



The shop's dim interior fulfills the promise of a dark aesthetic.

But the brighter lights scattered around the room serve as reminders that in the midst of darkness, there can be light, beauty.

The blackened windows entice “clothing, records, taxidermy, skulls, crystals, jewelry and more.”

The people who open the glass double doors and walk in discover the painted windows weren't lying.

Heads of deer, caribou, onyx and a \$3,500 moose stare blankly. A statuesque Satan holds court in the back of the room, while a massive, motionless lioness stands guard in the middle.

“It was pretty fucking cool and the damn thing was already dead,” said J.D. — “like the initials,” — Tucker.

This is Hail on earth — well, East Nashville, actually.

Hail Dark Aesthetics makes the weird seem normal and turns the creepy into alluring works of art.

J.D. opened the consignment shop in 2013 — naturally, on Halloween.

“I had been collecting. There wasn't a place to go to collect in town. I wanted to become the place,” J.D. said.

His collection began with a single human skull and an underwhelming deer mount.

As he refined his taste, his personal collection grew. Now, it's mostly dead exotica animals including a monkey and the head of a giraffe.

“I like having animals I haven't seen in real life,” J.D. said.

Thanks to the giraffe head he hangs out with, he doesn't need to travel to Africa to see one.

He redecorates his house regularly with items from the store, but the nostalgic collector still has that original deer head in his private collection. Not because it's exceptional. The antlers aren't even big, it's more sentimental, he said.

A man who's known J.D. nearly as long as the deer mount — with a beard that would make Chris Cringle jealous paired with a corduroy Levi's jacket — walks into the store.

“How's it going, brother?” J.D. asked.

Mike Fite — or Fite as he is known around the shop — has been shopping at Hail since it opened. He stops by often.

“Too frequent for my bank account. Good thing I have credit cards,” Fite said.

He owns Gold Club Electric tattoo and buys the decor at Hail.

“This is the place to come to,” Fite said affirming J.D. has reached his goal.

“It is the one stop shop. I look around and put stuff on my wish list. It is usually gone...”

Fite interrupts himself to admire the lioness who happens to be wearing a wolfskin coat.

“This is new. This is awesome,” he said, of the juxtaposition.

Toward the back of the room, behind the lioness and her coat, sits a bookshelf occupied by jars of fetal hedgehogs and octopi. All wet specimens.

One specimen on the shelf sticks out among the rest: the arm of an octopus coiled as if it were sunbathing.

The octopus is interesting — maybe off putting — at first glance. But gaze into the swirl and admire perfectly placed suckers on the arm, then the beauty is felt. It doesn't propel along the ocean floor anymore — it doesn't move physically — but it still moves the people who let it.

The octopus is dead, but J.D. doesn't see it this way.

“The shop gives these animals a way to live on,” he said.

Not everyone sees it that way. The people who are typically troubled by his shop are people who don't eat meat. Vegetarians and vegans get a little freaked, he said.

“But I'm a vegetarian.”

Technically, J.D. is a pescatarian. He eats fish occasionally. But he hasn't had chicken, beef or pork since he got into punk and animal rights 20 years ago.

Now, he doesn't see any reason to go back to eating meat.

“I've been doing it for so long, it just works,” he said.

To him, no contradiction exists in being a vegetarian and buying dead animals. He doesn't send people to murder animals for his shop. Everything in the shop died long before it got to him, he said.

As he talked, the first side of the newest Big Boi album comes to an end.

“I also like rap. That surprises people,” he said.

He flips the vinyl on the record player behind his counter and quickly gets back to doing a little “spring cleaning.”

Spring cleaning means getting deer heads ready to be reunited with their mounts and organizing old, broken knick knacks to be fixed by the store handyman, Tim Hyder.

Tim doesn't get paid — he isn't an employee. He comes into the store to hang out with one of his best friends — JD — smoke Pall Mall blues and drink Miller Lights.

“Miller Light is the official beer of Hail,” Tim said as he looked through Instagram pictures Miller Light has been tagged in.

“Ever taken a scroll through Miller Light's Instagram? It is a sad, weird place,” he said while standing among animals that have been dead for decades.

Hail isn't officially endorsed by Miller Light, it's something he likes to say to get laughs.

Tim and J.D. drink, hang out and laugh a lot. Talk of post mortem embalming tools flows off the tongue in casual conversation.

They're trying to remember the weirdest thing ever to come into the shop.

“If it was the weirdest thing ever, I would have bought it,” J.D. said. “As long as it's weird, dark or creepy I'll take it.”

J.D. has been doing this for so long, the weird, dark and creepy have become his norm.

“I don’t even know what is weird anymore.”

Even if he can no longer pick out what is particularly odd, J.D. knows what does — or doesn’t — go up in his shop.

“I don't want what is left over from a yard sale,” JD said.

“Or the leftovers from last night's KFC dinner,” Tim chuckled.

The two laugh about the non-strange things that have come through the shop — an old sewing kit, boring jewelry — things that could be found at any antique store. It isn't hard to figure out this is a recurring conversation between the two.

“You just never know what’s going to come in. That’s the fun part,” J.D. said.

“You wake up asking ‘I wonder what today will bring,’” Tim added.

He spoke the message of the store. The message J.D. sends when he speaks so highly of his assorted taxidermied friends.

The message: no one knows what the day will bring. It is what it is.

And if it’s weird, dark or creepy it lives here.

With a Southern Baptist preacher as a father, and a shop frequently thought of as a place full of Satanic imagery, J.D.’s thoughts on life after death fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.

“We live and we die and that’s that,” he said.

The animals in the shop didn’t wake up and expect to die. But they did.

Now they are living on Gallatin Road in East Nashville.

If these animals hadn’t died when they did, they wouldn’t have become beautiful wall mounts. They wouldn’t have ended up in J.D.’s care. They wouldn't live forever.

Death doesn't scare J.D. In fact, he knows exactly what he wants to happen with his body. He wants his skeleton to be assembled and hung from the ceiling in Hail. He wants to keep watch over the shop, like the satan, forever.

“If anyone sells me, I'm going to haunt them. I've put a lot of thought into it.”

He wants to be among the animals he loves so much. He wants to live eternally where beauty shines through the darkness.

“If there is any message here, it's that creepy doesn't mean scary. It can be beautiful.”

Written by: Harrison Baldwin