

Graffiti artists come in from the cold at a gallery exhibition in Chelsea

BY NICOLE LYN PESCE

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When Marc Ecko planned a Chelsea street fair in 2005 where graffiti writers could tag mock subway cars, Mayor Bloomberg pulled the permit, arguing that the display encouraged vandalism. Although a judge overruled Hizzoner's veto, urban art still carries a bad rap.

Now graffiti tries bringing its street cred to the art world once more with an exhibit in the same nabe. "Writers Strike," opening tonight at the Lott Gallery of DriveIn24, features a space covered with graffiti contrasted with familiar street objects and corporate ads. Consider it "vandalism versus advertising," getting visitors to question whether graffiti is any more invasive than the barrage of ads they face on streets and subways every day. And what would the Big Apple be without its graffiti?

"Corporate advertisements are just as much an assault on the city as this art," argues Bombin' Magazine editor Craig Dershowitz, whose publication organized the show. "We've been wrestling for a while with the question, why is graffiti illegal?"

The city considers graffiti vandalism a misdemeanor punishable by a jail term, fine and/or community service, with anyone caught defacing property without permission of the owner subject to arrest.

"Graffiti gets a very negative light," gripes aerosol artist TABOO, 29, from Brooklyn, who's been writing since 1992. "It's just really funny that you'll see a sign up for some movie, a sign up for some Camel cigarettes, companies placing ads all over the place, but I pull out a marker and I'm going to be thrown in jail."

TABOO, like many graffiti writers, won't give his real name or occupation because of his illegal activities. "I've gotten arrested," he admits. "They took me down to central. It sucked, but I was out painting again the next night. I do this because I enjoy doing it, and I'll stop when it ceases to be fun."

In the gallery, legends who set the standard for street art work beside rising artists, transforming the once-white and pristine space with vivid tags and colorful characters that leap off the walls, around corners, beneath counters and onto the floor. A blue and lavender flower by street artist Michael De Feo towers from floor to ceiling. Mad Magazine's mascot leers in green.

Almost as diverse as the images are the men spraying them. Some focus on classic tags in different styles, while others incorporate real ads and posters into political collages. Some stick to legal work, like murals for schools and parks, while others lead double lives: working by day, spraying subway tunnels and running from the cops by night.

KEZAM, 29, hails from Australia, where he once tagged trains. Now a grad student at Yale, he toes the line to keep his visa, doing large, legal works on the sides of buildings with his crew in Brooklyn. "There are people in different neighborhoods actually calling for us to redo our walls," he says. "It's interesting - political leaders will tell you that the public hates graffiti, but people complain more about noise."

ELBOW-TOE from Brooklyn, who studies and creates more traditional fine arts, also does street art - larger-than-life drawings and even painted woodcuts, put up using wheatpaste - all over the city.

"I was sick of keeping my art in a studio for no one to see," he explains. Participating in this exhibit has expanded his artistic horizons: "I'm genuinely interested in people who do the other stuff - the crazy letters. It's not my bag, but it takes a lot of skill to think that abstractly," he says, pointing to one tag.

Beneath it stands Johnny Alamo, aka CLARK and FLY I.D. (for "Forever Living Your Infinite Dreams). He started chalking his name on the street when he was 8. "From that point on, I haven't stopped," he says. He graduated from chalk to markers to spray paint, doing subways, rooftops and alleys before getting arrested just over five years ago. "That rehabilitated me," says the 38-year-old Bronx father. "I paint community murals, backdrops. With my work, I can inspire people of all ages.

"With this show, people can see the beauty of the colors. We can do something creative, some really beautiful work. We're not just defacing a wall."

Which raises the question: Does taking graffiti off the street take the street out of graffiti?

"This is art," says TABOO, "but is this graffiti?" He surveys his own work in progress. "Yeah ... but honestly, real graffiti is on the streets."

"Writers Strike" is on display through Feb. 21. Opening reception tonight at 6. 443 W. 18th St., second floor; (212) 645-2244.