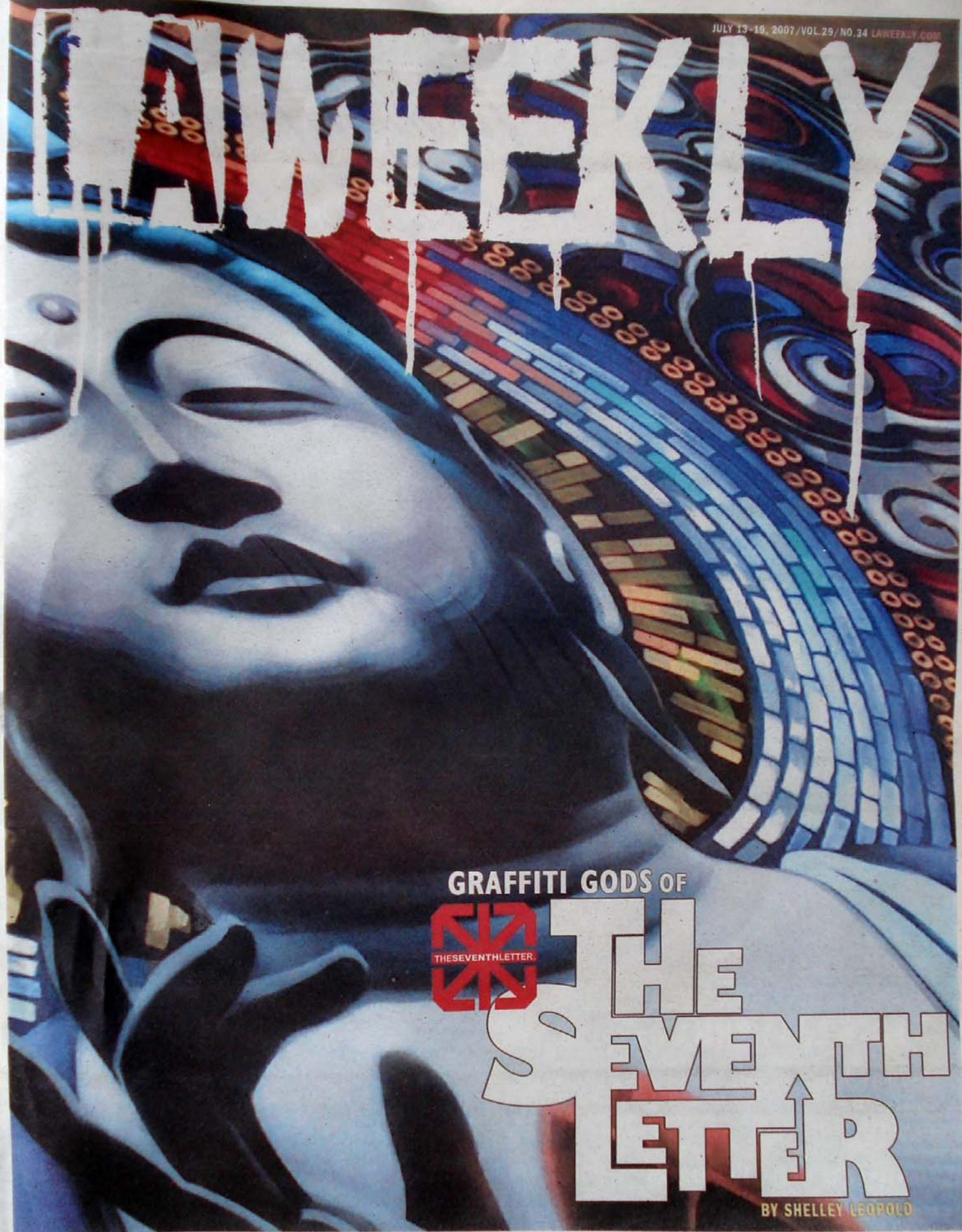


JULY 13-19, 2007 / VOL. 25 / NO. 34 LAWEEKLY.COM



LAW WEEKLY

GRAFFITI GODS OF



THESEVENTHLETTER.

THE SEVENTH LETTER

BY SHELLEY LEOPOLD

All in the family: The Seventh Letter crew

SEVER, ALLOY, JAPSON, FATE, SABER, Ralph the webmaster, RENO, Pat Tenore (RCVA), Keith, ZES, PATH, TYKE, GREEN, Steve Grody, RIME, PEP, EKLIPS, HAVOK, CORN, SHIVER, BUS, REVOK, DOOM, Kenston Parker, ZTONE, RISKY, WISE, PUSH, HAZEN, DAME, RETNA, WERTH, Young-kai, TRIGGER, DETR, Eddie Donaldson, Conan Hayes (RVCA), OZER, GLARE, ULYE, Alexis Ross, EWOK, PYS, KRUSH, Aaron Lavant, BUDS, MYSTIC ONE (not pictured). And many more...



MAD SOCIETY KINGS

BY SHELLEY LEOPOLD



THE RISE OF THE SEVENTH LETTER

Once you know what you're looking for, your sixth (make that your seventh) sense will kick in and you'll start seeing them everywhere — on empty walls surrounding vacant lots, on the ramparts of the L.A. River, along freeways, on billboards ... everywhere. To the cold, blank spaces of our urban canvas, the throw-ups and pieces bearing the marks of The Seventh Letter crew add color, beauty, a bit of danger perhaps, and, increasingly, legend. Not since the post-modernist heyday of Pollock and Picasso has the art world been host to such a decidedly macho milieu.

The seventh letter is, of course, G, which in this case stands for "Gods of Graffiti" and represents what may be the most ambitious, racially diverse and prolific crew ever assembled. With more than 100 members operating under the Seventh Letter banner, names like Revok, Retna, Saber, Push, Rime

and Zes are just a few to watch as they fast become L.A.'s modern muralists.

The Seventh Letter's roots go back nearly 20 years, when the collective's founder and leader, Eklips, a legendary writer in his own right, started the AWR (Art Work Rebels/Angels Will Rise) and MSK (Mad Society Kings) writing crews while bombing around the Motor Yard in Los Angeles. As Eklips' fame grew, so did that of those wanting to align with his artists. Sensing an opportunity to take graffiti in a new direction, Eklips merged AWR and MSK under the Seventh Letter umbrella in 1999. By then, AWR/MSK members were well known on the street, and Eklips' idea was to take graf where it hadn't gone before, but where lowbrow-art practitioners like Ed "Big Daddy" Roth had previously spun gold: namely, corporate gigs and merchandising.

TSL's streetwear brand features T-shirts designed by the writers and has incorporated a jewelry line, an upcoming bricks-and-mortar space for the currently Web-only knowngallery.com, and an ongoing film venture called *Seventh Day Project*, featuring time-elapased footage of writers painting actual pieces. New footage is released exclu-

sively via the Web site on the seventh of every month. The collective's members recently concluded a trip to Barcelona, courtesy of Royal Elastics, for its "Letters First" show at the internationally acclaimed Bread and Butter showcase. The concept revolves around 53 Seventh Letter canvases spelling out "Click Clack the Seventh Letter Strikes Again."

Having done paying jobs for Adidas, Boost Mobile, Nike and Scion, Seventh Letter members may get heat from other artists for selling out, but they refer to their opportunities as "buying in." Why let a junior designer in an ad agency attempt the crew's style when the real guy can do it better and faster and offer the product a little credibility?

"When a company hires or sponsors a Seventh Letter writer, they know they are going to get a professional, someone who can conduct themselves in an appropriate way," says Eklips.

European art schools hold classes in technique, and companies there manufacture premium paint stock. Salzburg, Austria, boasts a graffiti museum. Taipei and Tokyo hire the Seventh Letter crew to paint in their cities. "In Taiwan, especially, we're treated like royalty. Here, we have to be underground — because of laws and envy."

It's a different world over here, where graffiti can bring automatic felony charges, and tougher local laws are in the works. Some crew members hold vandalism warrants. "Creating fear isn't going to make a problem go away. Sending a kid away for eight years for painting on a wall and housing him with killers is just going to make another killer," predicts Eklips. "Violent graffiti? Is that because of graffiti or terrorism? You don't see it around people who are doing something, staying busy. We're about making sure everybody's passport is valid. The Seventh Letter is positive. Make big moves and showing kids that there's hope, that you can have something for yourself. Graffiti saved my life. It bought me a house."

As the time-honored painting space in L.A. continue to disappear — the well-publicized demolition of the Belmont Tunnel in 2005 for a planned housing development is a prime example, and the Motor Yard has all but shut down — the number of young artists interested in graffiti art has only increased. The fact that viable public space are becoming increasingly scarce has possibly contributed to what city officials see as a tagging dilemma. As long as reputations are still made



SPECIAL THANKS TO ROGER GASTMAN, MAPS BY MICHAEL DELAHAUT



PHOTOS BY KEVIN SCANNON

"IT'S ALWAYS ABOUT PAINTING DOPE PIECES AND GETTING UP. GRAFFITI IS SURROUNDED BY AN AMOUNT OF MANUFACTURED MISUNDERSTANDING. THE COLOR OF THE NEW WORLD ORDER IS 'PALOMINO BEIGE.'"



kept by getting up on the street, and they are, the Seventh Letter guys aren't going to give up the life entirely. But that doesn't mean they can't find ways to comply with the law without compromising their lifestyles. Crew member Jersey Joe is at the forefront of seeking new ways of mentoring the craft and teaching kids a positive lesson at the same time. He works with a nonprofit afterschool group called Woodcraft Rangers (woodcraftangers.org), doing murals at grade and middle schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Thanks to Jersey Joe, the expansive Samuel Gompers Middle School campus in Watts now boasts more than 35 of The Seventh Letter's best pieces.

Principal David Garcia couldn't be happier. "I was a little nervous at first, because, well, it is graffiti," he concedes. "But when I saw what it did for the kids — they are so well behaved and the grades are up. They know if they screw up, they can't come out here and paint with these guys."

Working with nonprofit organizations and property owners has gained The Seventh Letter access to City Hall. In an effort to change city officials' attitudes toward graffiti, about 20 crew members met recently with Elizabeth Morin, director of Youth Arts and Education in the city's Office of Cultural Affairs. It was a logical step after the successful "Movement: Hip Hop in L.A. 1980s

to Now" event she hosted late last year that included a graffiti-art showcase of city writers and photographers as a way to bridge the gap between lawmakers and young artists. While Morin is personally a fan of the art form, she realizes the momentous effort it will take to change negative perceptions, and also knows what the writers themselves need to do to help accomplish that.

"It's part of the fabric of the city. It's youth culture; it's alive. I need to be very careful that we do the right thing here," she says. "I would love to give the artists a place to paint, but there are still so many risks involved. Individuals who still live and behave in a certain way, making it difficult for both sides to get their point across."

The risks and rewards are well known to the artists. "We have a crew etiquette, we avoid [historic] murals and glass etch — we're not about flaming personal property or acting out of malicious intent," says Saber, one of the crew's most recognized painters. "It's always about painting dope pieces and getting up. Graffiti is surrounded by an amount of manufactured misunderstanding. The color of the new world order is 'Palomino beige,' and 99 percent of the time, it's a Caucasian individual getting uptight. There should be more yards — like Belmont, Motor, the River — they gave us a chance to practice and create a community."

Admittedly, he's not getting any younger and would like to see graffiti progress, maybe even to the point where it's considered a planned part of the urban landscape, like design and architecture. "My job now as a graf artist is to work with people in developing the bigger picture," he says. "AWR/MSK have been

testing the modern environment for years now, and we're just scratching the surface of possibility. I want to meet with city planners, architects, developers, and collaborate. I want to use these skills that I've built on the street as a viable resource. There is a huge amount of effort and skill that goes into what we do. I've risked my life."

The city's official stance on this kind of public art hasn't moved much. All murals require lots of red tape, "irrespective of artistic content," and along with that come size restrictions, not to mention that owners who have consented to have their walls painted but aren't aware of city regulations can be fined.

Retna has been running legal walls (collaborating with private-property owners) for 10 years now, and while he admits to a bit of scheming to get those permits, he challenges the city to recognize the solution he offers. "When talking to a property owner about a space, I never once told them it would be graffiti I'd be painting on their wall," he says. "I try to become the solution to their [tagging] problem. I try to make a culturally important piece for the neighborhood that no one destroys."

He also believes there's a disconnect between the importance of historic murals and the new ideas that a crew like AWR/MSK might represent. "I personally love the Eloy [Torrez, best known for the Dearden's Furniture Store wall on Main Street] pieces, and Frank's [Romero, '70s Chicano muralist] stuff is beautiful," says Retna. "But the youth can't necessarily identify with them. They're looking for name recognition, trying to get out there to say, 'Believe in me.' It became a graffiti free-for-all with the destruction of the yards — Belmont in particular unleashed it."

"There's nowhere for kids coming up to get good. New ideas haven't been allowed to flourish since the '80s. We love our city, and it's wrong to think that graffiti is out to destroy something. It's just the opposite. Maybe it would result in better pieces if you don't have

to worry about getting shot at or sent to jail. But [in reality] a big part of the story is the 'performance' and the effort it takes to get your paint together and sneak out of the house, climbing stuff. The effort of what it took to get the art there, just for the recognition. It will happen with or without the city's help. We've already been to jail and paid the fines."

However you define it, or try to control it, graffiti has evolved. The aesthetic bar has been raised, the materials and paint are manufactured better, the Internet provides forums for it. The 20-year-old argument about whether it's art or not is moot. It is a discipline representative of a unique urban American experience that's gone global — an art form completely created and cultivated by youth. This city's passion for graffiti is a story shared by many crews of artists and fans, one of overcoming fear, personal limitations and an obsessive-compulsive need to make marks. What makes The Seventh Letter unique is its members' collective commitment to each other's legitimate (read: legal) success, a consistent pride in their craft, and foresight for future generations of artists. The work that they generate is as individual as the writer who creates it and the public space it illuminates. ■

The following pages provide a look at some of The Seventh Letter stars and their art. Plus, a review of the definitive book on L.A. graffiti, and OG writer Craig Stecyk's anatomy of an outlaw artist, who may or may not resemble him.



Visit blogs.laweekly.com/lurker for "Letters First" artwork, more photos and exclusive Seventh Day Project films. Also featuring the 1989 article "Tagging," by Ruben Martinez.



The world's largest graffiti piece looks like this. SABER, 1997

SABER

HEAVY METAL MAGAZINE MEETS H.R. GIGER



Well spoken and outgoing, Saber is less elusive and quicker with stories than most of his counterparts. He's currently working on projects with Scion and Boost Mobile, and his first book, *Mad Society*, is coming out in August. Saber's first solo gallery show opens July 14 at White Walls, San Francisco. His greatest accomplishment, though, is his piece on the banks of the L.A. River, which holds the record as the world's largest graffiti piece. It took 97 gallons of paint, a blown-out knee and more than 30 days to complete. For Saber, the Seventh Letter is a respite from coming up in other crews — he was almost killed during an old-school gang initiation and bears the scars to this day. His current gallery work includes intricate large-scale metal sculptures and brush-painted triptychs.

—S.L.



L.A. Weekly commits mail fraud. SABER answers the call.



Tools of the trade

PHOTO BY SHELLEY LEOPOLD



SABER at Gompers Middle School



Geometry, PUSH style, at Gompers Middle School



Can you keep a secret? PUSH ceramics



PUSH at Virgil and Fountain

PHOTOS BY SHILLEY LEOPOLD

PUSH

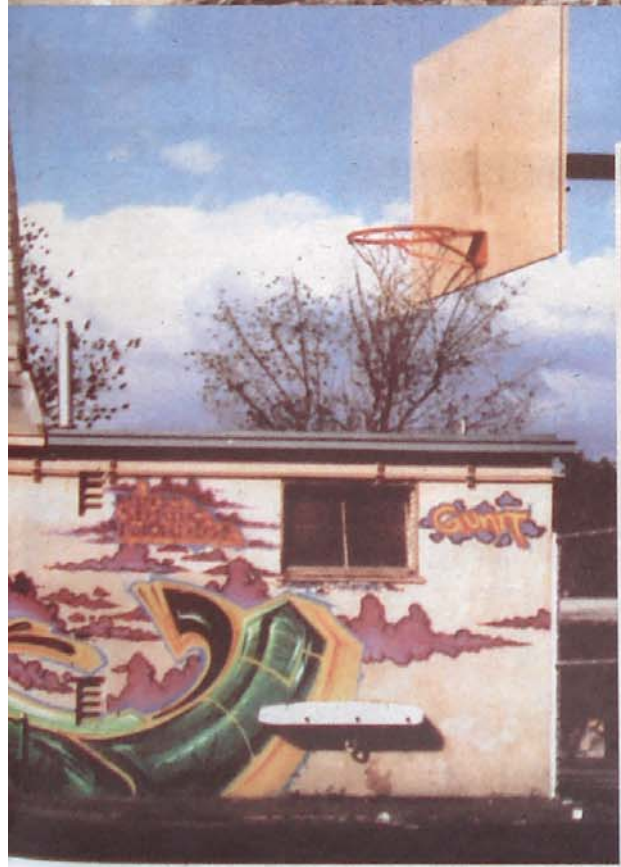
BAUHAUS MOVEMENT
ON MTV, CIRCA 1981

Trying to define Push's work is unfair, and nearly impossible. It's easier to say it's like nothing else: informed by postmodern abstract splatter paintings, yet rigid, neon and precise. Push has evolved his distinct letter style into a series of beautiful ceramics more suited for the indoors. Someday, when he decides the time is right, these pieces will be introduced to the world via a gallery. For now, they are only for a select, very lucky few to see within the confines of his studio. Introverted and quiet, he's the thinking man's graf artist.

-S.L.



ZES and PUSH square off in K-town.



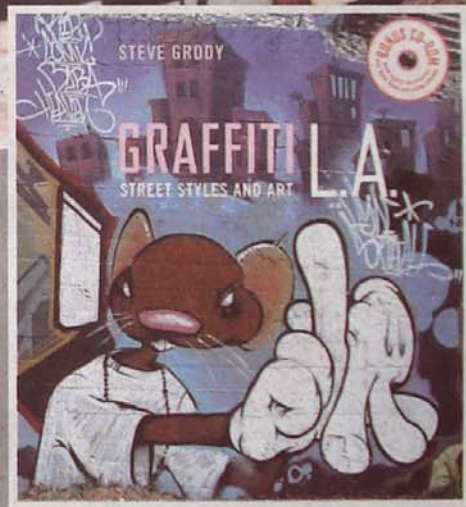
TAPPING THE SOURCE

If this is the only book on graffiti you'll ever own, pick up two. The spine on my copy is already broken from overuse.

Graffiti L.A. is a collection of photos by Steve Grody, soft-spoken man of mystery, martial-arts expert and graffiti historian. Who could predict that such a unique set of sensibilities would produce the most amazing, comprehensive archive of Los Angeles street art to date? As a hobby photographer, Grody, in 1990, undertook the heady task of cataloging art that would not otherwise have been recorded by ingratiating himself with young artists who would otherwise not have been known. Seventeen years later, he compiled the information into a format that is both intensely reverent toward its subject matter and easy and interesting for the rest of us to grasp. Accompanying the vivid photos are oral histories ranging from old-school cholo writers through the hip-hop era to now — including various AWR/MSK members. Grody also provides us with a record of graf-crew roll calls, of artists both active and inactive, and a well-informed "anatomy of a piece."

All the techniques and aesthetics of our local aerosol-painted landscape radiate here with bright, beautiful photographs of work, some of which existed for only a couple of hours. For all the influence and seniority that its artists carry, New York has not yet achieved such a recorded history. I'm sure they are jealous. We are lucky. Any clever art-history professor will include this as a required contemporary text.

-S.L.



GRAFFITI L.A.: Street Styles and Art | By STEVE GRODY | Foreword by JAMES PRIGOFF | Abrams | 304 pages | \$35 hardcover | More than 900 color photos, one full-color map.



Heavens! It's REVOK on the 110.

REVOK

MINISTER OF INFORMATION

Though he's one of the best painters, whose ability to cut and blend is unrivaled, Revok does not want to be considered part of the gallery scene. "I want to do art that you can't avoid — not that you have to seek out," he says. "I'm about painting walls and being out in the city, interacting with people on a daily basis. I've had a lot of jobs, but art always remained my passion. I kept it to myself for 17 years. Finally, I had to come to the realization that this is who I am and I don't want to go to prison for it. Eklips made it

possible for us, through TSL, to make a living doing what we were meant to do."

That being said, it seems Revok has recently found a niche in graphic design, building on his talent for restructuring alphabets. He's also on contract with Boost Mobile, for whom he did his first legitimate billboard, which was unveiled in New York in April. "I have the ultimate dream," he says. "I haven't compromised my beliefs, and I won't do that. I'm not selling out — I'm buying in." —SL



LINCOLN HEIGHTS PIECE
(North Broadway, between I-5 & SoHo St)

REVOK and OZER in Lincoln Heights



REVOK at Gompers Middle School



Digital Virgin Mary by RETNA in Lincoln Heights



Beware the Brimstone at Melrose and Highland

MICHAEL'S - STREET ARTS
Brimstone
XXX

RETNA represents at Virgil and Fountain

RETNA

MODERN-DAY MARC CHAGALL

Largely figure-based and mosaic-like, Retna's approach to his art is a personal one. Raised in a deeply religious family, he's painted the "Digital Virgin Mary" in various neighborhoods to fight the evils of drugs and crime. All too often, they became shrines to someone who's been killed in front of them. He didn't go to school for art, but encourages others to get formally educated. "It just so happens my degrees are from the street schools of AWR/MSK. I've discovered I'm a traditionalist; as I read more books, I gain a greater understanding of my place in the world [of art], regardless if I agree with it or not. I never thought graffiti would be this much a part of my life. I'm about to be 30 and there's still so much work to do. I'm not going to front and say that graffiti is the greatest gift, but it's important to people and it's not stopping anytime soon."

—S.L.



One of two Buddhas by RETNA and EL MAC at Western and Marathon



SABER, RETNA (not pictured) and REYOK, 8021 Melrose, Wall for Boost Mobile





PHOTO COURTESY OF RIME

RIME in action

RIME

EAST COAST '70S THROWBACK WITH GAUGUIN'S COLOR PALETTE

An L.A. resident with a heavy Jersey accent, Rime brings the best hand techniques of New York subway painting westward, transforming them into pieces that pop by incorporating amazing, off-the-cuff character design that Disney can't touch. His work with schools and mentoring kids has helped The Seventh Letter gain ground in negotiating legal spaces to paint, not to mention helping to develop the style of the next generation.

-S.L.



PHOTOS BY SHIRLEY LEONARD

ANATOMY OF AN AESTHETIC CRIMINAL

The lawyers say I must achieve distance via plausible deniability. So, hypothetically speaking only . . . it never occurred. At all. This is a piece of fiction. Please convey my due respect to the court. I emphatically deny all of the charges, as I have no culpability in, knowledge of or complicity in these matters.

Precursors/influences? Chumash pictographs, the Spanish conquistadors' florid carved signatures, Walt Disney's WWI graf, White Fence, Siqueiros America Tropical (for the spray), Bert Grimm at the Pike (for the line), Von Dutch and Ed Roth (for the brushwork), and Victor One de Sotel (for getting up).

The reductive intent? Elementary expression, to be able to make a single essential mark, the stroke of which is instantly identifiable as your own.

Tools of the aesthetic criminal employed in methodological visual overlay and the seizing of surfaces: Bowerman sprinters, climbing rigs, scanners, pole extenders, bug caps, scribe points, night vision, Czech fats, brass atomizing tips, etching solution, Klein 36s.

Unidentified miscreants wrecked thousands of noncontiguous miles of picture plane. LACMA, City Hall, Pacific Ocean Park, the Flying Dutchman, the Sea Serpent, Chuntaro Flat, Harbor Tanks, Battery Leary, Taylor Yard, Eastside Brewery, Lil' Lords Tunnel, Toluca Station, Humaliwu, the Colton Exchange, Chavez Ravine, Venice Pavilion, MoMA-

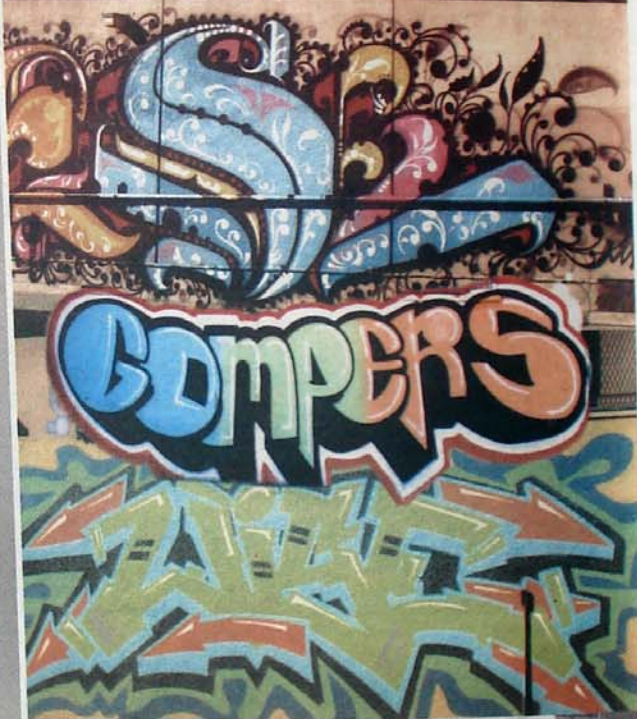
NY and the River Sewer Cats come to mind. Cars, bikes, trains, boards and all manner of equipment were bombed to extinction in the waging of this aesthetic war.

Then someone went and appropriated/copyrighted/trademarked some of these images. In choosing to steal that which had already been freely surrendered, they profiteered the collective consciousness.

An unsubstantiated allegation in *Rolling Stone* that I had a "propensity for vandalism and the destruction of private and public property" was my demise. The culprit? Some other legally disclaimed, morally unrepentant guy who looked a bit like me. Veracity is malleable for the command-and-control structure. You're guilty because they say you are. In a rigged game, the only way to win is to play to lose. Now it's all cops, lawyers, judges and triple strikes.

According to *People* magazine, Zephyr took up the name and advanced the game in homage to some of the shit we done. God bless anyone with strategic initiative. When I see good glyphs, honest arcs and eloquently splayed softball convergence fades, I still marvel at the insidious serendipity of it all. If you paint inside of a museum, you are called an artist. If you do an identical piece on the outside of that same institution, you are labeled criminal. Alleys, avenues and overpasses are the new Sistine Chapels.

-Craig Stecyk



Where it all began: Stecyk catches a tag on a Mickey Dora surfboard, 1966



PHOTO COURTESY OF CRAIG STECYK

SAMUEL GOMPERS MIDDLE SCHOOL (East 112th St. & South San Pedro St.)

Art ed: Sanctioned graf at Samuel Gompers Middle School (from top): DAMIE brightens the schoolyard; REYES puts the "s" in Reyes; WISE up, kids; ZES' alien workshop