



CHUCK SPANGLER FOR CORBIS OUTLINE

KENNY SCHARF paints a mural at the Art Center College of Design. He's among a mix of artists in an indoor-outdoor show demonstrating how the culture and commercial enterprise have adopted street art.

Street savvy

'OutsideIn' exhibition shows how once-outlaw art has had an influence on the mainstream

BY DEBORAH VAN KIN

As street art evolves with speed and elasticity, it defies categorization. Several sub-genres — traditional graffiti lettering, more design-based spray can art, wheat-pasted walls and painted murals — come together in the exhibition "OutsideIn: The Ascendance of Street Art in Visual Culture," which opened last week on the Art Center College of Design's north and south campuses in Pasadena.

The exhibition, which runs through Jan. 10 inside Williamson Gallery and Hutto Patterson Exhibition Hall, features a mix of established artists in varying styles: Shepard Fairey, Robbie Conal, Kenny Scharf, Geoff McPetridge and David Flores, among others. The show also will include two outdoor murals.

One of the things the indoor-outdoor show explores, through murals, paintings and object art, is the extent to which street art has bled into pop culture and commercial enterprises such as fashion, toys and graphic design — and whether that has corrupted street art's antieablishment, punk-rock roots. Street art that was once illegal and subversive may be considered "pre-packaged rebellion," as Art Center illustration chairwoman and exhibition organizer Ann Field puts it. However, that hasn't necessarily diluted street art's power, she says.

"I see this work as a powerful communicator because of the references within it, and the fan base," says Field, who co-curated the show with G. James Daichendt and Stephen Nowlin. "At best, it still provokes thought and ideas."

The Times recently spoke with her about "OutsideIn" for this edited conversation.

What was the inspiration? Was it a response to the growing popularity of art created on the streets or the direction you were seeing illustration taking?

It was a response to the relationship between downtown L.A. developers and street artists centered [on] the arts district (off Alameda) in particular. The concentration of artists and pacing of styles indicates a conscious use of design on the part of the commissioning developers. Within illustration, I see a movement of illustrators who are working at scale, perhaps as a response to this sharpened presentation of street art. Geoff McFetridge and James Jean in the U.S. have had success with personal projects and collaborated with major brands on interior retail spaces, gallery installations and advertising as well as fashion and accessories.

What does the title of the show, "OutsideIn," refer to?

When we, the three curators, were talking about the show, we knew it had to be different from previous shows at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art and the Pasadena Museum of California Art, where artists essentially replicated what they did on the street. The Williamson Gallery is a striking modernist space within a college that addresses creativity through the lens of design. Each artist or illustrator was designated a wall, and so the space itself ultimately became one artwork almost, an environment that they had to create together. And work that was birthed from the freedom and scale that the outside promises was invited inside, as an experiment in translation.

Could these artists create the same dynamics and impactful work inside? I think this has been a success.

"OutsideIn" is less a show about the history of street art and more about what you call "the porous" nature of the medium now — the intersection of art and commerce. Can you elaborate?

We do showcase legends like Robbie Conal and Shepard Fairey to give historical context, but the group engaging in this activity is much more diverse now, and commerce has seen the potential, and some striking collaborations have been formed as a result, which has ended up influencing design, product and lifestyle. Obvious examples of this include the use of art now in architectural space (Frank Gehry's Facebook office building and work space) where artists (not necessarily street artists) are invited to work on the wall.

How has the accessibility of street art created entry points, so to speak, for crossover into different areas of the creative and professional world?

The big vision was always there from the start. I think architects and designers have been the very first to see the potential in working with these types of artists, have understood the popularity, used the work sensitively and have promoted this idea to their clients — be they cities, brands or publications. What has helped enormously in moving this group of artists into something important beyond a fad is the fact that globally recognized names such as Dior, Prada, Louis Vuitton, Rem Koolhaas and Facebook have led the

charge and that the work was incorporated into an artful design universally recognized to be of the highest quality. This renders their choice as leading.

Given how "elastic" the medium of street art is, and how far it's evolved, why do you think the medium is still so heavily male? Or is it?

There is a soldier-like aspect to physically getting the work done, which requires a lot of strength and stamina. Classic street artists perhaps fit this profile, because the work was created in often out-of-the-way industrial zones or restricted areas. However, the advent of the creative businessman/developer and the quest for authenticity among brand leaders opened up the possibilities for female artists obviously, because these working relationships are based not only on the recognition of the artists' work but also their powerful role as the visionary, voice and hero of a fan/customer base.

Some of the works in the show seem both confrontational and funny at once. Was this purposeful?

I see that they all like to dodge definition, they like to question, provoke, make a good-looking image and not take everything so seriously while being serious and observant about the world at the same time. Almost all of the artists have a thought or deeper message behind their work, but I see that as fairly transparent, and this perhaps explains the popularity and accessibility of this work.

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