

eric firestone gallery

BEDFORD + BOWERY

Henry Chalfant's Golden Age 'Graf Writers' Speak

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Long before Gordon Gekko's bimbo cousin was inaugurated in January (no doubt aided by doing the best impression of Ronald Reagan he could muster), trend pieces had



Graffiti by Mad and PJ, Photo by Henry Chalfant. Image Courtesy the Artist and Eric Firestone Gallery

picked up a scent that hinted which way the wind was blowing. It had notes of burnt hair and overcooked mini vegetables on the nose, followed by white wine spritzer, and finished with a robust whiff of Misty Slim Lights and the lingering, chemically after-stank of cheap knockoff perfumes like "If you like Giorgio you'll love PRIMO!" Then, the elections made it official: the '80s are back, baby.

It might have smelled delicious, but the Decade of Greed wasn't exactly a superbly excellent time for everyone involved. But for all the negi vibes—magnified in New York City by an extreme wealth gap—the '80s produced some truly inspiring art, and the best of it came from a thriving, vibrant underground. During this time, graffiti reached its "golden age," as a recent photography exhibition, Henry Chalfant: 1980, reminded us, and it wasn't long before graf became a worldwide cultural phenomenon.

The show closed at Eric Firestone Gallery in late January, but B+B spoke with Skeme and Mare 139, two writers featured prominently in Chalfant's train series, part of a larger documentary effort that captured graffiti from the late '70s onward, as the movement found its footing and fostered some of its first masters. By 1980, a perfect storm of circumstances made for an urban landscape that teemed with graffiti—back then, it was possible to "bomb" subway cars and writers actually had a chance of outrunning the cops. Chalfant is probably best known for Style Wars, the 1983 documentary he co-produced with Tony Silver, which focused on the writers behind the massive train murals— as epic as the layups were, the scene was made up of a small group of teenagers whose daring bravery (some might say "reckless abandon," but whatever) informed graffiti culture from the ground up.

The gallery show was made up entirely of the train series, on the other hand— an assortment of full-color still photographs, panoramic views of bombed-out subway cars, decked out in sprawling lay-ups. It's the kind of graffiti that is almost unimaginable in New York City today, outside of developer-funded street art pop-ups and the strictly-controlled designated wall spaces near gleaming CVS signs. The images were packed in, lined up in rows running from nose to butt, crisscrossing columns stacked belly to crown— from "whole cars" to "window-downs" and "end-to-ends" which made the gallery look a bit like the train yards where the subway cars went to rest. For the writers, the yards were their studios (if art studios were places you had to break into in order to do your work), the quiet space where they perfected their creations before they were released into the city.



Graffiti by MITCH, photo by Henry Chalfant. Image Courtesy of the artist and Eric Firestone Gallery

For Mare and Skeme, 1980 needed no explanation—the photos were a goldmine of recollections on their own. “The memories from those photos are very vivid,” Skeme told me. “When you see them, you instantly flash back to those days, and you miss it—the thrill of the hunt, the danger, defying authority and so forth.” He was especially happy to find an image of his first successful train piece, which was captured by Chalfant shortly after they met. Back then, Skeme was just 15 years old.

Skeme admitted that he could not remember exactly how he met Chalfant. “It was basically his studio had become the talk of the town, you know? People were starting to whisper,” he said. At first, the place was a “well kept secret” but, as more writers started pouring in, Skeme recalled a friend’s excitement. “Yo there’s his dude downtown and he’s got a studio, slash gallery, slash a photography, like, darkroom or whatever, and he’s got photos of graf.” In his own words, he said, “It was like, wow.”

Mare, who eventually moved on to sculpture (he now goes by Carlos Rodriguez and Carlos Mare) spoke to a similar experience. “I was really, really moved,” he said. “I was around for a lot of that and witnessed, or painted on a lot of those trains, and my friends, family, even enemies, all of that came back to life.”

Aside from a few pieces of ephemera, the show lacked explanations and backstories—it seemed like the message was “I guess you just had to be there.” But eventually it became clear that Chalfant, who Mare explained was “a sculptor first, then a documentarian,” had set artistic ego aside and prioritized steady-handed cultural preservation above all else. It was a way of deferring to the writers, and letting the graffiti speak for itself.

But how and why did such a close-knit and understandably guarded group not only interact with but befriend an outsider like Henry Chalfant? After all many of the writers were “inner city kids,” as Skeme said, and Chalfant was a newcomer white guy who had studied Classical Greek at Stanford before moving to the Lower East Side, then a neglected, drug-infested, and crime-ridden neighborhood area as much as it was a cultural epicenter.

The writers seemed just as sensitive when I asked about Chalfant’s intentions. Mare called it a “collaborative relationship” that formed over time. Chalfant did not just approach the writers and ask them for something, instead he invited them to share their work with him in a two-way exchange. The downtown studio had a salon atmosphere that put everyone on equal footing, and it served as a place where the writers could discuss their art work, even if the larger art world did not see it as such.

Of course, graffiti was already a legitimate art medium, long before Chalfant opened his studio, and many years before galleries and art critics gave it a second glance. As an intense form of self-expression, the transliteration of identity, and an articulation of city life drawn



Graffiti by Revolt, Photo by Henry Chalfant. Photo courtesy the artist and Eric Firestone Gallery

directly from the streets, graffiti is much more complex than a term like “street art” lets on. In the 1970s, the earliest writers were definitely fighting an uphill battle, during a major low-point for New York City which was disintegrating thanks to a dismal economy, and lack of resources for residents. Many of the artists were from marginalized communities and, along with their friends, families, and neighbors, faced extreme policies of institutionalized racism. The result was a state of fixed oppression that gridlocked nearly every aspect of life, from blockbusting landlords to redlining banks, and disenfranchised people of color and immigrants, stripping whole communities of the power to enact change in their own neighborhoods, and opening the door for exploitation, crime, and hopelessness.

Against all odds, the vibrant, daring new art form was born inside a pressure cooker, and became not only an outlet for rebellious explosion, but a source of power through ideas and creativity, things that can’t be taken so easily. Graffiti was a way for these artists to reimagine the urban landscape and remap their environment, a form of active resistance.

At the same time, the kind of graffiti found in Chalfant’s photos, which made possible the street art that we see today, skirts legitimacy, as countercultural art forms are wont to do, and defines legitimacy on its own terms. As another writer from Chalfant’s crew said in a 2007 interview with *New York*: “Graffiti is vandalism. If it becomes too legitimate, it loses part of what it’s about in the first place.”

Skeme seemed to agree: “Without all those elements, the excitement, the danger, the cops, all the stealing, the lying, the cutting school, it’s not writing,” he said. “Because there’s no sacrifice involved. Real art is painful.”

Mare, on the other hand, was not so convinced that the danger and intrigue are all that relevant. “First and foremost as style writers, when we go out to train yards and do a layup, outside the obvious stuff of danger, and risk, you’re there to paint a style,” he said. “You’re there to paint a piece of art. That in itself is paramount.” Aside from a change-up in setting, he didn’t really feel much of a difference between the graf he made in the ’80s, painting which he moved on to a bit later, and sculpture, his preferred medium these days. “In terms of being able to translate that into painting on canvas or sculpture, it’s a natural transition, just with different settings,” he said.

There’s a reason why graffiti feels esoteric—for the most part, throw-ups are cast in a style that ranges from opaque all the way to cryptic. I’ve spent way too much time staring at text-based graffiti murals, tracing the spray-painted curves over and over, and can still walk away having no idea what I had just seen.

The mystery creates a surprising push-pull in graffiti, since it is necessarily a form of public art—writers not only get their name out there, but they tack it on a hard-to-scale spot. For Chal-



Graffiti by PJ and Kel, Photo by Henry Chalfant. Photo courtesy the artist and Eric Firestone Gallery

-fant's writers, being prolific meant completing a lot of trains. As Skeme said it, "I was up." Even though graffiti moved all over the city, snaking in and out of tunnels and criss-crossing bridges, most of the people who caught a glimpse of it had little or no understanding of who had made it, where it came from, and especially what it all meant.

For the most part, there was very little differentiation between Skeme and Mare's basic definition of graffiti and terminology, but they occupy completely different ends when it comes to purpose.

Skeme emphasized the importance of danger, and went so far as to compare graffiti to a sport: "It was most definitely a game," he said. "It was a game of juvenile cat and mouse." Strict rules were necessary because his generation of style writers were treading completely new territory. According to Skeme, there was good reason for sticking to a stiff outline. "It's what separates us from Egyptian hieroglyphs. Because the simple of writing, digging, carving into a wall is not graffiti. I'm sure there was some caveman kid who picked up a rock and hit it with an antler, but we don't call it baseball, right?"

Mare guessed that he first met Henry Chalfant in 1980, at age 14, after his brother Kel1st, and their friend Crash, both prolific graffiti writers, were already friendly with the photographer. "They were some of the first writers he came across," Mare recalled. "In that period, I was the youngest among a bunch of elite writers. Henry was another interesting older, adult figure in the mix with us, and a creative figure as well, because he was a sculptor and a photographer." Like a lot of the regular fixtures around Chalfant's studio, Mare saw him as both a friend and a mentor: "He was very influential on all of us young kids."

All of this, combined with graffiti writing, piqued Mare's interest in contemporary art, something he stuck with. In turn, Chalfant's photos were a way for graffiti writers to contextualize their work within the scene as a whole—and probably pumped up the competition a bit as well. "[Graf] taught me a lot about sculpture, and I think it's what a lot of style writers are alluding to," Mare said. "When you take a look at Henry's catalogue, you start seeing how much modernism and structure and architecture went into a piece, the analysis of style was important to all of us, that opened up so many doors of thought about how style could be physical, or abstract, or technical."

But Chalfant was never condescending, and despite the significant age gap, always treated the writers with the respect due to his collaborators. "He never treated us like children," Skeme said. "He never attempted to chastise us, or really even correct you, it was, 'Hey man this is your life, it's really up to you to do what you see fit.'"

What separates Chalfant from a long lineage of American documentary photographers, art critics, and anthropologists was just how close he was with the writers. He was more interested



Graffiti by NOC, Photo by Henry Chalfant. Photo courtesy the artist and Eric Firestone Gallery

in documenting their work than their faces and personal stories, which showed that he'd rather listen to the writers than try and piece together a story of his own. It's telling that Chalfant aimed to capture work by writers of all abilities, not just the top talent. "If it was painted, it was documented, so long as we gave Henry a head's up," Mare explained. "It was a reciprocal relationship, because he would also share photographs with the artists."

The train series especially required the participation of all parties involved, which in turn made sure that the artists themselves had a shot at writing their own history into the mainstream culture, which like all other societal structures, was governed by oppressive forces.

Overall, Mare said Chalfant's work played a roll in graffiti history as a whole, as well as Mare's personal trajectory. "It's impactful in the way that, it has helped us tell our stories, and also promote our stories and our art."

But Skeme pointed out that not everyone experienced such a positive outcome— Style Wars especially created some tension. "It was a powerful document, it did a lot of good for the culture, it also did a lot of bad too," he said. Not only did the film shine a light on a culture that needed to maintain some level of secrecy in order to survive, but many writers felt that it was an inadequate portrayal of the New York City scene. The "unsung heroes," Skeme called them, "felt slighted because they did not appear in the movie." He hinted that maybe he didn't deserve to be included. "I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, but for a young kid from the inner city to be in a movie, that's a big thing, that's nothing small. "

When Chalfant's photos started showing up in magazines and blowing up the Soho art scene, it was like blasting a canon ball into a placid sea of minimalism, a style which dominated the elite, commodity-driven world of collectors, art stars, and big-budget galleries. "He was making friends," Mare recalled. "The Village Voice had published his photograph, the OK Harris show happened, people really took notice of his prolific photography of trains, because he started opening his doors and sharing his portfolio with writers."

But even with the archival efforts of Chalfant and others like Martha Cooper, and the ubiquity of graffiti across the world, the culture's history still dwells in shadowy lore for the most part. "A lot of these things are the subject of folklore," Skeme explained. But much of it is grounded in truth as well."

Increasingly, Style Wars and Chalfant's train series seem like artifacts from a distant world. Skeme has noticed that kids watching the documentary today see it "as if it's a movie, as if the characters are not real." He can only imagine that graffiti's origins will recede further into the distance. With each passing "year that goes by when the trains are not around" kids have no recollection of the graffiti-soaked subways. "For somebody 50 years from now pop-

pin' open a time capsule, they would say, 'This couldn't be real.'"

It's not surprising, since the city has changed dramatically since the early '80s, and continues to get cleaner and safer (we're told) each year. It also gets increasingly slick, as old tenements are replaced by eye-sore glass and metal towers that look cheap when they are new and a few years later look like half-priced kitchen appliances from the Wal-Mart clearance section. Graffiti is still a prominent sight in the city, though more often than not it is made in a controlled environment, sponsored by developers, or otherwise legitimized by the powers that be. At the same time, the city is increasingly inhospitable to traditional forms of graffiti. The NYPD's Broken Windows policing tactics prioritize cleanliness and order, and target graffiti especially, based on the belief that eliminating lower-level crime and the appearance of chaos will deter more serious crime. (Studies and independent investigations have shown that Broken Windows is not very effective.)

Graffiti will not disappear completely, though. As perception shifted away from street art as evidence of criminal activity and wanton vandalism, it's now very much a part of the mainstream, commercial art world. Once indicative of a crime-riddled neighborhood and urban decay, graffiti is now a real-estate investor's dream, a desirable amenity that implies authenticity.

Mare said that the growth of graffiti has reached "pandemic" proportions. "It's an amazing ripple effect from history, even before me," he said. I wondered if he felt that "street art" was a bastardization of graffiti's earlier forms. "Well no, whatever is termed 'street art' now, we all created that, graffiti created that, we all painted murals on the walls and on trains," he argued. "The content has evolved, and the kind of techniques have evolved, and most importantly there's room in the world for all of it to exist and to thrive."

And if graffiti can be commodified, all the better. "For some people it's better than it's ever been," Mare said. "Graffiti is thriving in the art market and the in the market of ideas, generally."

Skeme, on the other hand, did not exactly approve, but he wasn't surprised by graffiti's transformation, either. "Any cultural phenomenon that is fostered by inner city kids is always exploited," he said. "So this is no different."

While Skeme saw a downward slope, Mare welcomed the "evolution" as a natural process. "These trains are just a cosmetic band-aid on these awful, awful conditions [that we had] in New York City and the fact that we would thrive today, it's pretty amazing." In his view, Chalfant's work has resisted becoming blurry over time. "This archival material tells so much about