

Street Art Has Arrived

Written by Anne Tschida
January 2010

Wynwood is now famous for its outdoor murals — unlike many of the artists who created them



What was happening out there on the streets of Wynwood, on a Wednesday afternoon in the middle of December? The Art Basel crowds had gone home, so why all these people milling about, taking photographs in front of murals throughout the neighborhood? Wynwood, the art center of Miami, may be filled with galleries, but it is rarely filled with visitors apart from one Saturday evening each month.

Here's what's happening: Wynwood has become one of the most vibrant street-art scenes in the nation, if not the world. Building walls here have been covered with an astonishing amount of illegal and legal graffiti, murals, and paintings, created by both local and internationally acclaimed artists.

So on this afternoon, art interlopers piled out of taxis and cars to see some of these spectacular murals. People posed in front of the 12 murals painted during Art Basel on a cluster of buildings along NW 2nd Avenue. The collection of murals is called "Wynwood Walls" and was sponsored by the New York gallery Deitch Projects and the developer Tony Goldman, whose company owns the properties. They posed in front of other walls too, like the massive one facing I-95 on the building housing the Margulies Collection, painted the artists known as Retna and El Mac.

Those two are part of a collective called Primary Flight, which has been responsible for much of the outdoor art in the area, and which is currently creating a sprawling mural and graffiti complex on NW 6th Avenue at 23rd Street, where more visitors were snapping photos of the explosion of color emanating from the walls of this warehouse property.



Wynwood's walls received intense scrutiny this past Art Basel, but this street-art extravaganza didn't happen overnight, and not without a lot of sweat and effort that some of the originators think have gone uncredited.

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The artist who goes by the name BooksIII is a founder of Primary Flight, the group founded in 2007 to seriously cover those neighborhood walls. “We busted our asses securing those walls, getting the paint,” he says of those early days. Along with several other artists and curators, the group has a passion for bringing art outdoors, to a neighborhood the art elite ignored, aside from indoor shows. “Here was a place that was becoming an art hub,” he says, “but for the most part it was one week a year [during Art Basel]. They appear and then disappear without looking at what was going on. We were like, ‘Fuck you, more is going on here.’”



Making art available to everyone was part of the mission, says another founding member, New York-based curator Lynn Yohana Howard. “We wanted to highlight high-level art for the people, to help revitalize a blighted area that was neglected for so long,” says Howard.



So with very little money but lots of enthusiasm, Primary Flight took to the streets of Wynwood, and wall by wall began putting up a truly amazing array of murals. Year by year the roster of people participating grew, and included local, national, and international artists. Primary Flight’s paintings were giving Miami worldwide street cred. (Photo galleries and more can be found at the group’s website: primaryflight.com.)

Fast forward to this past December, when “street art” was all the rage. An element of commercialism had clearly crept into the scene, from the beautiful but somewhat sterilized “Wynwood Walls” to yet another show that claimed to be exhibiting some of the world’s biggest names in graffiti art, a two-story exhibit called “Graffiti Gone Global,” sponsored by the restaurant chain SushiSamba. Both shows had brought in acclaimed artists, from Shepard Fairey to Lady Pink and Ewok, artists who had also created murals in Wynwood courtesy of Primary Flight.

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So back on the street, there was a feeling that all the effort of the past several years was being ignored by newcomers with more money and public relations fire power.

An artist and architect who works with Primary Flight, Douglas Hoekzema, a.k.a. HOX, was feeling more than slighted. He was feeling robbed by the “Graffiti Gone Global” show. He’d been hired to do the main sculptural installation and was highlighted in the show’s catalogue as “The Architect.” But at the last minute, he says, he was taken off the project with no recourse to fix what the curators thought was a problem.

“I swallowed my pride and began to change elements to their liking,” he says. “Halfway through the day [they] decided to shut the project down. I pleaded for two more hours to prove that I could complete the work as they wished, but this wasn’t enough.... I feel this is more than just personalities clashing.”

One of “Global’s” curators, Karla Murray, who with her partner James produced the well-regarded *Miami Graffiti* book last year, says there were creative differences but that any official comment had to come from the SushiSamba managing partner, Shimon Bokovza.

However, Bokovza says he had nothing to do with the curating or the hiring or firing of individuals.



Hard feelings were clearly surfacing. Says Primary Flight’s BooksIII: “That was just shit, what happened to HOX. No respect there.”

The “Wynwood Walls” project also got little respect. “*Wynwood Walls?* What a curiously titled project,” says BooksIII. “

We

made Wynwood’s walls and we’re getting no credit for that.”

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Says Lynne Yohana Howard: “No, we didn’t put out water bottles with the tag ‘Wynwood Walls,’ we just *did it* over the years.”

They felt the Goldman/Deitch mural park capitalized on what they’d already done, with no mention of their efforts and achievements in covering so many of Wynwood’s walls.

For his part, Tony Goldman hopes Primary Flight is rightfully credited for what they’ve done, but he is proud of what “Wynwood Walls” has become. “This is something else to add to the neighborhood and to the public’s enjoyment of public art,” he says. “It’s good for everybody.”



BooksIII agrees, in part. “Those walls are fantastic, I don’t hate on that,” he says of the “Wynwood Walls” murals. “I just think some people might get the impression that all this happened in one day.” (The “Wynwood Walls” project featured an international cast of artists, including Aiko from Japan, teams Os Gemeos and Nunca from Brazil, Stelios Faitakis from Greece, and Shepard Fairey, Kenny Scharf, Clare Rojas, Barry McGee, and Jim Drain from the United States. Go to www.deitch.com for information and more images.)



In the end, it may come down to truly different visions. The murals at “Wynwood Walls” are not graffiti. They are paintings, and Goldman has hired 24-hour security to make sure no one defaces them. As BooksIII points out: “Look, they’ve got tended grass and lighting and whatnot. Our stuff is still unpoliced; It’s just out there on the street.”

Over at the huge graffiti project on NW 6th Avenue that Primary Flight’s artists are creating, the lack of policing was evident recently when a mural by Hoekzema -- of singer Celia Cruz -- was defaced just days after being completed. “What a shitty thing to do,” sighs the artist, who is going to retouch it.

In spite of the discord, everyone seems to agree that Wynwood has become a unique

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neighborhood because of the remarkable proliferation of outdoor art. “Miami is a true graffiti destination,” says BooksIII.

Goldman agrees: “It is becoming an international street-art museum. It really is.”

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