

You Don't Spray?

America's changing attitudes toward street art are opening up new avenues of expression and energizing cities, big and small.

By Britt Olson for MSN Local Edition



Any longer, Banksy's referential street art is rarely viewed as vandalism. © Jim Dyson/Getty Images

Taking it to the street

Street artists were once mostly clandestine creators, stealthily navigating the art establishment, law enforcement and a public that can find it difficult to distinguish between "art", graffiti and vandalism.

More recently, with a handful of street artists firmly established as bankable art-world stars and acceptance growing among the public and museums, urban art has emerged from obscured alleyways to fanfare. When curator Pedro Alonzo put out a call this spring for walls to decorate as part of a city-wide urban art exhibit, San Diegans enthusiastically responded by volunteering their private property (deftly avoiding the red tape that can tie up the use of public space).

San Diego's bare walls and buildings became an open-air street art gallery July 18, with the opening of The Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's exhibit "Viva La Revolución: A Dialogue with the Urban Landscape". "Viva" includes works by 20 accomplished street artists from eight countries (including [Shepard Fairey](#), [Banksy](#), [FAILE](#), Blu, Invader, and Akay) whose works will be displayed at the MCASD through January 2, 2011 . Additionally, the artists will collaborate on and create new pieces at

authorized locations throughout the city.

The distinction between true street art and more common manifestations like graffiti is clear to Alonzo: "Graffiti is an insular community, not usually encouraging of public discourse," he explains. Whereas "street art has a populist ethos. Street artists want people to understand and engage with their art."

Ultimately, Alonzo allows, art is in the eye of the beholder, regardless of the prevailing view. But the growing legitimacy of street art makes it impossible to ignore.



Brazilian street artists Os Gêmeos will exhibit at MCASD. Photo courtesy of Deitch Archive, New York.

State of the artists

San Diego isn't alone in its appreciation of these artists. Hipster connoisseurs who collect it are on the rise; bloggers who digitally preserve the works multiply. British artist Banksy's works sell for six figures and are protected in many U.S. cities. Fairey's 'Hope' poster became the emblem of the Obama campaign. (Fairey even profiled Banksy for *Time magazine's* "2010 100 Most Influential People".) Street art equals big business, and mainstream galleries and companies seeking cool credibility often appropriate it as such.

Just as Banksy marketed his recent film with a graffiti tour and Fairey plugged his May Day show on his mural, younger artists looking to get discovered often take their talent to the streets hoping to attract attention. Self-promotion is as apparent in this upstart art as graffiti's trademark spray-paint tags.

"It was always about fame," explains former Seattle street art gallery owner Damion Hayes. "But it used to be just about achieving fame among your peers."

Agency advertisements attempt to simulate it and untalented ne'er-do-wells plainly deface property. But in these U.S. cities, not acknowledging the abundance of public creativity is a real crime.



Catch Bumblebee's whimsical works on L.A.'s streets. © Bumblebee

Los Angeles

Cities that favor walking are usually most ideal for street art. Nevertheless, car-friendly L.A. has an important and entangled relationship with uncommissioned creativity (one unfortunately tainted by gang graffiti and -- some would say -- self-advancers like Mr. Brainwash).

West Hollywood offers stellar examples, especially along La Brea and Melrose Avenues. Silverlake and Echo Park often also act as urban canvases.

"Street art can really be magical. Artists are gifting something to the world; they're adding humanity to the streets," says Los Angeles-based street art chronicler and founder of Unurth.com Sebastian Buck.

Buck admits there are imitators inspired purely by Banksy and Fairey's commercial success, but he points to L.A. artists [Shark Toof](#), Bumblebee and Phil Lumbang as examples of genuine talent. Shark Toof's wacky wheat pastes frequently depict his marine mascot. [Phil Lumbang](#) inks cartoonishly adorable characters. And Bumblebee leaves behind insect themed stencils but also crafts diorama-style installation pieces in disused phone booths and news boxes.

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Atlanta

Cabbagetown and Reynoldstown are popular Atlanta districts for street artists. The city's infamous Mr. Fang was once a familiar face here, though he seems to have mostly faded from the scene. Krog Street Tunnel is a colorful bastion of Atlanta graffiti new and old, though not all of it great.

With their indie-style wheat pastes of girls with far-off looks and other saccharine

species, Paper Twins are Atlanta's current street art (and gallery) darlings. Their outdoor works can be found along thoroughfares like Ponce de Leon and Moreland.

Paper Twins will attend Atlanta's first [Living Walls](#) conference this August, along with established street artists like Oakland's Feral Child, New York's Gaia, among others.

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Mister12Gage paints portraits of Portland residents. © Mister12Gage

Portland

The Northwest hasn't cultivated a particularly rich street art scene, as yet, although both Portland and Seattle have their share of artists. (While Vancouver, B.C. has Jerm IX and The Dark.) However, celebrated artists such as Swoon occasionally pass through town leaving their works behind.

Portland-based Mister12Gage's endearing portraits of unwitting local muses -- the collection is titled "[Paste Your Face](#)" -- hang along the Hawthorne district. The paint on white butcher paper works attempt to build community and draw attention to the oppressive eyes of celebrity-based advertising.

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Seattle's Georgetown Graffiti Wall shows off some of the city's finest street graffiti artists. Photo by Michael Hipple.

Seattle

Seattle has plenty of graffiti, especially in the Sodo, Georgetown, Belltown and Capitol Hill districts -- where several free (legal) walls stand. Other street art can be a little more tricky to sniff out, however.

One-time resident Karl Addison (Partybots) pasted polar bears and bicyclists, and stapled illustrations to Capitol Hill light poles. No Touching Ground is another artist whose wildlife wheat pastes can be found near freeways or on group walls. Sticker artist and graff writer NKO may be the city's most well-known street artist (you can see his work on the Georgetown mural). And Team Nerd's woodblock stickers can be found on many street signs around town -- or could be found. Staying power isn't one of the art's attributes.

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NoMe Edonna's creature is literally street art. Photo courtesy of Oddwall.com.

San Francisco

The Mission District may be one of the richest sectors for street art in the country. [Oddwall.com](#) founder, Saint X mentions Clarion Alley as a super popular haunt for hipsters with cameras. South of Market Street as well as Bluxome Street near the ballpark are good places to gander -- and perhaps encounter more hipsters.

Reyes (who set out to paint the alphabet throughout San Fran) is one of Saint X's current favorites. [NoMe Edonna](#) and [Chor Boogie](#) are two other established street artists who can be seen throughout the city. Of NoMe Edonna, Saint X says: "His work is always clever and high quality. He usually integrates something that has already happened; like he'll draw a face in a splotch of paint on the street."

The city "seems to go through a six month cycle where there's someone out of control, just throwing things up," says Saint X. A few years ago Pore, Mildred and Andrew Schoultz were big on the scene. For now, it's Plasma. "He's got like 10 new things every week scattered through town."

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Goofy characters by Chicago's Goons populate the city. © Goons

Chicago

Perhaps due to the opposition of Daley's Graffiti Blasters, Chicago has surprisingly few artists that have stepped from the alleys into the limelight.

The caricature paster Goons seems the most ubiquitous. His thick-lipped, colorful figures populate the city's warehouses and side streets. Don't Fret pastes an equally motley crew. And Nice One, with his pillowy cops spangled in stars and otherworldly flying machines, also could be categorized as part of this Chicago character tradition. Tiptoe's pastes and the poetic musings of Nautilus have quickly attracted a following on Flickr and around Chicago.

The Warehouse District, West Loop and Wicker Park offer some of the city's best examples. With the Art Institute so central to the Chicago community, one hopes more artists will take their talent to the streets.

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Aakash Nihalani pulls out all the stops in Brooklyn. Photo courtesy Jim Kiernan, © 2010 Aakash Nihalani, www.aakashnihalani.com. All rights reserved.

New York

Because of the city's subway system, New York is sometimes seen as the birthplace of modern graffiti. In the 1970s, writers aspired to have their works go "all-city", meaning the collective trains they bombed would travel all five boroughs; this contributed to competition among crews.

In May, a group of contemporary graffiti artists tagged over several NYC Banksys. The "attack" was reputedly spawned by Banksy's stenciling over the work of British artist Robbo -- Team Robbo was scrawled on several defaced pieces -- though some suggest it's a response to Banksy's film hype.

Tagging tiffs aside, New York is extremely sympathetic to street artists. The Lower East

Side, SoHo, and Chelsea are hotbeds for ephemeral art in Manhattan; Williamsburg and Dumbo have become as popular locations.

[Aakash Nihalani](#), who works in colorful tape, is quickly gaining attention among his peers. Cake, with her hauntingly anatomic images, has become another of Gotham's recent favorites. Established artists like Judith Supine, Swoon and FAILE, whose works are readily exhibited in hip Manhattan galleries, still take to the city's streets to share their craft. Last month, Brooklyn's Ad Hoc Gallery coordinated a community mural project at Queens' Welling Court. Over a dozen artists like Gaia, Swoon, and [Ron English](#) took part.

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Swoon's pastes inhabit Braddock's once desolate streets. © Tonya Markiewicz

Braddock, Pa.

"Once we were only talking vandalism, now we're talking about the value of street art," says Marc Schiller, co-founder of the street art blog [Wooster Collective](#). "We're talking about the role art plays on the street, how it can make cities what we want them to be."

Nowhere is Schiller's observation clearer than in the grand experiment that's Braddock, Pa. The collapse of the steel industry in the 1970s left most of the city's buildings deserted. In 2006, John Fetterman was elected mayor of Braddock. He's since encouraged artists to move to the city and buy the inexpensive, vacated buildings. Braddock's becoming a pseudo-ghost town full of lively works, with street side illustrations of children, birds and cattle occasionally the only signs of life.

For those seeking affordable studio space, interesting neighbors and lovely art, this town's worth more than a camera's shot.

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> Other artists take it to the streets. See our slideshow of [great sidewalk art](#).

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