

Underground Artists

What's the most moving art exhibit in New York? That's easy. It's the underground traveling show flamboyantly festooned on the sides of Manhattan's subway cars by teen-age gangs of graffiti artists who descend from the ghettos with spray cans and felt pens to make their colorful—and costly—mark in the teeming anonymity of the big city. Graffiti, always a metropolitan presence, began to escalate a few years ago; in 1964 Simon and Garfunkel sang that "the words of the prophets are written on the subway walls." After the Day-Glo epidemic of flaming swirls and swooping signatures last summer left hardly a

The pictures at the exhibition are going for between \$200 and \$3,000. What's more surprising is that these erstwhile denizens of dank tunnels and twilight train yards are now organized into a registered, meeting-holding corporation, the United Graffiti Artists. UGA was started a year ago by City College of New York sociology student Hugo Martinez, 22, who got the Razor exhibit together after tracing the multi-racial "writers" (as the artists call themselves) through ghetto gang leaders.

"Graffiti writing is a way of gaining status in a society where to own property is to have an identity," Martinez

good, if you brag nobody will like you." "A masterpiece has to be big, 4 or 5 feet," declares 18-year-old Mico, a Colombian who came to New York in 1969 and specializes in "political writing." When asked if a group mural of signatures in the gallery was a masterpiece, Mico recoiled vehemently: "How could that be a masterpiece? A writer does a masterpiece alone. For himself only."

The graffiti masters have their own status-consciousness. Within the UGA the old masters are known as WAR—Writers Already Respected. "And anybody in WAR isn't supposed to be written over [sprayed by another's design]," says Phase-Too. "Some writers even go over masterpieces—the really big, beautiful hits." The penalty? "I get 30 or 50 cans of paint from any dude who goes over one of my masterpieces," declares Phase, who adds wistfully: "Now, you can't find a clean car anywhere." Lack of respect invalidates high style. "Super Strut is very good," says Martinez, "but he is not recognized as a master because he's written over a mess of masterpieces people took big chances to make."

'Classy': The guerrilla tactic and pure physical challenge of writing are obviously a large part of the graffiti life-style. "We used to worry about getting hit by trains," says T-Rex, 18, "and sometimes we had to run through the tunnels to get away from workmen or the police." Says Mico: "I got busted seven months ago. They put me in jail for a night, and I'm on probation. Some guys got caught in Gramercy Park and got beat up, treated just like Sirhan Sirhan. In Washington Heights, though, you just have to wash the platforms or the cars for maybe three Saturdays." Most big masterpieces are done in the train yards: "We used to bring a can of paint each and all we did was make plain little letters back in 1971," says Phase. "Then last summer I started putting clouds behind my name to make it look classy. Now people bring 30 cans and stay all night. Some guys even bring stepladders." One 13-year-old writer, R.C., fell off a car and died of his injuries.

"The writers are changing the shape of the relations that have existed between members of ghettos in different boroughs," declares Martinez. "A couple of writers have even done masterpieces to honor a master from another ghetto." He sees some UGA members going into art careers; one, Bama (whose father is a subway worker), already has a scholarship to Brooklyn's Pratt Institute. But the graffiti movement itself may be dying. Says stripes-and-fire stylist Flint: "I don't write on the trains any more. I don't want to mess up the cars. And besides, they wash off the windows now. Somebody might see a masterpiece riding by now that's got a big chunk out of it!" And T-Rex adds a similar note of elegy: "The city paints the cars every two years, man. By the time they paint them again, I'll be too old to write."

—S. K. OBERBECK



Herbert Migdoll

Phase-Too: Super-doodle master

subway car or station untouched, graffiti began to be enshrined as Radical Chic, analyzed as folk art and deplored by cities spending millions to clean up the outbursts of adolescent personality.

Now, the subterranean art pioneered in New York by "artists" like the legendary Taki 183 has been surfaced—and, glory be, put on canvas—in New York's Razor Gallery. There, looking strangely static anchored against stark white walls, the wildly expressive works of such graffiti masters as Phase-Too, Flint, Mico, Slim 1, T-Rex 131, Tabu, Bama and Me 163 send out their carnival message in a caterwauling fantasia of neon super-doodles and shocking-pink stars, stripes and arrows.

Art Deco: Graffiti comes in various styles: the geometric "Broadway"; the billowy "bubble"; a cartoony style that looks like R. Crumb putting on Roy Lichtenstein. There are signatures like Art Deco balloons full of laughing gas and the calligraphic John Hancock of a 14-year-old Chinese-American.

told NEWSWEEK's Mary Rourke. "Graffiti artists are like a miniature community; they have their own code of ethics." Martinez is attempting to steer the midnight scribblers into art careers and away from the trains. So far, they have provided backdrops for Twyla Tharp's "Deuce Coupe," produced by New York's City Center Joffrey Ballet, and commissions for graffiti murals have started to come in, such as one for an office building in mid-Manhattan.

The writers' code is as fluid and intuitive as their work. "Anybody can be a writer, but if you're recognized, it means you're a master," says Martinez. "Basically, a master is a good human being with talent. He either writes masterpieces or has a beautiful signature that gets around a lot." Technique matters: "One thing a masterpiece can't do is drip. SuperKool 223 does beautiful pieces, but his paint drips," Martinez explains. "He doesn't use the spray can well." Lanky, 18-year-old Phase-Too points out: "RIP is good, but he brags. Even if you're



Graffiti come off the walls and into the gallery: A shocking pink explosion by Phase-Too

Photos by Robert E. Mates and Paul Katz



'Bubble' style and 'Broadway' style. Collectively composition by graffiti artists (above)

Putting it on the line: Flint plays with fire (below)





Dancing walls: Graffiti designs for Twyla Tharp's 'Deuce Coupe'

Herbert Migdall



Orange juice: Bama makes a splash of color



Art or vandalism: The New York subways are murals on wheels

A place in the sun: T-Rex is reaching for it (below)

Photos by Robert E. Mates and Paul Katz

