

A HEAVY



By Michelle Lee Ribeiro

Portrait photography by
Harry Benson

PERSPECTIVE

Ahead of his exhibit at the Cultural Council of Palm Beach County, artist (and former Metallica bassist) **Jason Newsted** takes us on a tour through his studio and his process



THIS PAGE: NEWSTED IN NEW YORK
CITY, AUGUST 2017

OPPOSITE PAGE: POWER TRIO
(2006), DIPTYCH, ACRYLIC AND
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS



“I ALWAYS WANT THERE TO BE WONDERMENT IN WHAT I DO. WITH PAINTING, I DON'T EVER HAVE A PLAN; THE SUBJECT CHOOSES ITSELF.”

Jason Newsted comes outside to greet his guest smiling and barefoot. Inside the 1950s-era home, music is playing softly—Sigur Rós at the moment—and the space is bright with sunshine. There's no AC cranking, despite the 90-degree mid-June afternoon, just a gentle breeze coming in through the screen door. There's an old tube TV, VCR, and stacks of VHS tapes in one corner. And then there's art. Lots and lots of art.

A quick scan of the wide-open studio results in an unexpected discovery: On one side, there's a remarkably bubble-gum flavor going on. Everything's pink, and yellow, and either pastel or neon. And perched in this cheerful environment are a couple of beaming, plush Care Bears showing off the cupcakes and rainbows on their tummies. So, wait... This guy was in *Metallica*?

“Oh, that's my wife's side,” Newsted offers, sensing the confusion in the air. “My side is over here.” Newsted, and his wife, fellow artist Nicole, live in Jupiter for part of the year, and this is the space where they make their art. There are paintings and drawings everywhere, finished and unfinished, in stacks, on

easels, on walls; cans of paint spilling onto tables and floors.... It's very clear that art is always happening here. “I probably did 20 pictures already since Sunday afternoon,” he says. (It's Tuesday.) “Nick showed up three months ago, and here we are.”

Nick is Art Miami founder Nick Korniloff. The two met back in February and hit it off, so one night Newsted invited his new friend to his home to hang out and play music. Inside the jam room, Korniloff saw some of Newsted's artwork hanging on the walls and pretty much said, “You're going to Art New York, and you have six weeks to prepare.” At the time, Newsted hadn't been painting much—those pieces were from years ago. Instead, he'd been focusing on playing music he enjoys with different musicians he knows, mostly for charities like Little Kids Rock (littlekidsrock.org) and the Perry J. Cohen Foundation (pjcf.org). Still, he accepted the challenge.

He arrived at Art New York with zero expectations. “A common thread with any artist who's a real artist is self-doubt,” says Newsted. “It's always there. I didn't think I'd sell anything. I mean, there was a Basquiat across the hall 15 feet away!” But people did buy his pieces. Some of the quickest sellers were

THIS PAGE (FROM LEFT): BILL EVANS (2006), ACRYLIC AND MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS; NEWSTED.

OPPOSITE PAGE (FROM TOP): THE PROJECTS (2006), ACRYLIC AND MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS; DOUBLE-NECK (2017), GRAPHITE AND COLORED PENCIL ON BLACK PAPER.



those depicting the “creatures” that have been prevalent in his work since he first got serious about painting more than a decade ago. While recovering from two shoulder surgeries in 2004-2005, he couldn't play bass as hard as he'd like and instead turned to painting to channel his creativity. Unable to hold a brush well with an arm in a sling, he improvised, grabbing whatever was around to splatter paint on canvas. It was a process derived out of necessity that aligned perfectly with his natural approach to music and art. “I learned very little music theory on purpose,” he says. “I always want there to be wonderment in what I do. With painting, I don't ever have a plan; the subject chooses itself. I pour all this paint on, sand and all kinds of crazy [stuff], moving the canvas while it's wet. Then I stand back and let it reveal itself. When it shows up in front of me, it's like, *that* was inside me? Most cool songs happen the same way. If you do it too long, it's just enough time to ruin it.”

The creatures that have shown up on canvas are likely the byproduct of Newsted's background as a metal guitarist combined with images floating around in his head of some of the artists he admires—Basquiat, Pollock, Joe Coleman.





THIS PAGE (FROM LEFT): JMB RIP (2006), ACRYLIC AND MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS, IS NEWSTED'S ODE TO JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT; NEW SHERIFF IN ROCK RIDGE (2007), INK ON PAPER.

OPPOSITE PAGE: NEWSTED



& WEB EXCLUSIVE MORE THOUGHTS FROM NEWSTED, PLUS SOME ADDITIONAL WORKS, AT PALMBEACHCULTURE.COM/MAGAZINE

"The skulls come from Basquiat's skullies, but before that he got it from Picasso's skullies," he says. "I'd pore through books when my brain was tired and let it go into my gray matter. When I spit it back out, that's what stuck." When waiting for the subject to reveal itself, Newsted says he "chases the face," seeking out eyes, bones, a figure in the abstract work, much like people see faces in clouds. "It's a simple, childlike clairvoyance; it's how you perceive it," he explains. "That's what I do.... And when it's finished and someone sees something I didn't intend or didn't see myself, I love, love, love that."

Newsted's work has evolved over the years, with maybe five or six distinct styles that have transpired. In what he calls his tapestries, he uses two hands simultaneously to write a sentence, or a verse from a song, over and over again, forward and backward. He spins the canvas one quarter each time to create layer upon layer of the verse, upward of 300 times. The end result is an abstract piece reminiscent of Pollock whose lyrical basis is no longer apparent. The only people who know its true makeup are Newsted and the buyer: "I take pictures of it at every stage and give them to the buyer so they can see what it says. And once you live with it for a while, if you focus on one color and let your brain zombie out, you can find the letters or words."

He has also made small sculptures and lately has been working with

collage a lot, spending hours clipping words and pictures out of magazines while watching documentary films or *Jeopardy*. "It's time consuming and labor intensive, but I love that it's about what can be created out of something that wasn't intended to be that," he says. "It's the same principle as the paintings and drawings: I never know what's going to show up."

Among the breadth of his work, some of Newsted's personal favorites are homages he created in tribute to friends and inspirational figures he has lost: Alice in Chains vocalist Layne Staley, film director Akira Kurosawa, and artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. "The best ones come from a deep, deep place where I'm paying someone respect," he says. "The same for music: The deeper the song and what it means to me, I put that much more love into it."

Newsted's many styles and phases as an artist will be on display December 1 through February 3 at the Cultural Council of Palm Beach County. The solo exhibit will also include some of his guitars, lyrics, a video installation, and an occasional musical performance by Newsted himself. It's his first solo show, but he's not sweating it. "There's a saying: 'Every bird has just their song,'" he says. "There are many artists greater, more advanced, than me. But that doesn't change the fact that I'm still going to go for it the way I'm going to go for it. Only I can sing my song." ❖

