

Keep calm and drone on, at Toronto artist Kristel Jax's safe, open space

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Kristel Jax is a Toronto-based musician, writer and performance artist who founded Drone Therapy as a YouTube comedy series that explores mental illness in 2015.

Kate Young

Kristel Jax sits on a did-it-herself cathedra of wires and beads, plastic jewels and sateen. Beside her are two handmade signs, beautified by dollar-store glitter, letting attendees know that “The Drone Therapist is In.” Daintily plunging a determined finger into the small pearl-studded keyboard that sits on the floor at her knees, Jax welcomes strangers who’ve come to experience

the travelling interactive performance known as Drone Therapy by stating she's not actually a therapist. Anyone can hang out, she says, but if they want to speak with her directly they need to sign a waiver. Most do.

Behind Jax hangs a large thrift store bed sheet on which dozens of possible subjects – imposter syndrome, depression, death, catastrophic thinking, trauma, relationships, “summertime sadness” – are listed. When I arrive, two people are lying on their sides at her tulle altar, talking about dread.

“I’m not good at being angry, but I’m trying to make space for it,” she tells one of them, careful not to diagnose, instead offering empathy and reassurance. During quiet periods, she slouches against the wall, twirling her hair. At the front of the stage there is a horse figurine with a pink ribbon tied around it – a symbol, I think to myself, of Jax’s predilection for valour and conviction, with a soft-spoken gentleness some might mistake as weak.

Jax, a Toronto-based musician, writer and performance artist, founded [Drone Therapy as a YouTube comedy series](#) that explores mental illness in 2015, before experimenting with a live version the following year. She refers to it as “funny, but not traditional comedy,” jokingly comparing herself to Dr. Phil – “but with live drone music.” Having deemed the first live Drone Therapy a success, she now tours around to various festivals and cultural events – such as Sudbury’s Up Here Festival, where this edition is taking place – glitter and gear in tow.

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Jax believes that if you approach mental illness with a bit of humour, 'it becomes less of a burden.'

Kate Young

“I guess the whole premise is ridiculous,” says Jax, when we meet the following month at her west-end Toronto apartment. “I’m severely mentally ill and not in a functional place. For me to be giving anyone advice is funny. But it’s more about validating people and helping them figure out what will work for them ... If you approach mental illness through humour, it becomes less of a burden. [Drone Therapy] resonates with people because it’s a little bit funny.”

One might describe Jax, and her sense of humour, as gloomily empathetic. In addition to Drone Therapy, she runs the popular Dying But Fine Instagram account, which brings to light the agonizing minutiae of mental illness by framing it in comedic contexts. Around American Thanksgiving last year, Jax posted a picture of a Barbie doll in a kitchen with a mixer and a

rolling pin, and added the caption, "Me harvesting my insecurities & paranoias in a recipe to sabotage my relationship before our anniversary." In another, she fused a photo of an aghast-looking dog with a caption that read, "When yr agoraphobic but yr supposed to look at apartments & find a new place to live."

Her afflictions and her work are intertwined. As we chat on her small back deck, Jax's loyal pug sidekick, Lana, snarls at the real estate agent who has come to show their house. Jax will soon learn that she is being evicted due to its sale. (Lana's name is a reference to the singer Lana Del Rey, as is *Summertime Sadness*, the song title, and feeling, written in black ink on Drone Therapy's bed-sheet backdrop.)

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After experimenting with a live Drone Therapy session in 2016, and deeming that a success, she now tours around to various festivals and cultural events.

Kate Young

Jax has built a practice, and a name for herself, on an aggressively goodhearted desire to help others while being in the thick of it herself. She also hosts a Drone Therapy podcast, started a new Instagram account that critiques portrayals of domestic violence in *The Simpsons*, co-founded the Noise Against Sexual Assault (NASA) campaign and performs as the electronic act Brigitte Bardot, for which she's been working on a new album, slowly. (On Feb. 2, Brigitte Bardot will perform at a Defend the I I fundraiser at Toronto's Beguiling bookstore in aid of I I comic community members being sued for defamation.)

During Drone Therapy, the cacophony of ambient electronic noise and an undercurrent of vulnerability are eased by the oddness of the set-up. Ultimately, Jax has created a space where nothing is weird – because everything is. She greets arriving audience members with a casual “hey”, before responding to a question about success: “Success is being able to interact with your environment in a way that doesn't make you feel afraid,” she says. A moment goes by, and she adds, “Being proud of yourself is really important.” Reverb fills the room as more people arrive, hesitant to participate at first but signing waivers as they grow comfortable. Jax strikes the keyboard, its meditative dullness an equalizer of nerves.

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“One thing that I’ve found helpful is talking to my therapist about anything that bothers me at a Drone Therapy, which I think she finds pretty amusing,” Jax says, when I ask how she processes the serious disclosures and stories told to her. “There’s definitely an emotional load that you’re taking on for people ... I guess that’s kind of part of the project. As a very empathetic person working in the arts, who was being public about struggling with mental-health issues, I was already working as a free ‘therapist’ for a lot of people who would benefit from therapy but weren’t able to access it.”

Part of Jax’s contractual agreement states that event organizers will work with her to compile a resource list of local organizations that focus on mental-health care. In advance of Sudbury’s Up Here, Jax collaborated with the Northern Initiative for Social Action to create handouts for participants to take with them.

“I see people needing help,” she says. “And I remember when I needed help and didn’t know where to turn. I would have one number to call, and I would call that number, and they would be like, ‘Why are you calling us? This isn’t what you call us for.’ So I think it’s really important to give people a variety of resources they can try. That way if one doesn’t work, they won’t think it’s the end of the line for them.” In 2016, Jax compiled the Drone Therapy Handbook, a PDF containing free or affordable mental-health-care resources shared by many on social media.

At the end of our conversation, Jax, who is wearing a shirt that says “Lana Del Rey,” offers to walk me to my car then quietly freaks when she discovers the borrowed vehicle I’ve arrived in: “A white Mustang!” she exclaims elatedly, without getting louder. “Like the Lana Del Rey song.” She and Lana climb on the hood; I take 63 different shots of them in slightly varied poses.

“Is This Happiness?” I wonder silently, my own brain now thinking in Lana Del Rey songs, as Jax smiles then reverts to staidness.

I hope the answer, however fleetingly, is yes.

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