

GRAPHIC DETAILS THE WALL ART OF HOUSTON'S EAST SIDE



Graffiti wall off Wayside Drive.

On Houston's burgeoning east side, a growing assortment of eccentric and decorative wall paintings is transforming undistinguished, blank walls into delightful and sometimes magical façades using a vocabulary of vernacular images embedded in the common visual culture of the area. Particularly in the murals of Eastwood Park, Harrisburg, and Magnolia Park, a quirky mixture of contemporary images (snowcones, soccer balls, baby bottles) and national symbols (cacti, flags, eagles, sombreros) are combined with elements from Mexican folk art, pre-Columbian gods, and hieroglyphs. The colors are festive, with lush, stark chromatic contrasts. Although many of the projects are socially concerned, artistically captivating, and collectively produced, a few seem to have been designed as slick high-concept pieces. Some businesses are capitalizing on the

mural movement by transforming incisive vignettes of social protest into dulled, pretty scenes from mainstream history. These more commercial projects aim to foster self-esteem in the youthful painters and establish better relationships between businesses and residents, but at their worst may function only as coloring books for the working class.

Muralists often face the choice of expressing themselves honestly in the ghetto art-world or designing a mural template on which people recruited from the community will fill in the colors. In order to make art that is accessible, educational, yet aesthetically alive, the successful muralists in the East End must keep one eye on images and how to play with them, and the other on the unemployment line. Environmental change depends, not just on the landscape, but on the people who live and



Paul Hester & Lois Hestberg © 1996



El Panal Radiator Shop, 7140 Canal Street.

Paul Hester & Lois Hestberg © 1996

SUSIE KALIL AND ANN WALTON SIEBER

work and enliven public spaces.

New directions in America's mural movement toward community art continue to be thrust from below, from a life begun quite literally underground by graffiti artists (or "graffiti writers" as they tend to call themselves) who stake out their claim on this postindustrial world. Beyond the subways that link Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan to the streets and the underpasses of Pittsburgh, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, neighborhoods have been transformed overnight by the crazy characters and wild-style lettering of mysterious hands bearing names such as Phase 2, Dondi, Kase 2, and Fab 5 Fred.

With graffiti writers the name is the thing, as they elaborately repeat their graffiti monikers on wall after wall. Naming power is supreme power; it creates value and even takes on mythic

significance. "It really tells people how they feel about themselves," says Houston graffiti writer Adrian de la Cerda (a.k.a. "Bristle"), who at 24 is one of the elder members of the graffiti scene. "It's about power — I'm bold, I'm strong — that's the reason for the bold letters. All of the pieces in Houston are signed by the graffiti writer. He's saying, 'I'm out here; I'm alive. Look at my colors. Look at my sharp edges.'" Like the mural artists, local writers such as Gonzo, Kex, Enemy, and Berserk tie together snatches of folkloric images, emblems of the Chicano movement, and quirky commercial signage from the neighborhood in a colorful, dense, overall mass of *placas* (symbols) and graphisms. Both writers and artists share a desire for reconstructing a different set of social relations that will connect art with the neighborhood.

Bristle is solid in appearance, laid back, and avid in his speech. He's been "bombing" for four years, starting with tags — just a quick scrawl of his name — then moving up in color and size and artistry. Bristle's first legal graffiti was commissioned by ColorTile. Located on the feeder road of Interstate 45, the building's large, windowless west side was a favorite for gang tagging. "I took a photo of his [the store manager's] wall with all the graffiti, and I took a photo of one of my walls and I said, 'Which would you rather have?'" The store manager hired him. Bristle studied art for two years at Houston Community College and San Jacinto College, as well as taking art courses at the Glassell School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, but didn't like it. "It was too much 'I'm an artist,'" he says, making air quotes. "I've done drawing and painting, but

nothing satisfies me as much as graffiti art," he says. "Why? I guess the fact that everybody got to see it, got to see me, a piece of me — the size, the colors — and it was me bringing it to them. So it was a gift. Going out and risking your butt just to give something away. . . . Some of those price tags on those paintings — five hundred dollars! You should make it easier to obtain them. Regular people should have access to art."

But the perennial question is impossible to answer: Is it really art? Is graffiti an authentic form of community art or a destructive excess of culture gone haywire? Such questions have hindered graffiti's integration into the art world ever since East Village artists such as Crash, Wasp, and Lady Pink in New York City changed private behavior into a commodity. Some believe that graffiti is nothing more than deface-



El Torito Lounge, 6208 Harrisburg Boulevard.



Community mural at Thompson's Sling Co., 6601 Harrisburg Boulevard, Jeff Garcia, lead artist, Hugo Pedraza, Dante Rodriguez; Magnolia Youth Corp., Harrisburg-Wayside Revitalization Project, August, 1994.

Paul Hester & Lisa Heston © 1996

ment of public property, symbolizing violation and social anarchy. For them, the presence of graffiti increases the sense of lawlessness and danger. Still, graffiti is radical — radical art with a radical methodology — because it is illegal. Its vitality springs from the indigenous situation as much as from the creativity of the artist.

Paradoxically, crossing the border into criminal behavior may be necessary to give graffiti its authenticity. To the uninitiated, graffiti can look like so much nasty scribble-scrabble, at best a hermetic babble of hieroglyphs.

"Graffiti speaks to a certain community that knows the code, or to those who try to find out what it says and what we're doing," according to Bristle. "If you don't care to find that out or relate to it, then graffiti isn't for you. When a piece is finished, it's art — form, composition, and location all tie in. You can look at it purely in terms of color, abstraction, and dimension — and enjoy it for that. But it also conveys a message, which can be very simple or extremely intense."

Although Bristle maintains that graffiti is accepted in Houston more easily than in other cities, it is still associated with violent gang tagging. "I used to do some tagging as a kid during the mid-

eighties," says Bristle. "But I was told it was for bad people, for *cholos*, for gang members. It was wrong, so I stopped. In 1992, I did my first big piece, right down the street from my house. I did the first part between one and two in the morning. When I was through, I wasn't very happy because I didn't have the tools I needed as far as tips, knowledge. I went back the next day and worked until I was satisfied with it. From then on, I was hooked. It said 'Bomber,' which is the act of doing a piece illegally. I remember walking to the store and seeing a bunch of kids hanging out, smoking cigarettes, sitting in front of the piece, looking at it, trying to feel like they're a part of that piece. The kids don't know who did it, but they assimilated themselves. 'This is for me,' they say. 'It's put here for me to feel good about my area.' That's how it all starts." Bristle's palette of pink and green is rooted in the cheap, bright paint that has been used to distinguish buildings in his neighborhood for years. Similarly, his Latin-influenced characters have been informed by the folkish pictographs that advertise products on the exterior façades of sidewalk cafes, bars, car repair shops, and beauty parlors. The 1973 Leo Tanguma mural of death,

poverty, and destruction at the Continental Can Company building on Canal Street (*The Rebirth of Our Nationality*) meant a lot to him. "When I was growing up, the paint was very fresh," he says. "I guess that was why, subliminally, I got involved." Frequently his pieces incorporate Aztec and Mayan images, which he transforms into complex layers of archetypal expression. Letters are not separated but crunched together and interwoven, evoking the animated rhythms of Celtic or Arabic writing.

When Bristle first became a writer, there were no more than ten graffiti artists in Houston. By his estimate, that number has grown to over 100 writers whose turf extends from the East Side to Humble and Katy, to Rosenberg and Bellaire. Last year he organized a Texas-wide convention that drew writers from all over Texas for a legal graffitiathon on an exterior wall of an old car lot near Wayside. Bristle can drive the city streets and read them like a book. "Gonzo's been here," he says, laughing at a black scrawl in a parking lot off Wayside. "Look, a new tag!" he says, pointing out a freeway pylon under Interstate 45. "I haven't seen that out before." He can tell who scaled the Blue Ribbon Rice elevators (recently

demolished) on Studemont, and who's been hopping the fence at old Jefferson Davis Hospital on Allen Parkway, the latest hot wall.

As graffiti injects itself into the public domain, the competition increases between the writers, who go by aliases to conceal their identity from the police. Rather than remain committed to their hit-and-run tactics and the potential consequence of being jailed, however, many will stop taking risks. Bristle is part of this crossover crowd, but with reservations. "A lot of the kids say if it ain't legal, it isn't real," he says. "I still do illegal too. It helps you keep your edge. But I'll take as much time as when I do a legal. I'll take my time and take some risks." Commissioned graffiti does have the potential of going flaccid, being too bland, too civic. Bristle often covers up gang graffiti, but his commercial work is alive and upbeat. "What it is, it's a hip-hop mentality, while Houston is more gangsta, more violent." Many of the graffiti writers are picking up on the "reprogramming," as Bristle calls it. Their pieces proclaim, "Depth not Death"; "Increase da peace!"; "Graffiti is art, not a crime"; "Every act of creation is an act of destruction (Picasso)."

Graffiti art can be seen as the out-



Paul Hester & Lisa Heston © 1996

Yerberia, near the Houston Ship Channel.



Paul Hester & Lisa Heston © 1996

growth of a genuine aesthetic impulse, the personal expression of an oppressed and disenfranchised group. Denied control of their landscape through legitimate channels, graffiti writers are grabbing their place at the table. Their powerful, in-your-face messages and headlong, wild style declare, in no uncertain terms, an authority-flouting voice that will not be hushed. For writers like Bristle, graffiti will always represent unrestricted freedom and a chance to give something back to the community; it reinforces one's identity, creates a sense of common purpose, and lends an upbeat appearance to the immediate environment. "It can bring the community together, as far as the young kids who are lost, unloved, uncared for," says Bristle, who currently has three young apprentices. "These kids will be teenagers in no time and faced with the decision of stealing a car, beating up a kid for his shoes, or joining a gang. But with graffiti, we're working in a positive way. We're a different kind of gang. We show these kids support. We give them time." ■

The great Mexican muralists — Rivera, Orozco, Siqueiros — painted their people struggling for freedom in patterns so brutal, so explosive that the power of their work remains one of the greatest Mexican contributions to the art world. The tradition these muralists began spread during the late 1960s to American cities with large Chicano populations, including Houston, where an artist named Leo Tanguma painted the anger around him and the frustration he felt.

The son of a migrant farmworker, Tanguma joined the militant Mexican-American Youth Organization, which met in the Casa de Amigos on Gano



Paul Hester & Lisa Heston © 1996

"The Rebirth of our Nationality," Leo Tanguma, artist, 1973.

Street. With La Raza Unida making organized bids for political office in Houston and the Voters' Registration Project coalescing Hispanic voting-booth power across the state, it was a period of restlessness turned vocal, and for Tanguma it was a stimulus to prove in huge paintings that a Chicano could make his presence known outside of the barrio. Tanguma's attitudes strengthened when he met David Alfaro Siqueiros in 1972 in Mexico City. The master impressed upon his Texas visitor that human history is a monumental experience. Tanguma began to feel that Chicano art had been grossly misdirected, relegated to portraying such subjects as Pancho Villa and the Aztecs. He felt his people should be seen as having gone beyond a folkloric culture into a new, often combative variety of United States citizenship.

With these ideas, Tanguma approached the Continental Can Company on Canal Street with plans for an 18-by-240-foot mural depicting the history of Spanish-speaking people in America. Originally meant as a community statement for the 1972 Main Street II show, *The Rebirth of Our Nationality* was not completed until a year later by Tanguma and his collaborators, Remigio García and Janie Galván. With images of death, poverty, and slavery, this forceful, dynamic painting shocked many. "My theme of the emerging Chicano depicted too much struggle," Tanguma said a few years after its completion. "It didn't glorify the system but glorified the people instead. And this has thrown fear into the establishment, which assumes everyone is corrupt. But the truth of the matter is, the Chicano cannot be bought off. We have special qualities as a people that are just now awakening."

Murals like Tanguma's can act as catalysts, making the community stronger, more visible. But this calls for a redefinition of common values, even a reevaluation of a history previously ignored or suppressed. Community murals are often controversial, for this formulation of values not only serves as symbolic social action, but also implies a possible alternative world. For over two decades, viewers have identified with Tanguma's mural because it tells the story of the viewers themselves. They see their lives reflected in the massive figures' powerful, thrusting movements cast on a heroic scale.