

Los Angeles Times

Welcoming the street art 'Revolución'

October 31, 2010

By Leah Ollman

Reporting from San Diego — Only a few weeks after Shepard Fairey finished work on a mural covering the side of an Urban Outfitters store here, someone else made his or her mark on top of it, sullyng its crisp black, white and red graphics with a sprawling blue tag. The Fairey mural had been commissioned as part of the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego's exhibition "Viva la Revolución: A Dialogue With the Urban Landscape." The graffiti response was anonymous and unsolicited.

Not exactly the kind of dialogue the museum had in mind, but also not entirely unexpected. "I felt very badly when I first saw it," says museum director Hugh Davies. "It looked like an attack, a wound. But Shepard was so gracious about it. He said it's part of being in the public domain. A lot of edgy graffiti artists no longer respect him because they feel he's become part of the establishment, making clothes and doing ads, and this was the expression of that rage."

Fairey, who lives and works in L.A., has become the household name of street art, for his ubiquitous "OBEY" graphics and Obama "Hope" poster. The U.K.-based provocateur Banksy is up there too, infamous for his street stencils, outrageous actions (an installation in L.A. a few years ago featured a live, painted elephant) and, most recently, the bitinglly entertaining documentary "Exit Through the Gift Shop." The San Diego exhibition, which runs through Jan. 2 at the museum's downtown facility, proposes that both artists are part of a broad, international phenomenon situated simultaneously on the street, in art venues and within popular culture.

Get the monthly that has L.A. talking. Subscribe to Los Angeles Times Magazine at a special introductory rate.

Guest curator Pedro Alonzo, who organized a popular survey of Fairey's work at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston last year, gathered 20 artists from 10 countries to illustrate this cross-fertilization among painters, sculptors, installation artists and interventionists of different stripes who all draw upon the grit and vitality of urban culture. Some work in the studio but base their imagery largely on what's found outside: Ryan McGinness paints canvases densely layered with the graphics of informational signage and corporate branding; Mark Bradford incorporates ripped posters and ads in his two- and three-dimensional work.

Outside in

Many of the artists have developed complementary practices in both the studio and the street. Os Gemeos, twin brothers from Brazil, are known for their large paintings on urban walls. Here, they are represented by a mural of a column of figures standing on one another's shoulders on the side of a shopping center parking garage, as well as two sculptural wall works, whimsical painted wood assemblages.

Swoon, famous for the soulful block-print portraits of "forgotten people" she pastes on New York walls, and the subject of Alonzo's next curatorial project at ICA, affixed one to the side of a downtown building and also constructed an installation inside the museum that recalls the flotillas of salvaged debris she has sent into the waterways of Venice, Italy, and New York. "Swimming Cities of Switchback Sea" suggests at once a makeshift shelter, a ship's mast and a monument. Built of old furniture, ladders, fragments of wrought iron railings and other odds and ends, the structure is crowned by several of the artist's tough and tender images of women embracing, and trailed by heavy ropes, black tubing and chains.

All of the artists engage overtly with facets of contemporary urban life — consumerism, poverty, the blending of populations and religions — and their work manifests a certain ingenuity and resourcefulness associated with street-level survival, but it's not entirely accurate to call "Viva la Revolución" a street art show.

"This is really an exhibition about contemporary art," says curator Alonzo, by phone from his home in Boston, "and my goal is to establish a dialogue among the street artists and their contemporaries and peers outside of street art. It's important to establish those links, otherwise [street art] stays in the ghetto. It marginalizes the genre. Mixing it up broadens the discourse."

Mixing it up feels like the operative impulse throughout. From Stephan Doitschinoff's syncretic altar to Dzine's tricked-out pedicab, the works take hybridity as a given. Traditional categories — whether of genre, intent or manner of display — are dismissed as ill-fitting and irrelevant.

"A lot of the people in the exhibition are pushing things into atypical places within the term 'street art,'" says Brooklyn-based artist David Ellis, who has work in the show. "They're on the outskirts of that definition." Ellis traces his aesthetic inspiration back a generation, to the graffiti that used to envelop New York City subway cars. He adapted that improvisatory energy to spray-painting tobacco barns in his native North Carolina and, since then, to covering and re-covering all manner of still and moving surfaces.

"My favorite canvas is a delivery truck. It has four sides and will be on a different street every day, where a painting will hang on one white wall for a month. I like art that can move through space and time. Paintings on the side of a truck operate more like music than paintings in a gallery."

Like much of his work, including mesmerizing stop-motion animations recording the making and remaking of paintings, his piece in the San Diego show merges sound, visual form and movement. Part of his "Trash Talk" series, it looks like a typical

metal mesh garbage can, the kind you'd find on any street corner, filled to the brim with food wrappers, beverage containers, plastic bags, cigarette boxes, as well as studio discards (a paint can) and museum brochures. Insistent, infectious rhythms, composed in collaboration with Roberto Carlos Lange, emanate from the trash can, rattling the debris and giving it a jaunty, visible pulse.

The beats resonate throughout the museum space, providing a soundtrack of sorts to the rest of the show. His percussive piece speaks, Ellis says, to the context that generated much of the surrounding works — the spontaneous, noisy tumult of the street. “When I’m in the studio, I try to bring in the distractions and interferences you find when painting on the street. I like working on several things at once. I like challenges, extra hurdles. I find it very frustrating to sit in the studio with the AC blasting. Having tension always seems to make better work.”

Tension and a measure of defiance streak through the exhibition, both its onsite and offsite components. The Fairey mural wasn’t the only piece that triggered some protest. Barry McGee painted the side wall of a historic theater downtown and several city officials initially called for its removal.

That, says Davies, was the most challenging piece, from the perspective of an institution eager to break out of its pristine walls and connect with the city. “I describe it as a large abstract painting with forms that resemble calligraphy. Other people describe it as graffiti, large-scale.”

Establishment attention

Whatever curators, bureaucrats, passersby or the artists themselves call such work, it is becoming more and more ensconced in the annals of art history. Books on art of and about the street are proliferating (the exhibition catalog will be ready in early November) and museums around the world are turning over their walls to it. Last year, the Cartier Foundation in Paris organized an extensive show on graffiti, and the year before, London’s Tate Modern commissioned huge works by six street artists to adorn its riverfront facade.

Next spring, L.A.’s Museum of Contemporary Art will open an extensive, historical survey of “Art in the Streets,” which will span from the 1970s to the present, with attention to graffiti and street art, and the Pasadena Museum of California Art will show “Street Cred,” examining the visual language of graffiti as it migrates from concrete to canvas.

“It’s a good moment for this kind of work,” Alonzo says. “The first show I did of this kind, in the U.K. in 2006, there was a backlash from the arts community: Should this be in a museum? Is it really street art if it’s legal? But the artists want to do this. They wanted to be in the museum and were happy to have these walls. With time, people have become more accustomed to the establishment looking at it. There is resistance from certain members of the street art community who feel the integrity of the genre is being exploited, but it’s rarely artists who feel that way.”