



Search Articles:

Login

Register

Email this

Comments (1)

Post a Comment

## VISUAL ARTS

News &amp; Views

Life &amp; Style

Music

Arts

Screen

fflog

Videos &amp; Slideshows

Best of Calgary

Movie Listings

Events

Archives

Bars &amp; Restaurants

Places &amp; Spaces



Volume 14 No. 31  
July 9, 2009

Classifieds

Advertising

Contests

## Legendary graffiti at Artlife

Zephyr helped establish the style, but laments the hip hop connection  
Published June 25, 2009 by Ken Price in Visual Arts

It's tempting to say Zephyr is to graffiti what Grandmaster Flash is to hip hop. But that's not completely fair.

The bane of many graffiti artists like Zephyr (a.k.a. Andrew Witten) is being lumped into hip hop culture, whether they identify with it or not. What makes these boundaries tricky, though, is that Zephyr's contribution to hip hop culture is canonical.

"Graffiti writers should be able to establish these paradigms for themselves, not told where they stand by outsiders," says Zephyr via e-mail. "Personally, the idea that graffiti is a smaller component of something bigger makes me very uncomfortable. Hip hop swept graffiti up in its wake, and it was, for reasons that would require pages to detail and describe, anointed the visual component of that movement. The association is not the natural, organic symbiosis that many young people incorrectly believe it to be."

Zephyr's work is being featured along with other eminent graffiti artists at the *Out of Context #3* exhibition at ArtLife, as part of Sled Island.

Zephyr and his pioneering cohorts, such as TAKI 183, Lady Pink and Futura 2000, among others, started with tagging, or bombing, with the goal of going "all city" — having their names splashed across trains in all five boroughs of New York.

Their pieces became more elaborate as they invented techniques that are still used today. It marked a new direction for modern graffiti — a departure from the simple logos and sloganeering that preceded it.

Among his circle of friends was legendary artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, who at the time was signing his graffiti with the handle SAMO. The two of them collaborated on a music video backdrop for a band called The Colors, which was a side project of Blondie's drummer Clem Burke.

"Painting that backdrop was an incidental event, but knowing Jean was a pleasure and I miss his smile," says Zephyr. "Too bad that he had a bad habit of throwing 40-oz. beer bottles at random people on the street. It was a tendency of his that I never got used to."

It didn't take long before the diligent work of the early graffiti pioneers attracted a lot of attention. In 1983, the documentary film *Style Wars* aired on PBS, and featured a then 19-year-old Zephyr. To this day, the film is a touchstone for people involved in graffiti culture. Around the same time, he was part of another iconic film called *Wild Style*, a hip hop classic that has been sampled countless times. (Both these films can be found on YouTube and are well worth watching.)

"If you compare something I did in 1980 to my work today, the lack of change is probably one of the more striking things about it," he says. "But I'm not embarrassed about that at all. I had an opportunity to spend some time with the artist Barry McGee back in the '90s, and he had a very powerful impact on me. He helped me appreciate the simplicity of making art."

Zephyr credits McGee (a.k.a. TWIST) for being the father of the "current Street Art as Fine Art explosion." One day Zephyr heard McGee use the word "noodling" in reference to the art he made.

"It went straight to my core," says Zephyr. "He had a great nonchalance about his approach, but raised his own private and personal ideas to the level of massive, truly impressive visual presentations."

As the years have gone by, he has seen a commercial co-opting of graffiti that he finds himself at odds with. Since the '90s, he has rejected "99 per cent of commercial offers" because, as he bluntly says, "It's my opinion that artists should avoid becoming corporate shells."

"We need to regard the commercial mass-saturation an inevitable evolution," says Zephyr, who these days adds the words "Graffiti Dinosaur" to many of his pieces. "We saw it with skateboarding, tattooing and more recently with chopper motorcycles. When it comes to these things, I'm just a grumpy old purist."

*Out of Context #3* is curated by Adam "M" who is also responsible for the website Visual Orgasm ([visualorgasm.com](http://visualorgasm.com)), an impressive Canada-centric online repository of graffiti. His travels have taken him across Canada and the U.S., meeting many of graffiti's luminaries.



Zephyr leaves his mark on Calgary during a visit in 2006. The artist helped define the contemporary style, but thinks graffiti has lost its provocative nature

## Movie listings that will move you.

Click for Fast Forward's comprehensive listing of movie info and show times.



## Recent Blog Posts

[Bruce Peninsula](#)

[Alderman moves to gut Plan It blueprint](#) 5

[Fostering a more caring Calgary](#)

[Tonnes of Guns](#)

[Alberta not the only PR screw-up](#)

## Recently Commented

laricasurf on [Cheaper booze in Alberta? It depends](#) 3

Gardjinn on [Room to grow](#) 3

asiaticpygmie on [What's wrong with you, moorons \(sic\)?](#) 15

calgaryhumper on [Only man on the Moon](#) 1

## Hot Discussions

[Why we oppose the Stampede rodeo and chucks](#) 18

[What's wrong with you, moorons \(sic\)?](#) 15

[Smile! The Calgary Farmers' Market board is watching](#) 7

[Second chance for methadone clinic](#) 6

"It's interesting the variety of people you meet that are into graffiti. I personally know some that are becoming doctors or are architects," he says.

Zephyr would somewhat agree. According to him, "Today, a lot of graffiti writers live in the suburbs and drive their Honda Civics to go and paint a legal wall. They remind me of the kids that my friends liked to rob back in '89."

Graffiti has lost its provocative nature, he says. For that matter, a lot of people say the same about hip hop.

## Comments: 1

**calgaryhumper** wrote:

Graffiti...yawn.

on Jun 28th, 2009 at 1:49am [Report Abuse](#)

Post comment: ([Login](#) or [Register](#))

---

### VISUAL ARTS IN JUNE 25, 2009 ISSUE

#### A Jen-uine exhibition

Uppercase brings a unique, if confused, curatorial direction to new show

*by* [Mark Strowbridge](#)

#### From Calgary to Kraków

After touring Eastern Europe, Calgary art comes home

*by* [Jocelyn Grosse](#)

[More Visual Arts...](#)

[More by Ken Price...](#)