



SECTION L MONDAY, MARCH 24, 2008

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Globe Life

THE CITY » A BIWEEKLY LOOK AT LIFE IN VANCOUVER

Wheat-paste masterpieces

Blink and you might miss it. The urgent works of the city's street artists are temporary pieces meant for the here and now



TIMOTHY TAYLOR
ttaylor@globeandmail.com

I went and watched the Thrupup Thrown-down, which happened next to Gallery Gachet on East Cordova Street the other day. Imagine a live street-art competition/performance with MCs and dim sum. That's roughly the idea.

These events have put the spotlight on recent happenings in Vancouver's busy street-art scene. Graffiti is still ubiquitous. It's even in art galleries now. But it's also criminalized on the street, so some artists have moved into wheat-paste poster and stencils. That way they can do their artwork in private and only be exposed to the law for as long as it takes to post something on a wall.

This was the second such event in a few months. The first, in December, pitted the talents of the artist Camera-man, whose fabulously succinct *Louis Vuitton Dumpster* (a regular alley garbage bin papered over to look uncannily like a piece of Vuitton luggage) I mentioned in this column previously, against those of the conceptual artist Andrew Owen (AO1), whose Michael Snow and Zen Buddhism-inspired photography has been making our downtown alleys an ever-more semiotic experience over the past year or so.

The first Thrupup Thrown-down was photo-based. The end result was an explosion of posters and objects glued and nailed to the wall. The artists themselves are depicted as competing, many-armed Kali goddesses, bent against one another as they work the surfaces around them with brushes, markers, screw guns and scrapers. You can still see what remains of the piece on the north exterior wall of the Cambie Hotel on Cordova Street.

The second Thrupup Thrown-down, which will have just

been completed by the time you read this, is based on text. In execution, it remained a mock-combat between artists. On the one side, AO1 working with his partner UnoHu. On the other, street artist Jermine with his partner Ninjagine.

You may know Jermine's art without even being aware that you do. It's possible to see one of his simple box-label banners and miss that it's art at all. When 13-year-old Chris Poewing was stabbed to death outside Science World, a Jermine banner appeared on a nearby wall: "This is where it happened."

Another banner that read "I hope you don't get tasered," shortly after the infamous death of Polish immigrant Robert Dziekanski, offers a parallel critique, thinly veiled.

These are stark comments on the here and now, impulsive annotations of the urban landscape that go far beyond the ubiquitous, and now very suburban, tagging impulse. Here we have precisely what street art is supposed to be: an organic extension of the creative mind using the materials that are available.

As Jim Carrico, whose Rainbow Art Institute on Hastings Street is an all-purpose creative space devoted to the burgeoning street-art scene, puts it: "No one is asking permission to do this stuff. It's like nature. It doesn't ask permission."

Even though Gallery Gachet did co-operate in the second Thrupup Thrown-down, nature is still a good metaphor. Stand on the sidewalk opposite this latest Thrupup Thrown-down and you might almost mistake the tangle of tightly packed letters in their various fonts and arrangements to be natural growth, like a garden wall rioted over with ivy and moss.

Close up, meanwhile, you might expect the result of two artists putting up variously overlapping and interlocking texts to be completely incoherent, but the work actually has a complex unity to it, both artists building around a number of linked layers that lighten in tone and increase in hope-



Artist Jermine applies paste to paper as he puts his art on a wall of a Vancouver building as part of Thrupup Thrown-down, a Vancouver street-art event. JEFF VINNICK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

fulness as they rise.

In Jermine's first layer, for example, he makes an anguished "cascading confession" of having been molested as a child. Built up on pages of an unpublished novel - about a street artist named Jermine who moves to Vancouver from Ontario as he himself did in 2004 - the work is brocaded with falling stencilled letters, which settle into the words of a rhyme describing what happened to him. Rising above this are photos of a sky-blue dumpster onto which the artist had previously banned the words: "This is not my suicide note." Those photos are themselves then arranged in a "9" almost as large as the panel itself, an assertive statement of self as made by a survivor.

AO1's work, similarly, rises from anger through to hope. A series of posters he called the *Braggadocio* series - combative gauntlet throwdowns to other artists that he plastered around the neighbourhood last year - are smoothed over with Chinese poems, including one by the famous Hui Neng.

"It's about a new and hopeful spring," he tells me, of this effect.

The work has been in progress since I saw it. By this week you should be able to see the final layer, which will be posted in letters cut out of photographs taken and printed onsite during the original performance. A poem of spring and transformation.

But the piece was already working on that level when I left.

The huge platters of dim sum had just begun to arrive. A crowd was converging. The music kicking in. People passing on bicycles were coming over for a nosh, starting up at the art work, asking questions and taking pictures. And then the sun broke through. Gorgeous burnt orange on a cold day. And everybody stood still for a moment, faces raised to the warming light.

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