

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR)

Title: Spray Cachet?

Date: August 29, 2005

SUMMARY: The old art form of stencil art returns as street art, even if it's sometimes against the law

Think stencil and you think of grade-school art projects. Or crafty kitchens with painted cutouts of leafy vines.

You probably don't think of someone on the sidewalk stenciling a guy's bare chest.

But on a recent summer evening, stencil workshop instructor Victor Nash is doing just that, at student Jay Davis' request.

"It's cold," Davis exclaims as the spray paint hits him. Well . . . yeah.

Stencils have come a long way in the U.S. since door-to-door salesmen sold stencils made of tin for home decor a century ago. Today, stencils are a growing art form, a sometimes-charming tool for personal expression -- and, increasingly, a vivid medium for political activism.

In some cases, it's also illegal.

Stencil art, which can be surprisingly complex or endearingly simple, tends to appeal to a young, unconventional crowd that likes its raw, unpolished look and appreciates its accessibility.

All you need to start is a semi-stiff piece of paper, a blade and a can of spray paint.

"That's the cool thing about it. It's affordable," said Rebecca Rakstad, a 27-year-old visitor from Chicago who enrolled in the three-hour stencil workshop. Rakstad says she sometimes cuts a stencil out of a cardboard beer box.

Like traditional graffiti, "street stencils" also are illegal when done on public space or on private property without permission. They weren't advocating street stencils during the workshop at the Independent Publishing Resource Center in downtown Portland, but the work they created on a scuffed skateboard, a water bottle and a T-shirt are still all part of the growing stencil movement that spans from Portland to Melbourne, Berlin to San Francisco.

Stencils span the globe, according to Josh MacPhee, who documents decades of street stencils in his book, "Stencil Pirates: A Global Study of the Street Stencil" (Soft Skull Press, \$20, 191 pages.)

You can find stencils in art venues such as Zeitgeist Gallery and the Goodfoot Pub & Lounge, both in Portland, and on unique, handmade T-shirts passed among friends.

Artist Russell Short, who goes by Klutch, started using stencils in his art about two years ago. Now, the 44-year-old Portlander holds an annual show called "Vinyl Killers," where artists stencil images onto old records. His third show comes up in October.

"Stencils strike a nerve in people," says Short, who says he likes their gritty effect and the temporal nature of art put up in public that is often removed by authorities.

Short says he used to promote illegal street art but now focuses on legal work because of high fines.

When done well, street stencils can be clever and thought-provoking, he says -- enough to bypass many people's initial negative reaction to graffiti.

"We want to make where we live cooler," Short says.

But, just like traditional graffiti, public stenciling is still against the law if done without permission, says Marcia Dennis, Portland's graffiti-abatement coordinator. She estimates that it costs \$1 million annually in private and public money to clean up graffiti, including an increase in stencil graffiti she's seen this summer.

To Dennis, it doesn't matter if a stencil is artistic.

"Just like I cannot differentiate between someone's 'tag' that might look better than someone else's, I can't differentiate between stencils and more traditional graffiti vandalism," she said. "Granted, some may have more talent than others, but it really doesn't matter. It's an arrogance that people think that they're improving someone else's space."

Stencil artists, however, argue their work improves cities by taking back public space that has become overrun by corporate and commercial interests, MacPhee says.

In New York in the 1970s, teenagers started covering subways with graffiti, but were busted.

"Now what do we have? Complete trains covered top to bottom with advertisements," MacPhee says. "What's the difference? One's paying for it, one's not."

For MacPhee, who lives in upstate New York, stenciling started out as a public way to express his growing dissatisfaction with the first Gulf War. Now, it continues to be a way for people who have no access to powerful media to make their voices heard, he says, just as Vietnam War era protesters used it.

Short says his work is driven less by political messages and more to see how far he can push stencils and more traditional types of painting. "Even when you have it fully planned out, you never know what it's going to look like until you do that first spray," Short says. "There's all this excitement."

Both Nash and Amanda Spring, who taught the resource center's workshop together, use stencils to decorate their band's CD covers and posters. The twentysomethings have even designed wedding invitations for friends.

All stencil artists share a common bond, whether they work legally or not, Short says. "We know that we're connected," Short says. "If nothing else, it is that battle for public space."

Stencil artists are also increasingly connected by the Internet, which has created a supportive, worldwide community but has also led to accusations of artistic theft.

Documentary filmmaker Colin Brown of Portland hopes to capture the world of street art in a film that started out as his senior thesis project at the Art Institute of Portland.

Short, who left a lucrative career in real estate in San Francisco five years ago, says he hopes to make his living through his art. His work has appeared in small magazines and in shows around the nation, including a room at the Hotel des Arts in San Francisco, which features emerging artists.

There appears to be a growing commercialism of graffiti-type work as corporations co-opt the street art. Hummer this summer hired a graffiti artist to paint a New York City mural for its new H3; the mural was quickly defaced.

Ecko Inc., a clothing line founded by a former graffiti artist, last week held a public art event in New York City, where graffiti artists painted on fake subway trains. Mayor Michael Bloomberg fought the event because he thought it encouraged illegal behavior but ultimately lost in court.

No matter how commercialized stenciling or other forms of street art may become, its energy stems from individuals.

Back at the resource center's workshop, Nash compliments a teenage student who has just spray-painted a white, winged stencil onto his black skateboard. Next up: his backpack.

Rakstad, the stencil artist from Chicago, creates another copy of a bird stencil and adds it to her growing pile on the sidewalk.

As the summer sun dims, the fumes from three hissing spray cans rise like steam off the sidewalk table near Burnside Street. The spray cloud smells toxic, but the group doesn't seem to mind.

To them, it's the smell of art and fun and activism in the city.

Su-jin Yim: 503-294-7611; suyim@news.oregonian.com

3 photos

Sidebar - How to Stencil

Sidebar - A Brief timeline of modern stenciling Timeline

Copyright (c) 2005 Oregonian Publishing Co.

Author: SU-JIN YIM

Section: Living

Page: D01

Copyright (c) 2005 Oregonian Publishing Co.