

“Art is Life”: Upcycling through Patterns in the Sand.

Interview with Artist Robert MoonDragon at Joshua Tree Music Festival, October 8, 2017

Robert Moondragon is a multi-media installation artist known for his use of society’s “trash” to make shrines, mandalas, sculptures, and jewelry. Using his art to promote upcycling, Robert’s work has been regularly featured at Joshua Tree Music Festival. His unique style and generosity make him one of the most notable installation artists to date.

Interview (October 8, 2017) and photos by Flo (Flore Muguet), a French anthropologist. Edited by Laurel Teal in 2017 and re-edited by Flo in 2025.



“There are patterns in everything. Patterns are in our DNA.”

ROBERT I was born in Sturgis, Kentucky, and moved to Eureka, Missouri when I was about 9. People ask me, “When was the first time you did something like this?” I tell them, “9.” What would happen was my father worked at Chrysler and he would fill his lunch bucket up with bolts, nuts, cotter pins, little pieces of car parts, or whatever. He would bring them home. So, we had just buckets full of that in the garage, because he was a handyman, a carpenter, a mason—that kind of thing. So, we just had buckets of it.

He would leave for work and as soon as he left for work, I’d drag it all out into the driveway and start making patterns and designs. I remember my mother, she would work also. But, she’d get home before him, and she would say “You’d better get that cleaned up before your father gets home. You’d better get that driveway picked up.” So... that’s just kind of how it all started. I love picking things up and making patterns. A lot of the time they’ll make their own pattern if you just listen to them. Some of this stuff will actually speak to you.

I sit on my porch in Bisbee. I’ve never been to art school or anything like that. But actually, I paint more than anything else. I paint mandalas. I’ll sit down on my porch, and I’ll get a piece of Masonite or drywall... usually a foot and a half so I can spin it as I paint it. Then I’ll take chopsticks—bamboo—and I’ll dip it into the paint.

I do one dot at a time. Some of them have as many as 20,000 to 30,000 dots. The amount of time is six months to a year. I love painting the mandalas. And I love this! Making all the little pendants and doing the art... but I paint a lot. I just never show my painting in public.

FLORE I’ve noticed there’s a lot of different cultural inspiration in your work. Do you travel to get this inspiration, or does it just come to you?

ROBERT It just comes to me. I traveled when I was younger back in the ‘70s and ‘80s. But, I haven’t been out of



the country since then. So, it just comes to me. ... And I try not to target just Buddhism or Christianity in my art. I include them all.

FLORE Would you like to tell me about your history in the festival scene? Is it something that you usually do? Do you go to Joshua Tree especially, or do you go around?

ROBERT I used to. I used to do a festival every weekend with an installation and everything at each one. So, I kinda slowed down on that. Now I do one or two a month. When I first came to Joshua Tree Music Festival

it was probably 12 or 14 years ago. I was traveling with an artist named Scott O’Keefe. He’s a real big name on the West Coast. Between Scott and Barnett... they both opened a whole new world to me.

FLORE Do you feel like this festival scene offered you a place to express your gifts?

ROBERT Oh, absolutely. I get to freely express myself. Barnett never puts a leash on me. But before I got started in festivals, I was doing it in the mountains or just for fun. I’d take a hike up the mountain and do a mandala... and I love that because when you come back 2 or 3 years later you can watch what nature does to one. Some parts may still be there, others that animals have dragged off or whatever. I just love watching what nature does.

FLORE Why did you choose to use this kind of material? Cans, rocks, and trash?



“I’d hike up the mountain and make a mandala.”





ROBERT Well, it's free. The cans are in the trash and the bottle caps are on the ground, so it's free. ... When I was growing up, you had two or three cans—Budweiser had a red can, Pabst had a yellow can, and that was about it. And now there's just thousands of different colors and new cans. I just love all the color of the cans. And it's just so available!

For example, if you have a pile of rusted cans, like this installation down here at Joshua Tree by the lakeside. Over time you develop a sense of balance and you know that "I need to add this piece to balance it out" or "I need to add this color to balance it out." You learn to fill the space without making it overly crowded. I don't want to get it to where it's just a big mess of stuff I've thrown on the ground. So, you learn about balance and color and texture. Right now I'm big into shadows. I love watching the shadows that are cast. I don't really know why I'm into shadows right now, but I've been there for a year.

FLORE You mean the natural shadows that are appearing out of your art piece?

ROBERT Exactly. When I'm making something I'm trying to imagine

what shadow it will cast as the day progresses into the evening. I'll place a can or one of these lamps I make. When I'm doing that, I'm trying to keep an idea of what shadow it'll make.

FLORE When did you start to produce those really interesting patterns that are very specific in your art?

ROBERT I paint. When I was really young I started painting. Then I had a vision of my grandmother's quilts. If you look at a quilt, they all have patterns, and a lot of them are geometric patterns. I started having visions of patterns. There are patterns in everything. There's a pattern in this bench if you look close enough. There's a pattern in a grain of sand. And... patterns just come to me. I don't know where it comes from. Patterns are in our life. You know? Patterns are in our DNA.

FLORE What does your art mean for you?

ROBERT To me... if I couldn't make art, I'd die. I have certain friends who know that if I ever have a stroke or something like that, just set me down and put a bunch of bottle caps in front of me, or maybe a jar

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“I give away more than I sell.”

of paint and a brush, and just let me do it. Even if I can't move or walk, or am bedridden or whatever... just put something in front of me and let me do something. Without art, it'd be over. I'd die.

FLORE Is there anything else you'd like to add?

love giving them away. Because you learn that the more you give the more you receive. You know, you're not going to receive when you want, but when you need you will receive. I've learned not to worry about it. Give it away. And in turn, someday if I'm in need—say I'm broke down or I'm out of gas—someone will come and give me a dollar to two, or help me change a spare tire. I love to see the happiness when the young ones receive something. They get it and they clutch it in their hands like they're never going to let go. It's a joy.



ROBERT I give away more than I sell. The first day I got here, I had a cigar box full of pendants. I went around and every little kid I saw—and I always make sure they're with the parent—got one. I want the parents to know that this is a gift, that they didn't come over to my table and take it. And... so I make sure the parents are aware. I gave away, oh, I don't know, a hundred or more. I

RobertMoonDragon lives in Bisbee, AZ. Find him on Facebook at [TheartofRobertMoonDragon](#).



Robert crouches next to his declaration, 'Art is Life,' crafted from wood chips and Yerba Maté caps at JTMF 2017.