



## Physical Graffiti

And you thought it was all about teens gone wild with cans of spray paint

By Alfredo Triff  
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As our late-capitalist society grows in complexity and sophistication, so does the competition for our attention. One obvious symptom is today's information overload -- on TV, the written media, instruction manuals, corporate logos, and traffic signs. There is so much meaning to deal with: implicit, deferred, cryptic, or plain silly. Can we process it all? Where to find meaningful signs in a system that digests everything?

Tao Rey's show "onwords" at Placemaker Gallery calls to mind Ludwig Wittgenstein's famous and clear-cut passage on words: "Think of the tools in a tool box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screwdriver, a rule, a glue pot, nails and screws. The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects." And then, "To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to master a technique."

Rey's medium is graffiti. With its origins in social subversion, it appropriated blank walls, subway cars, and highway signs to imprint the artist's personal signature -- or message. In a way graffiti enriched some of our "standard" cultural meanings by simultaneously defacing and embellishing them. All this happened within the periphery of the impoverished modern cityscapes. Now we're far from the 'hood, inside an art gallery. Extremely conscious of this environment, Rey employs the iconic description of these personal hieroglyphics and proceeds to bend it -- materially and conceptually. Following Wittgenstein, what's the point?

Rey begins by misplacing the sign's reception. Instead of regular metal sheets displaying your typical "STOP" or "DO NOT ENTER" message, he employs paper panes with an elegant -- though cryptic -- colored calligraphy on them. Meaning is stretched and repositioned. Rey's graffiti art can coexist inside the perceived space of the gallery, only not in its previous form. Interestingly, if this were all, Rey's exhibit would fail conceptually. To retain its nonstandard cultural viability, Rey knows his display must leave no doubt that these signs have what Walter Benjamin called "aura" left in them. In the end we encounter repositioned, remanipulated, almost-destroyed emblems. Their aesthetic is not devoid of contradiction, but more important, in the process, they've become authentic and original cultural marks.

Franklin Einspruch's "Following the Weather" at the Dorsch Gallery reveals an artist fighting his own demon: figuration. Realism rescues him. Einspruch's exploration became clear to me at his show "Presence" in 2003 at Dorsch, where he tried to break loose from the iconography he is known for, realized with a detailed spatula work akin to pointillism. Then, the artist wrestled with form and medium; only his canvases were too big to effectively translate his hand-and-body gesture effort and the form looked contorted. This attempt helped him understand that he can go small -- or smaller, for now -- and carefully measure his style progress. With "Following the Weather" Einspruch moves on to a very personal and somewhat abstract Expressionist figuration with the self-portraiture genre as leitmotif. Nothing is closer and safer than one's face. Yet, here lies the risk.

Frantic at times yet deliberate, Einspruch obstinately works tone and form. The sequence of little paintings makes you see how hue and gesture can alter sameness. What begins overtly ends introspectively, the realist self fades while a truer, deeper, likeness grows. My favorite self-portraits are: Mysterious Instructions, Howard Cimabue, Blue Negative, a wounded portrait-collage, Leafy Greens, a disintegrating mass -- as if eaten by some mad force from the inside; Giotto, an effective minimalist contorted grimace and finally Backlight -- strong and dark. Einspruch's effort has achieved a deliberate and intense chronicle of the many masks we wear and uncover in this multitude we call self.

Also in Wynwood, the Fredric Snitzer Gallery opened "Eclipse," an exhibit of drawings by artist **Bhakti Baxter**. The display brings forth some of the artist's regular themes with significant new developments. Baxter engages the human form in a mood akin to psychedelic Sixties without rainbow colors or let's-make-love-change-the-world humor. His black-and-white human drawings -- some adorned with inkblot swirls and drippings -- take us instead on a quest for the inner mind. There are four portraits of Baxter's friends, each striking a meditative pose. In spite of how clichéd this image can look (in the context of a West that seeks spirituality while ostentatiously promoting consumption) these pictures appear genuine. They clarify Baxter's earlier, abstract themes. One of his preferred subjects is nature's symmetry, which I always perceived as an example of Emersonian "transcendental beauty" -- one that speaks to us through the elegant simplicity of the universe.

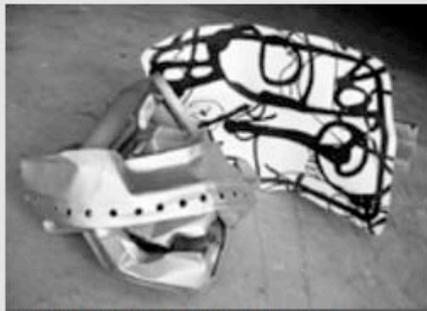
In "Eclipse," the artist continues working the mandala, the circle -- now against the void of light in a solar eclipse -- various flowers, fish anatomies, the atomic world, asteroids, even man-made structures such as domes. The drawings exhibit a relaxed pulse as if instructed by a keen and curious mind.

Now Baxter's major themes are brought home. In order to better understand our place in the world we need to delve and find common ground with our universe, the idea behind Boddhidarma's "the no-mind," a self-ruled psyche free of unnecessary noise. Nature speaks (to those who can pay attention) in a language of beauty, which can become a model for human practice. Aesthetics may not be enough for serenity. We also need praxis, something the ancients believed we could cultivate: the ataraxia of the stoics, the skeptics' idea of askesis or what Taoists called wu-wei. Mental calmness for a world of chaos.

"onwords" Through November 30. Placemaker Gallery, 3852 N. Miami Ave. 305-576-6695.

"Following the Weather" Through November 13. Dorsch Gallery, 151 NW 24th St. 305-576-1278.

"Eclipse" Through October 30. Fredric Snitzer Gallery, 2247 NW First Pl. 305-448-8976



*Untitled (Crumpled Sign), Tao Rey, 2004*



*Untitled, Bhakti Baxter, 2004*



*Self-portrait, Franklin Einspruch, 2004*