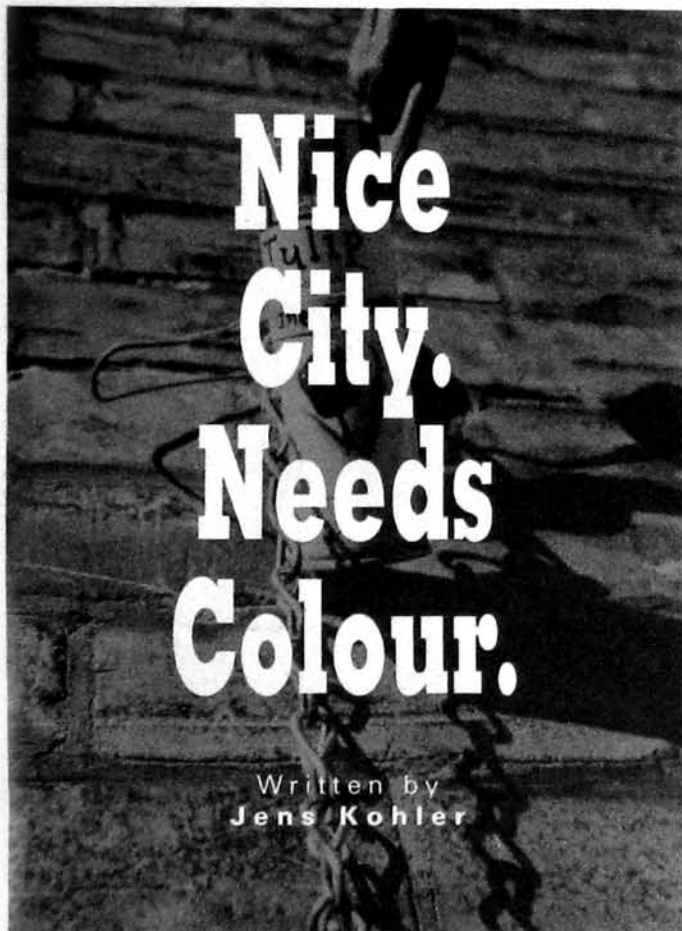


anonymously famous



Whether you know it or not, if you live in Toronto, you have seen the artwork of Jamie Osborne.

If you haven't seen his work in the form of an installation at The Purple Institution, then you have seen it in the form of Murad advertisements for Q107 and Molson Dry. Or you've seen it in the form of the most colourful, inventive and labour-intensive graffiti in the city.

Osbourne doesn't look thirty. He could easily pass as a second year PoliSci student. He's got such an infectious enthusiasm about everything he does that, halfway into our conversation, if I'm not interrupting him, he's interrupting himself. We talked in his studio in the warehouse district of King and Dufferin. Art is everywhere: a canvas or two, a future installation piece — an art vending machine — and photos of all the murals and graffiti he's ever done.

Osbourne and his creative partner Andrew Owen collaborate under two separate organizations: as DecorAction they do professional, income-generating work. DecorAction did eleven murals last summer for Murad and does work for RPM, every six months. As EnvironMental Produce they do "art" art and graffiti.

Whether working as a muralist within the law, or as a graffiti artist on the edge of it, Osborne has the same objective.

"I mean, this city needs colour. I think that the architects haven't fully addressed that — they haven't addressed it, period! The Dome is a joke. It's just raw, exposed concrete. It's just blatantly poured concrete and re-bar — Toronto's aesthetic. I think one of the mandates for any muralist in Toronto would be to add colour to the environment, to add



some brightness, maybe some nature. I think that's something that's really missing, especially in the winter."

He's right. A February in Toronto grinds you down. Winter is already four months long, and thanks to the developers, it is also oppressively grey. The city looks like the calcified spout of a tap in a toilet of a house with a smelly carpet. Which makes it a real joy to come across one of Osborne's graffiti flowers.

There are three flowers he does: tulip, iris, daffodil. If you go to Liberty Street, you can see all three of them lined up on the wall of the Vetcraft building where they used to make Remembrance Day poppies. The flowers are beautifully rendered in colour and include painted picture frames. In the summer, Osborne also planted a row of sunflowers along that dismal brick wall. Next year he plans to plant real daffodils, tulips and irises under his paintings.

Osborne reconciles the technical illegality of his graffiti with the fact that "there's visual vandalism going on by landlords who design poor buildings, who don't make the environment visually pleasing. Most of the walls you'll see graffiti on are abandoned, ill-repaired eyesores. I've never graffitied on a beautiful facade of a building."

Osborne and Owen have big plans for art murals in the city. They've developed a great deal of skill and slickness through their commercial work. They don't want to just do advertising for the rest of their lives.

"It's getting closer every year," says Osborne, "I think we're getting closer to actually doing legitimate graffiti — or public art."

"That's our ultimate goal. We want to get high-profile walls and we



"I've never graffitied on a beautiful facade of a building."

Jamie Osborne

want to put up art."

He emphasizes that they're not trying to compete with Murad: "They've been very good to us. We're not selling a product, we're just doing art, you know?"

They want to put up work "that's going to appeal to the community, that's going to relieve urban blight — colour and form are really important to us — and we want to provide an outlet for other artists to get their art ideas presented to the public."

Just as important is the idea of taking back or redefining the urban environment to include more than just messages of commercialism and mindless consumption.

Of billboards, he says, "I'm an urban dweller and I can't turn them off, it's not like a TV. Billboards literally force you to watch. They are forced upon the city. They're creating the urban environment."

"If people saw more art murals then ads would become less and less important. If Andrew and I went out and solicited three other artists that we thought could do dynamite murals, plus we did our own and all of a sudden we doubled the number of art murals in the city..." then advertising would take up less of our headspace and people could spend more time thinking their own thoughts.

Jamie Osborne didn't grow up thinking he was going to be an artist. He's from Brighton, an Ontario farming community where art is not high on the agenda. You know, he says, "the stigma thing".

He went to York University and majored in Economics. Two years into it he began doubting his passion for Economics and began taking some

art courses, watching the drama and cabaret productions while hanging out with the people in the art departments. He continued and completed his degree though, not wanting to throw away two years of hard work.

He's worked at Harbourfront, he sold stocks for a "two-bit mining company that was flogging mining stocks. It was a legal scam — I couldn't take it so I quit." He bartended and even drove the RPM shuttle for a while.

Now through DecorAction and EnvironMental Produce, he supports himself entirely with his art.

"I think in the modern, democratic, capitalistic society that I live in, if I want to live here and be an artist I have to work within that mode, and I think it's possible. I admire artists that have been able to do that."

DecorAction has done well enough to always be able to hire another artist and spread the work around.

Part of our mandate is to make some money, to do art but definitely the other part is to get other artists involved in doing work. We always hire somebody. We've hired Napoleon Brousseau of Fastwurms to work with us, we've hired Fiona Smyth, we've hired Matt Harley who's a painter, we've hired Gene Machida, who is a sculptor. It just goes on...Kurt Swinghammer's worked with us. We've had a lot of people work with us and help us do our thing."

*But the flowers he does alone.*