own buzz. "One of the reasons he's climbed so quickly is that he's very good at self-promotion," said Paddy Johnson, an art blogger. "Nobody returns an e-mail faster."

Nor is anyone as prolific a sender. Several times a month, Mr. Linzy sends a group e-mail to about 300 people, including celebrities like Ms. Sevnigny, David Alan Grier, Molly Shannon and Uma Thurman, updating them on his latest works. In a recent e-mail, Mr. Linzy wrote: "Thank you to all who were able to make my birthday celebration performance! I am sharing the video 'Fly Away,' which I previewed for those who were unable to attend. Hope you enjoy!!!"

"If you tell me to keep in touch, I assume that you mean it," Mr. Linzy said, adding that his e-mail list included high school art teachers. "You can't destroy your foundations."

Especially when those foundations have given you your best material. Mr. Linzy grew up in Stuckey, Fla., a tiny village near Orlando. His mother was schizophrenic and a drug addict, said Mr. Linzy, who was 12 when his father was semiparalyzed by a stroke. Mr. Linzy was raised primarily by his deaf grandmother, Georgianna Linzy, and his aunt, Diane McMullen, a nanny, in homes full of cousins, gospel music, make-believe church and television soaps.

In high school, Mr. Linzy began shooting his own soaps with a video camera. He majored in art at the University of South Florida and received his M.F.A. there, where he continued to make soaps. "My professors told me they were too lo-fi for TV but they weren't art, either," he said.

His big break came when one professor urged him to apply to the prestigious summer art residency in Skowhegan, Me. "I thought, I am not going to spend my summer in the middle of nowhere," he said, laughing. "I totally did not get it."

At Skowhegan, Mr. Linzy found friends and collaborators who would become his network when he moved to New York the next year, including the artist Matthew Day Jackson and also Pascal Spengemann of the gallery Taxter & Spengemann, which would come to represent him.

But in just a few years, Mr. Linzy has gone from craving attention to running the risk of overexposure.

"When Kalup did 'General Hospital' with James, I think he thought that was where he belonged," said Leo Fitzpatrick, the actor from the 1995 movie "Kids" who has appeared in his videos. "I don't know if he understood the absurdity of it or even the bad connotations that might come along with being associated with James Franco."

Last month, Mr. Linzy surprised his e-mail readers when he announced he was leaving Taxter & Spengemann, writing cryptically that he needed to be with people who "wholeheartedly support" his career.

The e-mail surprised the commercial art world, not least Kelly Taxter, a founder of the gallery, who said in an e-mail that she thought Mr. Linzy had left to "pursue his career within mainstream Hollywood."

And then there's his collaboration with Mr. Franco. In July, as publicity was building around Mr. Linzy's five-song EP, which is listed under iTunes as "Turn it Up (feat. James Franco)," Mr. Franco seemed to be distancing himself from the project. Mr. Franco declined an interview request, but a spokesperson for his manager, Miles Levy, emailed saying that "James is no longer involved with this."

Seated the other day in his basement apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, which

was crammed with video equipment, Mr. Linzy was uncomfortable discussing the apparent split. "James and I have worked together right here," he said, pointing to his cluttered worktable. "We used to text each other all the time."

Mr. Linzy added that there are more recordings with Mr. Franco, but was reluctant to release anything without Mr. Franco's blessing. The unlikely duo, it seems, need to work through some issues first. "James texted me saying, 'Oh, we're still friends, right?'" Mr. Linzy said.

In the meantime, there is plenty on Mr. Linzy's plate. He'll be in San Francisco in August working on an opera for the city's Museum of Modern Art. After that, he wants to focus on a feature film about a wannabe Web-series star named Katessa. "It'll be both funny and sad," he promised.

And then there are the daytime soaps, which Mr. Linzy still watches and gossips about with his family. "Nobody in my family ever dreamed that one of us would be on a real soap opera," he said.