

THE CITY » A BIWEEKLY LOOK AT THE IDEAS THAT ARE SHAPING VANCOUVER

Paper covers rock

With tighter regulations on spray paint, artists like Andrew Owen are turning to posters and stickers to decorate the cityscape



TIMOTHY TAYLOR

taylor@globeandmail.com

For a long time in Vancouver, South Granville had the most visible concentration of art galleries: Heffel, Diane Ferris, Bauxi. And no wonder, really. Tony grocery stores, lingerie shops, florists. Here's evidence of a populace whose basic human needs have been met - heat, shelter, 1,200 calories, etc. - and who are happily disposing of their income on more discretionary items.

For many of these folks - who need not be philistines for this to hold true - buying art generally clicks in as an activity some time after the purchase of a Whistler time-share and before that of a recreational watercraft. Call it even with cosmetic surgery in the haute bourgeois hierarchy of consumerist needs.

The art zone emerging around Carroll and Cordova seems quite different in that regard. Meinhardt's is probably still a few years away from opening a satellite location in Pigeon Park, although with the Woodward's redevelopment, you never know.

Art gallery street frontage certainly has increased already: Jeffrey Boone, the Interurban, Centre A, the Access Artist Run Centre, Art-speak. But a far more distinctive feature of the new Carroll/Cordova art nexus may be found outdoors.

I'm referring to what is surely the epicentre of street art productivity in this town. Keep your eyes on the walls and hoardings around here and you'll find work by artists such as The Dark, Cameraman, weak hand and of course whoever it is that's responsible for those weird "Obey" posters.

Of this work, the stuff I'm interested in at the moment



Andrew Owen's work often focuses on the distressed urban texture of Vancouver's streets. RAFAL GERSZAK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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is a poster series called LocalPhotoPosters by Andrew Owen. Mr. Owen actually has a gallery history beginning with a first show at Toronto's Isaacs Gallery as far back as 1986. But even in the eighties Mr. Owen was a tagger, throwing up his AO1 signature over large swaths of the Toronto central core.

Business owners tend to take a sour view of this kind of creativity. Part of the move toward posters and stickers among street artists (including Mr. Owen, who is now a family man) is a response to the criminalization of spray paint. It's serious now. You can actually go to jail.

LocalPhotoPosters are 1:1 scale photographs of distressed or otherwise patterned urban wall texture. The photos are then turned into 8½-by-11 posters that Mr. Owen pastes up directly over

the wall texture in question.

You may have seen some of these already. There are 300 posted in the Gastown area, and several hundred more on the way.

The first one I noticed was on the telephone pole just to the right as you enter the alley behind the Dominion Building at Hastings and Cambie. The pole is stippled over with decades worth of old staples. Mr. Owen's poster is glued over these, absorbing their texture both visually and physically as they press up through the paper.

The effect is arresting. Here the depicted (a pole) blends with its depiction (a photograph of a pole) almost seamlessly. We're reminded only by a white border around the photograph that a distinction between the subject and the object remains.

This is a cuttingly contem-

porary point, given that the subjective depiction and objective reality of ourselves is an increasingly blurry matter (Facebook, anyone?).

Yet Mr. Owen's tackling of this highly conceptual business is most approachable. As we walk the neighbourhood together, I am repeatedly struck by how his eye on this troubled part of the city has found its most beautiful crevices and corners. A pattern of broken masonry with a spray of gold paint remaining (Water Street). A brick-red wall peeling to reveal aqua paint beneath (Alexander Street).

"A lot of people have commented on that one," he says of the Alexander Street poster. "It has a gentle quality."

Elsewhere, Mr. Owen's work comments back to the world on the topic of its own genre. Several LocalPhotoPosters lie directly over a jumble of pre-

viously posted wall content. A Carroll Street convenience store sports one of Mr. Owen's photographs cheekily duplicating the layers and layers of advertisements previously stickered there. Outside the Brickyard you'll find one that half overlaps a Jermog sticker from the Asigine series.

Of course, on the topic of distressed urban texture in this neighbourhood, all roads lead to Pigeon Park. Here, on the high hoarding just behind the open-air crack market, you'll find a completely spontaneous public art gallery. There's an Obey Poster. There's a Kent Foster, a kid slinging a guitar. There's a quite intricate and beautiful aboriginal motif carved directly into the plywood.

Here you will also find the largest and most complex of Mr. Owen's series, a multi-postered panel he calls the Pigeon Park Tableau. There are Owen posters over graffiti and vice versa. There are Owen posters over other Owen posters. There are posters with no white borders that you can't even see at first and other square white borders that, when you look closely, contain no photograph at all.

He did all this at 3 o'clock in the morning a few nights ago and is still wired. "It's a disruption in the space-time continuum. Write that down," he says to me, just as it starts to rain really hard.

Maybe it is. What it is certainly, however, is a close reading of a neighbourhood that still inspires and accommodates this kind of expression, but is quivering at the moment of transition.

And as the Woodward's District overlaps and subsumes the old Gastown, shifting it toward the great continuum of South Granvilles that ring the western world, I can only hope the quality survives here that inspired Mr. Owen's work in the first place.

» Timothy Taylor is a novelist and journalist based in Vancouver. His latest book is the novel Story House.