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As told to Samantha Katz, 1657 words.

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On creating affirmative messages in public art

Street artist Hugo Gyrl discusses the importance of putting uplifting messages in street art, what it means to be a queer graffiti artist, and the value of supporting your community.

Putting your work up in a public space when you don't have permission to do so is in direct conflict with typical means of showcasing work. Can you tell me about your process of "illegally" exhibiting vs. showing in a gallery?

Creating street art—which, for the sake of this interview, I will call “grafifi” to encompass street art, tagging, murals, and roller pieces—is much easier and more fun than putting stuff in a gallery.

The criteria is totally different because street art speaks for itself. Just doing it and taking the risk. Finding it important enough to do that lends something to the work. Whereas with work in a gallery, you really have to strive to make it something that stands out. If you're trying to say anything, you really have to reach for it.

There are so many more options when you're making work for a gallery. When you're doing work on the street, especially if it's illegal, you're constrained by time, police, etc. When it's something for a gallery, you can sort of do whatever you want. It's almost like a freedom cage. I think it's much more challenging for me to make stuff for a gallery than it is to make something for the street.

Explaining to students and aspiring artists how to make good work with the potential to be successful can be difficult. Did you go to art school?

I went to a public arts high school for two years, but I hated it. So I am not really a good role model here. I dropped out. I went hitchhiking, riding trains, doing graffiti. I was an angsty, queer teen. So I can't really advise anyone else to do the same, but I do think there's definitely no way to tell anyone how to have an art practice. There are so many different ways. If you're compelled to make art, hopefully you have the time and the means to do that. I've always felt really compelled to do it. If I'm not making art, I feel like shit.

It's about me, but it's also about affecting other people as well, as far as public art. For a lot of artists it has to do with themselves, and getting whatever it is inside of them out. Growing up in a big city there's a lot of public advertising, and things that can make you feel more insecure, and more small. There aren't a lot of genuine uplifting public messages besides corporate advertising, which feels really fake. And I just wanted to add things to the landscape that were supportive, fun, funny, queer, and feminist—to encourage people. Sometimes I'll draw stuff that's a little scary, too, to make it even goofier. My friend said I've always been a “culture jammer.”



Following your interests seems like the easiest, most authentic route to take, but we all have bills to pay. What was your path to making a career in doing what you love?

I get a lot of random commissions. I've kind of taken a path of doing what I want to do primarily. I've also turned down a lot of opportunities that I thought were stupid. I'll do something that I think is mildly stupid, sure. But if it's really gross? No, I'm not gonna do it. It's not worth it.

I've somehow managed to make it work, but I don't think it's easy, and I don't think my exact path is really the best one to follow. I have worn a lot of different hats and not much of it has been that fabulous or glamorous. I've worked as a construction worker, a house painter, a Mardi Gras float painter—always just doing blue-collar stuff that at least somehow had to do with paint, hopefully.

You are very diverse in the work that you create and, seemingly, in all facets of your life. As an artist, you make illustrations, screen-prints, and murals, but you also produce large community-oriented events. And you curate! How do you decide what to do when? How do you manage your time between these endeavors?

Well, it's all in my head and in notebooks. But because I work with a lot of other people, I think that really helps me keep everything in order. I feel a big responsibility to the people who I work with, so I really try not to let anyone down. That keeps me motivated. I think that working with people is what makes it all work and keeps me on track.

I want to create something positive for people, but also champion an alternate view of queerness, and bring that into graffiti, which is, as you may imagine, not exactly the queerest or most feminist place. For me, it's been a weird lane to choose, being a queer graffiti writer. It's not a lane that often exists.

As an artist I think a big thing you can do is look to what was missing from your experience, and what you wanted to see in the world, and then try to create that.

What do you see as the function of live performance? While you're most well-known for your visual art, you do play a curatorial and performative role in some of your pieces. So how does orchestrating this tie into your personal art practice?

Events, parties, and nightlife really do play a big role in the queer community, and the arts communities in New Orleans. When you can make an experience that's bringing all that together, and making something even more extra out of it, like with "ChokeHole," which was a drag wrestling event with a huge party afterwards. That's winning 100%.

We did a haunted house a couple years ago and, to me, that was a good example of getting people to engage with a performance art piece that involved all these different actors and artists. But the viewers didn't look at it that way. You know? They didn't come into it scratching their heads, or scratching their chins and doing that long gallery stare at a piece. They're just *in* the art, and that's amazing to me.

Also showcasing other artists is important to me. We have a thriving underground arts community here, and I think many people I know deserve more recognition. During Southern Decadence, I curated a group show with my friend Chris Berntsen, which included all queer artists from New Orleans. Some were mid-career artists, like Skylar Fein and Lorna Williams. Others like Ryan Gilbert had never had work in a gallery before.

Are you dedicated to putting an emphasis on LGBTQIA themes into your own work? And do you believe art can be a catalyst for a larger conversations around the topic?

Definitely. It's fun to add something queer and feminist to graffiti. If I can manage to get some public queer art out there, especially a mural, that's been really interesting for me. The amount of times I've been censored by people because something is a little too, you know, fruity, or whatever you want to call it, has been wild to me. So I think it's important to try to get those images out that people can relate to.

Does it create a dialogue? Sure. I mean, I think art better do that, otherwise it's just bland... And that's unfortunate because art could be so much more than that. It can piss people off. It can make people happy. Hopefully! That's the goal, really-to make someone feel something.



It seems like collaboration and support for other artists is of great importance to you. One could look at art, or any industry, as competitive or collaborative. And you really seem to have a collaborative attitude. Is this unique to your New Orleans community?

The people who I work with in New Orleans are the only reason that I can do so many of the things that I do. I have a really great team of people that I work with, and they are so amazing. And I don't mean assistants or interns, but collaborators. We come up with the ideas together. We all want to see things happen, and we get to experience the joy of pulling them off together. That's really special.

We're not the richest city. Like I said before, it's hard to make money here. It's not a good place to really break into your bigger art career, as far as I've seen. I have never gotten a grant or seen support from a larger entity. But I think we are really rich in our community, and I'm grateful for that.

You've managed to create a pretty ample following while still retaining your anonymity. What are the benefits of this mystique? Has it helped in shepherding your career along, or does this component of your identity present its challenges?

Well, wearing a costume, and being seen in it, is new for me. I really haven't done it that much before. Graffiti culture is all about, "Why would you get photographed? What can you gain from that? You have everything to lose. There's no point." I have always been opposed to photo-culture in a lot of ways.

Has my anonymity it helped me? I don't think it's helped me, but I don't think I've had much of a choice. One of the benefits I guess would be that New Orleans is a very small town, so it is nice to have some anonymity. It kind of comes with the territory. I guess dressing up a little bit lets me have fun with it. I'm trying to make the best of whatever this weird life has given me.

Hugo Gyrl recommends:

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