

RAPTURE

Pure, instinctual nirvana. Friends and collaborators Cara Stricker and John Kirby draw us in to their post-dystopic world of human unity.

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It's dark, and wet. Bodies slap together and then slide apart, clashing and dissolving into an inky shallow pool. Light rippling over limbs and loins, sound vibrations roiling all around. Softly violent, fluid and free: the lovers' dance.

Something happens when we enter into a primal space. Of skin and sound, water and darkness. Of enlivened senses and bodily urges. The tyranny of the mind collapses and we slip momentarily into a state of being, just being. Here, at home with our carnal instincts where form and essence merge, we find absolution. This is *DROOL*, an audiovisual dreamscape designed by US-born music man John Kirby and Australian filmmaker Cara Stricker.

One sticky summer evening, the pair took a well-deserved break from the intensity of the studio to have dinner with me and check out the Sydney Festival. Over a bottle of sake, we got deep into the time-worn topic of sex, love and relationships and how they relate to the central theme of *DROOL*. I'd only met Kirby a couple of times before that night, but from the outset he struck me as an intriguing type. A keyboardist, songwriter and producer, he's collaborated with some of my personal favourites, including Sébastien Tellier, The Black Keys and Dev Hynes, aka Blood Orange. He's also a certified yoga teacher, regular mediator, loves women but rarely has relationships in the traditional sense, and could probably pull off any outfit you might throw at him. Tellier was once quoted as saying, "John Kirby is the only guy I know that dresses better than me". Stricker, I have known for years and I'll just say this: she's like a perpetually popping creative firecracker. What drew them together was a combination of complementary artistic expertise and a shared creative vision. They also met at karaoke, which has been known to have a bond-creating effect.

They describe the chimeric world depicted in *DROOL* as "a post-dystopic utopia ... Where the ultimate truth of universal consciousness disintegrates into everythingness, beyond sexism toward sex, equity and unity". Between sashimi platters, Stricker showed me a snippet of the opening scene on her iPhone. It's a movement piece, both graceful and animal, shards of light grazing the skin of the dancers – man and woman – sliding rhythmically through water, over and under one another, with a symbiosis that almost made them appear at times as one entity and at others, starkly polar. Holding the phone close in an attempt to block out the hustle of the tiny restaurant, I could just make out Kirby's instrumentals: waves of cascading of synths, beats like a choir of palpitating hearts somewhere in the distance, ghostly echoes from another world lunging in and out of audibility.

In the following days I couldn't stop thinking about it. I wanted to see more. I wanted to know more. Two months later the pair were back in Los Angeles where they're now loosely based. I got them on a three-

way Skype to explore their ideas further. Stricker was being put up in a hotel for a campaign and making the most of the complimentary fluffy bathrobe. Kirby joined us as his usual self – smiling, Zen, and shirtless. Together, they gave me their thoughts on sex, love, and creating your own kind of utopia.

RUSSH: Kirby, so nice to see you dressed for the occasion! So let's start with how you both met and became creative collaborators. What initially drew you to one another?

Cara Stricker: We first met about three years ago in a karaoke bar in Sydney with Dev (Hynes) and Chris (Taylor, of Terrible Records). A couple of years later Kirby, myself and some close friends got a house together in upstate New York – a collective of creatives working from there. There was no view to collaborate, it happened to be a time when I was shooting a lot of art films and photographic projects at the house. Kirby had all his synths laid out, and was just doing yoga and playing music throughout the day. I became really familiar with his sound so when I was doing an exhibition in New York at The Hole, I wrote an essay to John about my inspirations, and affinity to his sound, around the idea which was minimising the differences between people in terms of the ideologies and judgments placed on us growing up in Western culture. John sent back sounds – what I was creating visually he was writing sonically and it felt really

Cara Stricker PHOTOGRAPHY Cloudy Rhodes.

Cara Stricker and John Kirby PHOTOGRAPHY Cloudy Rhodes.

natural between us. After that I was asked to perform at a fashion show in NY, so I asked if he wanted to do it with me because we were kind of on the same page. We ended up spending a couple of weeks together in LA making this meditational cinematic soundscape for this fashion show. The next morning, we got asked to play a festival in Australia, which was Sugar Mountain. We were pretty much living on top of each other by that stage, John in my studio apartment, our gear sprawled over the floor, which was actually really nice.

Was your relationship always purely creative/professional?

CS: Yes, we used to call each other husband and wife though, because we got to a stage in our relationship where we were working and living on top of each other but we skipped the whole romantic part – it was 60 years down the line of a marriage!

John Kirby: We were living together and sleeping in the same bed. I was like a stay-at-home dad or something.

Talk to me about the concept behind DROOL and how it evolved?

JK: It started with Cara's exhibition and then we sort of gathered from the other person that we were both interested in exploring sex as a topic. I think we both have a similar viewpoint on sex, we don't view it as a taboo, and it seems even among our friends it's kind of rare to be uninhibited with sex and not harbour any bad feelings around it and we were interested in exploring that further.

CS: What really made me enjoy working with Kirby is he's very open-minded and I guess I'm really interested in presenting to the world a very open-minded way of living, however that is, whatever profession or lifestyle you're into. We wanted to explore intuition and basic human instincts, and I guess sex was the most basic that fuses all humans together.

How does this project treat the subject of sex? What is the message you're hoping to communicate through it?

JK: It's just an opportunity for people to look at sex out of context. It's not in a bar or in a nightclub or something you see on the net. We're coming at it from a point of something natural and intrinsic.

CS: Yes I guess it's a way to equalise people in the sense that it's the most innate thing to humans, whatever you are or however you choose to express yourself, there's a basic instinct for human attraction – to have sex. So we're almost just trying to present a world that hopefully takes away stigmas about the way you're taught to live and suggest the possibility of living in a way that feels authentic (to) you. Sex is the most fundamental way to look at that. *So does this form the basis of the idea of a post-dystopic utopia which you say is post-humanity? And does this mean you believe that the idea of utopia is achievable only beyond the existence of the human form?*

CS: I think you can present something as simply a utopian space which might not be accomplished within humanity, but the way to access it is through your instinctual human qualities, which at it's most basic would be sex.

JK: We're not trying to advocate this post-dystopian utopia (where everyone's going to walk around naked and you can just fuck who you want and everything's gonna be cool – we're not proposing that as some kind of societal structure. People have tried that and it doesn't really work better than any other. I think we were just trying to isolate a type of living that follows an instinct, and as Cara was saying that seems best expressed through sex but it could be anything. It's not like a Thomas More *Utopia* where he said everybody will have two slaves and adulterers will be enslaved. He was just proposing his version of an ideal moral structure. Our idea is a lot more conceptual and spiritual.

So do you perceive the concept of utopia as something different from its definition, which is a place or state in which everything is perfect?

JK: I don't think by utopia we meant perfect, I think we just meant better.

And what did you mean by 'post-humanity'?

JK: Post-humanity to me dealt with more the fact that the characters (in the film) inhabiting that world seem to be the only ones. They're not part of a nation or a culture, they're not bound to a job.



“We got to a stage in our relationship where we were working and living on top of each other but we skipped the whole romantic part.”

CS: I think in this we have quite different views ...

JK: I didn't picture the film as having a strong emotional basis. I don't want to sound crass but regarding the characters in the film, I didn't picture them as being like 'I love you' or 'I need you'. The motivation of how they got to that point was not really included. It's not like we followed these people as they went on a date then things progressed, it was isolated from all that and I found that to be kind of liberating.

How do you perceive sex and relationships on a personal level? Because that will always inform your creative work ...

JK: I guess the way I perceive it in terms of life would be to look at sex in a natural way. If we think about the different reasons people have sex the best one would be as an expression of love, I think everybody agrees with that. It could be an expression of love for yourself or for someone else or love for the relationship that you've created. But I think it can become like the love and sex that you might see in a movie where it's full of conflict and tension and then finally it culminates in sex, but I think my definition of the word love is not romantic love. Maybe even love is the wrong word – that has a lot of connotations – maybe 'expanded compassion' is a better way of describing it. I want to think of love in a bigger sense not like, *you*, I love *you*, you've got the right clothes and you're dope and let's do it. But more like universal love.

You seem to share a unique dynamic. Tell me about your creative process and how this collaboration works. Which comes first, audio or visual or is it different every time?

JK: In this case the music was finalised first but with the film in mind. So we were kind of writing music to an imaginary film and we had these ideas and I could tell Cara had a more keen sense of that because that's her field. I think the way I see it is that we were both envisioning something similar and when Cara completed the video it was pretty much exactly as I had visualised.

Do you ever experience artistic disagreements?

CS: Haha! Yes. Of course when you work in such close proximity with someone and we definitely have our different ways of communicating. We're both very open people but work really differently as we discovered, which is amazing but also difficult. In terms of this project, we did a lot in a very short amount of time – finalising a 40-minute film and 12 tracks in a month. That was mental. But it was kind of reflective of what we were trying to explore in a way. Whatever's going through your head or your heart goes straight into whatever you're making that day. So it actually felt really fluid to make the film really fast. It was a straight head to hand thing without thinking too much about it. But I really do love what comes out of Kirby in terms of sound so it's pretty hard to disagree with that.

What would you like to explore next creatively?

CS: Narrative film as well as the open-ended cards of personal 3D experience – your own personal trip. So say you want someone to feel elated through this divine feeling of sex, you put on these goggles and it makes you feel like that because you're so immersed in the visuals that you lose sensation of reality. *DROOL* is releasing soon with Terrible Records. What's exciting is working out how to make something personal and at the same time digital – accessing the music and visuals in a personal way I'm finding fascinating at the moment. The journey dictated by the audience. Fundamentally, I want to work alongside other people I look up to ... And dream. 

So did you really mean post-society? Because post-humanity could also be read as post-human, the dissolution of form essentially.

JK: Yeah you could look at it that way – post-human. If we're looking at a utopia, I can say that in my world there's no money and everybody's going to share everything and we're going to be just as we are but if you want something you can get it. Of course that doesn't work because as humans we're bound by our natural desire to evolve and become the alpha male or female that gets to pick the best mates so our progeny can thrive, etcetera. So if it's going to be a post-dystopic utopia or post-humanity there has to be a shedding of this desire to thrive and survive.

But isn't sex a major part of our primal desire to thrive and survive?

CS: We're more interested in taking sex as a concept of experiential utopia, rather than the form in which it exists in humanity, isolated. I think that in the world of sex you tend to leave the formal understanding and logic of the world and flip into a utopian-like space. It's not human to exist in that forever. It's a dream-like space where you can experience life in your own way without the boundaries that our logical world has placed on us. It's post-human because that's not a human way to exist – we don't live in an existential world. That euphoria of sex is almost a utopic space to be. We're not trying to zoom in on one subject to find ultimate truth, that won't work because in life we have to also support that functioning space, but in sex you are in another world with someone. So it's a conceptual idea more than a formal understanding of what utopia is.

With regards to this idea that you can enter into a pure utopic space through that pinnacle orgasmic experience, where does human emotion sit within that? I'm particularly directing this at you, John, because you have an interesting perspective on relationships. Where does love sit in relation to sex in your opinion?

JK: This is my interpretation; Cara and I didn't discuss this ...