

## reviews

# 'Art in the Streets'

Museum of Contemporary Art  
Los Angeles

Through August 8

If documenting the history of art is a slippery task, doing so for graffiti is even slipperier. Illegal and ephemeral, its principal venues are grimy alleyways and roaring freeway underpasses. Its history is largely oral and documentation can be slapdash or nonexistent. And its artists operate under monikers (Revok, Swoon, Espo) that they regularly discard and resuscitate—the artist Barry McGee, for example, also goes by Twist and Ray Fong, among other names. All of this makes telling the story of graffiti a thorny undertaking.

"Art in the Streets" aims to tell that story. The exhibition's curators, Museum of Contemporary Art director Jeffrey Deitch and associate curators Roger Gastman and Aaron Rose, have responded to this complicated task by taking a kitchen-sink approach to the subject at hand. The show includes site-specific murals, sculptural pieces, artifacts, paintings, videos, and a tagged-up refrigerator—along with photographs of practically every American subculture associated with graffiti, from hip-hop to skateboarding to the New York nightclub scene of the 1980s.

This eye-popping overload includes some puzzling juxtapositions. Pieces by '80s Pop icons Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf face off against a contemporary canvas by Los Angeles graffitiist Chaz Bojórquez, an artist inspired by the stylized typography of Mexican American gang graffiti. An airbrushed car by L.A. tattoo artist Mister Cartoon sits in view of a whimsical installation crafted by the Brazilian street-art duo Os Gêmeos. There is little

in the way of wall text to explain how such vastly different works might relate to one another or how they might fit into a larger art-historical context. Case in point: you'll have to pick up the catalogue to find out that stenciling was an art form refined by Italian fascists in the early 20th century.

Likewise, for a show that purports to be a broad historical survey, significant styles and artists are only tangentially addressed. British prankster Banksy is given a sprawling space for an installation that includes a steamroller, stencils, and a taxidermied dog apparently relieving itself, while Blek Le Rat, a pioneer in the stencil form whose tongue-in-cheek images predate Banksy's work by at least a decade, is left out entirely. Roller tags (letter-based graffiti created with paint rollers and house paint) get only incidental coverage, even though the form has been wildly popular since at least the early '90s—especially along the concrete banks of the Los Angeles River, which lies just a few blocks away from the museum. By and large, graffiti styles that

aren't from L.A., New York, or San Francisco—such as Philadelphia's loopy "wicked style" of lettering—get overlooked.

That said, "Art in the Streets" contains some gems. Of the vast amounts of documentation on display, moody black-and-white photography by Gusmano Cesaretti is a standout—a vital record of L.A.'s Mexican American graffiti from the 1970s. Likewise, the infrequently seen sculptures of Rammellzee, a New York-based graffiti and performance artist who passed away last year, are otherworldly: psychedelic samurai suits and graffiti-inspired artifacts constructed out of plastic toys.

Most fascinating is the timeline portion of the show, which begins on the second floor and spills into a side gallery. The chronology features rare photos and ephemera, including vintage spray-paint cans, old portfolios, and New York tagger Angel Ortiz's '80s-era address book, with phone numbers for Keith Haring and Andy Warhol. Ultimately, it is in this component of the exhibition that graffiti's ebullience and history come together to form a coherent narrative.

"Art in the Streets" is in need of judicious editing. But it provides an ambitious first draft of a history that, until now, has been written only in scattered bits and pieces.

—*Carolina A. Miranda*



Martha Cooper, photograph of  
*Lion's Den* by Lee Quiñones (LEE),  
Lower East Side, New York City,  
1980, C-print, 16" x 24".