

Salon Culture: Dzine Brings Nail Art to a New Level

BY Rachel Wolff POSTED 01/07/13

Chicago artist Dzine elevates the custom craft of bedazzled nails, lowrider bicycles, and trophies to fine art

Though they are precisely shaped, carefully painted, and artfully adorned, acrylic nails—and the application thereof—have rarely been associated with high culture or fine art. But for 43-year-old Chicago artist Carlos Rolon (who goes by a moniker from his graffiti days, Dzine), ultra-ornate falsies have become something of a calling card—avatars for his smart, Pop-savvy blend of street and gallery cultures.

Dzine's debut solo show of sculptural works crafted from dense arrangements of costume jewelry at New York's [Salon 94 gallery](#) in the fall of 2011 included a for-hire manicurist, stationed at the nearby [New Museum](#), who studded visitors' nails with plastic tchotchkes and chains. Dzine's subsequent Art Basel Miami Beach installation, *Imperial Nails*, was similar: he converted a Standard Hotel suite into a set resembling his childhood living room, where his mother ran a bootleg salon. He installed several nail artists inside it, transforming the event's related festivities into an unlikely platform for the nail artists' over-the-top designs. Yet another iteration of the salon will feature prominently in a group exhibition this spring at [Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art](#).

Dzine loves the idea of inducting a new community of nail artists, as well as longtime wearers of their work, into the art world. "I hope people can look at it from a performance-art aspect, a sculptural aspect," he says, perched behind a hulking desk during my visit to his large, factory-like Chicago studio. He is actively preserving the work and legacy of nail artists, as well: he has collaborated with Standard Press, the Standard Hotel's publishing imprint, to produce *Nailed*, a hefty tome that traces nail art's ancient roots and documents its most striking manifestations from around the world.

"I am so humbled by the response to my work," Dzine says, though he is not necessarily surprised. He has been exhibiting his art—which took the form of swirling, painted abstractions in its earliest days—for the last decade, and, as he puts it, "My train has been on schedule since I was 14." But with his gallery-installed *Imperial Nails* salons, something most certainly clicked. "When you make work that is honest and there is a story behind it and it's relevant, it's going to show. And it's going to show via the response from the public as well," he explains.



A finished product of the public performance *Get Nailed* at the New Museum.

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Raised in a Puerto Rican household in what he calls a “gang-infested neighborhood” on Chicago’s southwest side, Dzine packed boxed lunches as a kid and trekked over to the [Art Institute](#) and the hyper-contemporary [Smart Museum of Art](#) at the University of Chicago, tending toward Pop-inflected work by the likes of New York street artist Richard Hambleton and fellow Chicagoan Ed Paschke. “A lot of the process was self-discovery,” Dzine explains. In high school he took art classes, all the while devouring books about 1970s- and ’80s-era New York punk and graffiti subcultures. By the time he enrolled at Chicago’s artsy [Columbia College](#), he says, “I found that what they were teaching me was stuff I already taught myself at a young age—how to look at art, what was happening in the art world.” So he dropped out.

Graffiti tags and murals soon gave way to large, abstract paintings. He had his [first solo exhibition](#) at Chicago’s then-nascent Monique Meloche Gallery in 2002, followed by outings at galleries and museums in Tokyo, Madrid, and Paris. One year after his inclusion in a group exhibition at the 2007 Venice Biennale, Jeffrey Deitch gave him a solo show; he is currently represented by Salon 94 in New York, Leeahn Gallery in Seoul, SCAI the Bathhouse in Tokyo, and Galerie Henrik Springmann in Berlin.

Dzine’s recent sculptures, installations, and paintings are dominated by his signature mix of high and low, personal and universal, modest and baroque. Many of the works are destined for the Dallas Contemporary, where his [largest solo show](#) to date opens on January 19.

If *Imperial Nails* was an homage to his mother and her less-than-legal salon, Dzine’s Dallas commission, an exhibition titled “Victory,” is a tribute to his father, with work inspired by his quirks, passions, and cultural identity, as well as other elements of the artist’s upbringing. *Club Gallistico*, a new sculpture in which two brass roosters face off on a cracked-glass coffee table, and *Untitled (Marranoz)*, a framed custom satin robe, are nods toward the boxing matches that Dzine and his father watched nightly on TV. Gold-leaf paintings studded with broaches, earrings, and found nameplates dangling from gold chains are artful riffs on his father’s penchant for loud jewelry—and lots of it.

The Dallas show will also include several of Dzine’s garishly customized cars—sculptural, high-sheen Dada takes on the MTV show *Pimp My Ride*. But the piece the artist seems most fixated on every time we speak is the exhibition’s namesake, *Victory*, an altar-like installation of remixed trophies. The work was in its earliest stages when I saw it in the studio, with trophies dismantled into their various parts and sitting atop a workstation situated between Dzine’s on-site woodshop and a well-ventilated painting area (he uses toxic automotive paint in his two-dimensional works from time to time). A staff of five—some interns, some assistants—was dispersed throughout the space, proof of the artist’s efforts to minimize reliance on out-of-house fabrication. “I have complete control over everything built here,” Dzine says.

Victory is tinged with the same sort of nostalgia that suffuses *Imperial Nails*. “Sports were also my way of connecting with my dad when I was a child,” Dzine recalls. “And one of the best memories I have as a child was winning my first trophy, a baseball trophy. It was this amazing feeling—I knew I had earned it. I still have it today. I wanted to bring out that same feeling in other people, too.”

To that end, he decided to fire off an e-mail to his friends, family, and colleagues asking if they’d allow him to incorporate their own gilded keepsakes into his sculpture. His request has been largely successful: one artist friend handed over a cache of bowling trophies he had saved since his father’s death, and others donated various

tokens of their athletic accomplishments. “The objects all have stories behind them,” Dzine says, “and I wanted to keep those stories alive.”

He doesn’t take these holdings lightly. Yes, he and his team dismantled them—but only to put them back together in ways that entice audiences, and allow the trophies’ original owners to look at them anew. The objects in *Victory* sit on neon-colored and velvet-sheathed wooden bases, and they are studded with rhinestones, wrapped in sequins, and draped with costume jewelry and gold chains. “I wanted them to have a monumental feel to them,” Dzine says—like they did when he was a kid.

The installation also “harkens back to a time where trophies had some substance and meaning, and there was craftsmanship behind them,” according to the artist—a time when they were made of real wood and heavy metal, all hand-engraved. “You just don’t find them like that anymore,” he adds. “Everyone gets one now.” And it’s typically made of plastic.

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