

What to See in New York Galleries This Week

Henry Chalfant

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January 12, 2017

Few artists have a connection to art history the way graffiti artists who knew Henry Chalfant did. A short film included in "Henry Chalfant: 1980" at Eric Firestone shows how, after "bombing" a subway car with aerosol paint, graffiti artists would leave a message for Mr. Chalfant with a precise description of the subway line, car and nature of the work they had just made. Mr. Chalfant would then grab his 35-millimeter camera and document it before transit authorities could buff the train.



Henry Chalfant: 1980," at Eric Firestone Gallery

The photographs here are the result of that relationship — particularly centered on the events of April 1980, when an 11-day strike by transportation workers gave artists extraordinary access to the subway system. One wall shows the original prints, which Mr. Chalfant pieced together by hand to recreate a facsimile of the work. The rest of the gallery is filled with rows and rows of digital versions: 150 subway cars of brightly colored mobile murals by Blade, Crash, Daze, Futura, Mare, Skeme and others. (Lady Pink is the only woman in the exhibition.)

These subway friezes became signature emblems of New York. Thanks to Mr. Chalfant and others, like Martha Cooper, the ephemeral work was preserved in photographs. Sure, it was illegal. But graffiti art has become one of the most globally recognizable and copied forms of contemporary culture. And in the realm of creative civil disobedience, it is one of the most extraordinary instances of a bunch of young, working-class artists affecting the world.