

**"RISE UP"**  
Peyton Scott Russell  
Minneapolis, 2020



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# WRITING ON THE WALL

ROBYNE ROBINSON ON THE IMPORTANCE OF STREET ART.

*IN THE DAYS FOLLOWING GEORGE FLOYD'S DEATH, THE PUBLIC WAS GLUED TO TV SCREENS AND social media feeds, absorbing news and images of protests, rioting, and destruction that devastated neighborhoods and businesses throughout the Twin Cities. What millions also saw in the aftermath were people helping board up shops and storefronts. From the rubble came poignant commentary in spray paint, reflecting the bitter pain of injustice, a call for unity and the promise of revolutionary change. This protest art became a source of collective pride — and politics: Does it belong to the public? How can it be preserved? Should museums acquire it? Should it have a space of its own?*

Why has street art become part of the public art conversation again? Free speech and civil rights are undeniable forces behind the growing interest. Global movements surrounding social justice, climate change and the pandemic have made millions keenly aware of what's happening in the world around them and the historic value of the artwork being produced in response. In most cases, the message is immediately accessible to its audience — the public — without the use of traditional channels like media or museums.



**"THE WALL OF RESPECT"**  
 Organization of Black American Culture  
 Chicago, 1967

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**"UNTITLED"**  
 Amy Sherald  
 Philadelphia, 2019

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 AMY SHERALD, 708 SANSON STREET | PHOTOGRAPHY BY STEVE WEINIK

“I believe it was a combination of COVID shutdowns and restrictions, the murder of George Floyd, and the resulting protests, riots and curfews,” says Peyton Scott Russell, muralist, Bush Fellow and founder of the educational program Sprayfinger. His haunting black-and-white mural of Floyd and his “Rise Up” painting depicting a young Black girl with a power fist in the air gained national attention last year. “Graffiti got a huge upswing as people needed an outlet. There was a time when policing was lax about most everything except the protests and riots, so artists had a great opportunity to paint without a heavy threat of being stopped or arrested.”

“As the boards went up to protect businesses, owners wanted something more than the apocalyptic plywood look,” he continues. “So artists were commissioned or given permission to paint in areas that previously were not offered as a canvas. The public got to see the power of street art being created in real time. I believe an understanding was shared that this art is practiced by many and speaks to everyone.” Hundreds of those boards were collected by grassroots arts and activist groups, like Memorialize the Movement and University Rebuild, in hopes of preserving them for proposed memorial displays and community centers.

Street art is stealing the spotlight in other American cities, too. Los Angeles transit riders who take the Metro Crenshaw/LAX Line later this year can behold dozens of new commissioned pieces by renowned artists like Kenturah Davis, Rebeca Méndez and Mickalene Thomas meant to capture the spirit of the surrounding neighborhoods. And in Philadelphia, where street art has long shared space with the city’s public art collection, acclaimed painter Amy Sberald’s six-story mural of a young Black woman holds court over Center City, home to historic sites like the Liberty Bell. Best known for her portrait of Michelle Obama, Sberald challenges ideas about public gaze and asks, *Who is allowed to be comfortable in public spaces? Who is represented in art? How can one woman’s portrait begin to shift that experience for others?*

Street art has always been about power. Graffiti sprung from 20th century subculture, with Prohibition-era gangs tagging New York City buildings and boxcars to assert their strength and standing. It evolved from turf marking to creative expression in the sixties, when the godfather of graffiti, Darryl “Cornbread” McCray, started tagging Philadelphia walls with designs. This built a reputation for him and ushered in a new means of freedom of expression.

Illegal and subversive, the concept spread like wildfire across the country, with teens adopting it at once and bringing it to the attention of community artists. It became a full-blown movement in the summer of 1967, when a group of Chicago artists painted a mural honoring famous Black Americans on the side of a crumbling South Side tavern. Created in response to the Detroit uprising of the same year, “The Wall of Respect” was considered a revolutionary form of communal political expression. It gave birth to the Black Arts Movement and supported the rise of a national Black consciousness.

By the eighties, hip-hop and punk totally upended contemporary American art. Instead of being told what art is and who can create it, a generation of street artists gave traditional institutions the finger

and led an insurgent movement into the commercial art world, juxtaposing music, fashion, video and other visual elements. “Hip-hop was huge for me in setting a DIY mindset,” says Minneapolis-based muralist Wes Winship. Along with his skateboard crew, he blended rhymes and beats, loud guitars, graffiti, and outrageous clippings into a popular underground magazine that eventually evolved into *Burlesque* of North America, a design collective that cranks out print projects for museums and companies like Nike and 3M.

Although Winship acknowledges that street art has grown up and become more mainstream, that doesn’t mean everyone will get rich — or even wants to. “Graffiti is a culture,” he notes. “It’s inherently human, like speech. The whole idea behind street art is that an artist will do it because they want to, for free or for a price. They’re not all trying to be the next Blek le Rat.”

The rise in street art is signaling a change in the art world, with the move outside traditional institutions as important as the artwork itself. Although works by street art idols of recent decades — Keith Haring, KAWS, Futura — are now the hot commodities of auction houses and posh galleries, art is busting out of museums and showing up in public spaces.

“It’s created a very different system,” explains Artnet Auctions Senior Specialist Jason Rulnick. “There’s democracy in the art movement. It allows people to subvert the gallery system; either you work in it or you make your own opportunities. There’s more than one way to do things in the art world.”

Street art has become more than simply a genre. It’s the embodiment of a fundamental principle of design. It’s art created by people sharing experiences with others, with art and life at equal states. As a result, collectors are willing to pay up for art that reflect a time, message or emotion that excites and connects us — culturally, socially, politically.

Banksy, the elusive provocateur whose creations range from a dystopian amusement park to a boutique hotel set up in a conflict zone, is considered one of the street art world’s best. His works have commanded up to \$23.1 million at top auction houses. Graffitiist Shepard Fairey, who started as a sticker artist stamping images of wrestler André the Giant on street corners, rocketed from the underground to the bright lights when he created the iconic “Hope” poster for Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. A limited edition of the artwork set an auction record for Fairey last fall, bringing in \$600,800.

Yet despite the commercial appeal, street artists say their work can never be truly mainstream. “Parts of street art and graffiti will always be outlaw,” notes Winship. “Look at Peyton Scott Russell. He does real stuff — for the love of it, risking civil liberty.”

“I think there’s a shakeup in the art world,” concludes Russell, who believes 21st century graffiti will keep pushing the boundaries of what’s considered contemporary fine art. “Street art is an extreme, creative action that has no limits, doesn’t seek permission, is unsanctioned, and releases raw, creative expression that uses the public infrastructure to articulate a voice. Its source is human interaction with space and surface to gain attention and acceptance, to fulfill the need to participate, and to leave evidence of being present and contributing to humanity. I believe street art is a benefit to society.” ●



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**“LOVE IS IN THE AIR”**

Banksy  
Bethlehem, 2003