

ENTERTAINMENT

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Graffiti artist sees the writing on the wall

By John E. Mitchell
North Adams Transcript

NORTH ADAMS — Sometimes breaking the rules turns out to be the best way to learn. With graffiti artists, that often comes in the form of breaking the law.

Artist John Breiner has curated a show for MCLA Gallery 51 at 51 Main St. that examines how young artists move past youthful indiscretions and retain that energy for gallery work.

The show "Quantum Spectrum" opens on Thursday, Sept. 30, with a reception at 6 p.m.

Even though Breiner has gathered a cast of street artists who spent much of their early years in the world of graffiti, his interest isn't in what was, but rather, what happened after that. Breiner is fascinated by the transition and how each artist has dealt with it on his or her own creative terms.

"This show tries to find out if there is something that these artists are doing that motivated them as much as graffiti did as teenagers," Breiner said during an interview this week. "We all grew up with similar backgrounds, and the motivation when I was young to paint outside, to paint in public, was to wake up the next day and have a photo of what you did the night before. Unfortunately, when you get into the real world and make a living, you have to go easy on the stuff that will get you in trouble."

Breiner's one promise to himself was not to create a graffiti show within the gallery. He just doesn't think that works and believes that, within in a gallery setting, what has grown out of those early creative years and become part of mature art-making is far more interesting.

"As a teenager, I was definitely out running around at 3 o'clock in the morning, seeing some unique things. It makes me who I am and therefore makes the art what it is," he said. "It's the same for a lot of

these artists, and I feel like there is an edge to them and that their work is worth being shown. I know them personally, so I know the different types of things people are doing, and I want the show to be that instead of the obvious, what everyone would expect to see."

Breiner's own transition was not necessarily easy — the move to "acceptable" art was not smooth.

"I grew up painting murals — I grew up creating art outside on walls," he said. "As I got older and maturity kicked in, I went to art school and I started to see other sides of art. I had trouble the first year starting to work on white canvas; it wasn't happening."

Part of the problem was that Breiner wasn't able to find a medium that engaged him as much as urban walls — nothing inside a studio compelled him to make art. Another issue was that he could find no middle ground within the academic art world to help in his transition.

"Art school was my way to get to New York City and be where graffiti was really happening. After the first couple months, you realize that's not so practical," he said.

"I started to branch out, and art school was kind of good, but they had a very black-and-white view on graffiti. A lot of the professors didn't really respect it as art so much. I can kind of see their point of view a little better as I've gotten older and learned about different types of art and the history of art, but still, I think there is something to be said."

Eventually in his experimentation, Breiner came upon the idea of using books as his medium — taking actual printed and bound matter and creating art on top of what existed. His first effort was a copy of Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" with the conceit that the work he created was an object that had leapt out of the very story it contained.

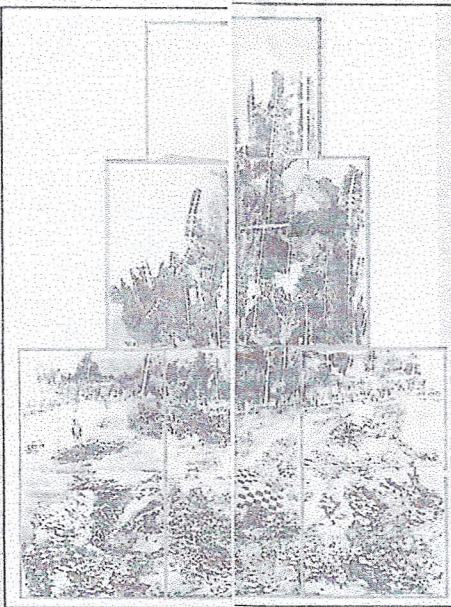


Image courtesy of John Breiner

Street artist John Breiner transitioned into the galleries by using books as his medium for art.

"My idea for the project was to use the theme from the book and do it as if I was there and I had grabbed the book from the pile they were burning and saved it," Breiner said. "Some pages were ripped out, and I illustrated the story on that book as if I were in the book portraying what was going on."

With books, Breiner discovered the empowering medium he had been seeking — one that offered some of the same allure as graffiti work.

"That really clicked for me, the surface of the book," he said. "They have water damage; they have light damage. They have touches of life that reminded me

take these loose pieces of paper and paste them together and make these gigantic wall papers for me to work on.

"The surface tells me what to paint on it. I don't know how that works, but I need to figure it out, because that's what art is. It's similar to when I was a teenager and would see a billboard and think, 'There it is. I know what I'm going to do up there already.'"

Breiner acknowledges that the movement from street art to the gallery world is not necessarily an easy one for any creative kid, since the appeal of the former is not obvious in the latter. The compulsion to paint on urban walls is partly about the art, but also about the circumstances surrounding it, including the danger.

"That's what made it so hard for me to paint on a white canvas — just show up and sit down and start painting," Breiner said. "The art I had been used to doing involved other things, like planning where you were going to do it, how you were going to get there, where you were going to park your car, how were you going to get there without being seen. It was all these little things that accompany the actual art process."

Breiner also believes graffiti work plays into teenage ego gratification, as well as a certain social aspect that is hard to replicate for anyone as they mature. When it's combined with creativity, the struggle to transition that into more accepted forms presents a challenge.

"It was pretty powerful to go for somewhere for five or six hours and create something that was 15 feet long and 15 feet high," he said. "You're on your feet all day. It was just fun. And then there's the whole aspect of your buddies who do it and meeting up with them and spending the day with them creating something. I haven't found too much I enjoy doing as

much as just spending an afternoon painting a wall."

The key, Breiner believes, is to search until the passion becomes re-ignited and you have an emotional remission with your own creativity in a new format.

"The books are doing that for me," Breiner said. "Before that, I would say what's the point of painting on canvas — that's how I felt and I really couldn't do anything. Once I grabbed onto the book idea, it just took over, and that became what I'm passionate about today."

He acknowledges that while you're in the thick of it — that is still in the teen years, still producing within the subculture of the graffiti world — you might take a negative view of moving into the professional art world. To the upcoming generation, he passes on a message of keeping an open mind to different forms of art — it may just be their future ticket to making the kind of art they want.

"I remember how I was, that this was the greatest thing and nothing else mattered," he said. "You get older and have a different perspective, but if you get that perspective earlier, there's no reason if you pursue it that you can't get job in the arts. There are all kinds of kids who write graffiti; there are the types of kids who are like 'at galleries, that's for sellouts. We just do it illegal.'"

"I understand that, and I agree that I'm not going to show graffiti in a gallery, but I'm not going to be pigeonholed into what goes along with that — where you have to do a job you don't like so you can go out and write illegally in the middle of the night. You might as well try to make it into something without having to compromise how you feel about it."

John Breiner can be found online at johnbreiner.com.