



Kalup Linzy New York Magazine February 2011

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FEATURE

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Made for Each Other

In Kalup Linzy, James Franco met his performance-art match.

By Rachel Wolff | Published Jan 30, 2011 | Share

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(Photo: Graeme Mitchell)

What's a not quite established experimental artist to do when a handsome, eager, artistically inclined movie star wants to partner with him? For the artist in question, Kalup Linzy, there were some concerns. He asked himself, "Do I lose my identity as a solo artist? Will our collaborations be more powerful than the stuff I'd done before? I was afraid of the art-world politics." But the movie star wasn't just any old star. It was James Franco. And, says Linzy, "James always tells me that I inspire him, and he inspires me, too. Creatively, it's like fireworks. I realized that it was best for me to just let things unfold."

Linzy, 33, is sitting on a worn leather futon in his sparse Crown Heights apartment, huddled over his MacBook Pro, previewing music from the album he and Franco are recording—their first effort as the artistic duo Kalup and Franco. He plays an upbeat tune with a heavy bass line. "James is really into the old Motown sound. This is supposed to be like 'Papa

Was a Rolling Stone.'" We go through several more songs: would-be ballads, ambient New Age-y crescendos, and layered electro-pop beats. The lyrics are still taking shape. "James wants me to teach him to sing," he says. "I told him, 'You do so much voice work to get into movie characters—singing is the same thing!'"

Franco first saw Linzy's work around the time the actor was beginning his 2009 stint on the daytime-TV soap *General Hospital*, playing the deranged artist Franco—a gig he has described as not so much acting as a piece of performance art. Coincidentally, Linzy was doing essentially the same thing. His graduate thesis from the University of South Florida, *All My Churen*, was a funny, touching, and raunchy video send-up of daytime soaps in which the artist plays most of the characters in drag. It was what got him included in two 2005 group shows at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which in turn got him picked up by the Taxter & Spengemann gallery. Linzy has since expanded his thesis into an ongoing video series, "Conversations Wit De Churen," and has been showing consistently—and performing live, usually as the wannabe diva Taiwan—ever since. Linzy's work is strange and powerful. Riffing on angst, whitewashed soaps, he says, has allowed him to access his own feelings about love, loss, family, society, isolation, being black, being an artist, being gay, and relating to what he calls "the other."

Franco and Linzy finally met in December 2009, at Art Basel Miami Beach, where Linzy performed at the festival's glamiest party, in honor of MoMA P.S. 1 director Klaus Biesenbach. It was a match made in gonzo-performance-art heaven. "I had one of those moments where you see art or read a book and it strikes you as a spirit that's akin to yours," Franco says. "I was intrigued by the videos, the do-it-yourself aesthetics—everything. The soap-opera connection was the bonus."

Franco immediately asked Linzy to do *General Hospital*. "I had just finished performing on a pool table, singing and bending over," says Linzy. "I was like, *Really?* It would be like singing 'Asshole' [Taiwan's signature ballad] to soccer moms. I didn't take it seriously." Clearly he didn't know the power of Franco: Linzy, playing singer Kalup Ishmael, was on *General Hospital* six months later.

It wasn't long before Franco was getting in on Linzy's projects. At their first appearance together—a party at the Bowery Hotel last May—Linzy performed as Taiwan while a tuxedo-clad Franco, playing Taiwan's unrequited love, barked out muddled lyrics through a voice-altering mike. It was disorienting for Linzy: "Taiwan sings sad and lonely love songs. But it was hard for me to get to that lonely space when James was onstage, because we don't have a tragic relationship."



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Still, by December, the partnership of Kalup and Franco was officially announced, with Linzy essentially devoting himself to their co-projects, including the albums, films, and live performances; he'll retire Taiwan (at least live) in Spain on February 3, when his first big museum solo show opens at La Conservera Centro de Arte Contemporáneo in Murcia. It's a risk: Teaming up with Franco means abandoning some of the bigger themes of Linzy's work, like loneliness, and potentially sacrificing his own artistic authenticity for a strange permutation of the artist-patron relationship—one in which the patron happens to be an aspiring artist as well. (An aspiring artist with "people," or a management team, which Linzy inherits.) "I think it's going to take time for the whole picture to make sense," says Linzy. "Someone suggested to me that it was a career move [for Franco]. But our connection is not superficial. If he wasn't passionate about it, then why? He already has the fame and fortune. I think what works is that I've had a certain level of success in the art world and he's had a certain level of success in Hollywood. Before we met, we both yearned for what the other has achieved. Now we have a middle ground where we get to work together."



Linzy and Franco at the Rob Pruitt Art Awards at Webster Hall.
(Photo: © Art21, Inc. 2011)

Franco, meanwhile, adds one more extracurricular activity to a very long list. But he insists the benefits go both ways. "Kalup has given me a lot of confidence, showing me how you can boldly and nakedly put yourself into your work," says Franco. "He has no fear when it comes to art or performance, and I admire that. I look to him for guidance."

Partiers at Sundance Film Festival got a taste of what's to come: The two, each in blond wigs, performed Linzy's song "Chewing Gum" (average reaction: bemusement). Linzy may also appear again on *General Hospital*, after Franco returns to the show next month. Of course, there is one opportunity for maximum mainstream exposure coming right up. On February 27, Franco co-hosts the Academy Awards. Does Franco's commitment to this new partnership go that far? "I haven't uttered those words—and I don't know if I should," Linzy says with a laugh. "If I tell James I want to do something, he's pretty good at making it happen."