

eric firestone gallery

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'Style Wars' Producer Henry Chalfant Offers Panoramic Views of Graffiti's 'Golden Age'
by Nicole Disser

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Since Thursday, the white walls at Eric Firestone Gallery have been wholly devoted to just a small portion of Henry Chalfant's archive of "subway photographs." Henry Chalfant: 1980 focuses on a year in which graffiti was still regarded as subversive and dangerous. At the same time, street art was at its most vibrant and anarchic. The work offers not only a trip back to the "golden age of graffiti," but a thorough "visual anthropology," as Chalfant describes it— a studied view of street culture back when it actually came from the streets.



Image Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery

The 150 photographs are framed, stacked on top of one another, and lined up end-to-end so that the room looks a bit like a train yard— which is exactly where the artists hopped razor-wire fences to make their work, and where Chalfant snapped his photos.

He first started documenting tagged-up subway cars in the 1970s and continued to do so through the 1980s, but for the purposes of this show, the gallery has isolated the year 1980 (give or take a couple of years)— right around the time when Chalfant first became familiar with the people who were actually creating these enormous, daring murals wrapped around train cars. Until 1979, he was simply an outside observer.

The images might feel deceptively simple at first: strikingly consistent panoramas of subway cars, always taken from the same precise, perfectly-leveled angle, each car scrawled in colorful globules of graffiti lettering and images. The spray-painted forms range from complex murals with cartoon characters, complex landscapes, and clear-as-day pop culture references to more ecstatic throw-ups (accomplishments in their own, hasty right). Sometimes the lettering is mysterious and indecipherable, more like arcane symbology than anything linguistic. In other places, the declarations are immediately discernible (one explosive accomplishment by an artist called Seen UA depicts Mickey Mouse from Fantasia zapping a fireball at carefully aligned, diamond-cut block lettering that declares: "MADSEEN").

Each train has an individual number that's clearly displayed at the top right or left corner of the car, which only adds to the sense that Chalfant's effort in cataloguing is museum-worthy. Given that vibe of officialdom, and the implication that the photographer approached his subjects' work with the same kind of care and deference that an archeologist might approach ancient cave paintings, it's easy to forget that, at the time these photographs were taken, graffiti was hardly considered an art form by anyone but the writers who risked life and limb to spray it. In fact, city officials and cops regarded it as one of more difficult forms of blight, and spent the better part of a decade in an attempt to eliminate it.

If you're completely ignorant of all this, in order to bridge that gap fully, you'll just have to check out *Style Wars*, the 1983 documentary on hip-hop, break dancing, and graffiti that Chalfant co-directed with Tony Silver. Even if you're vaguely familiar, however, the display cases set up between the photo-covered walls might function like a memory jolt. Sketch-

books, line drawings, and candid photographs are faded with age and awash in a distinctive, early-'80s color palette (the one that makes blue jeans look a little bluer, brown hair a little fluffier, and a gray cityscape glossy with amber browns and sun-bleached yellows). These artifacts are a reminder of the consideration and artfulness that went into the writers' creations, as much as they are evidence that graffiti culture was a bonafide movement, with its own language, values, and mores.

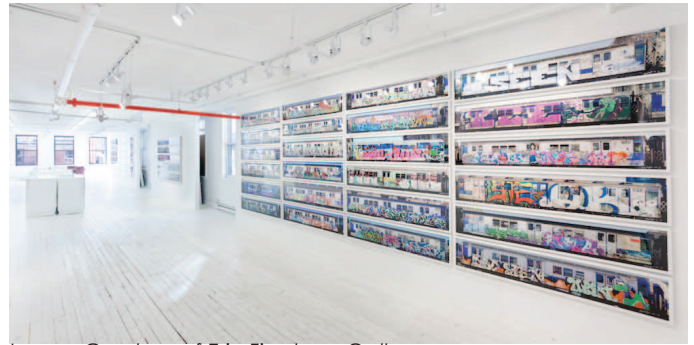


Image Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery

They're also a reminder of how far we've come from that era, which is so often mythologized and romanticized as a period of freedom and creative experimentation, when artists were unhinged by soaring rents and the lightning-fast rat race brought on by technological advancement. But that's not the whole story.

Chalfant's photos were taken long before developers with less-than-savory reputations sponsored street art murals within the very communities they plundered, and decades before club owners hired art-star writers to throw up some authenticity in their exclusive, velvet-rope-lined establishments. All of which can feel pretty gross when you think about graffiti's beginnings as the street-level artwork of the oppressed. The trade-off was that it was an inherently ephemeral art form: all the pieces depicted in Chalfant's photos are most definitely gone. But what makes Chalfant's photos so extraordinary is that the images feel ghostly, otherworldly even, in that they truly do capture a fleeting, incredibly influential moment frozen in time.

It's important to remember the reality of the time period these images are drawn from: Ed Koch, who lorded over the city from 1977 to 1989, when hip-hop and graffiti were taking off from their Bronx beginnings, was hardly the first mayor to declare war on street art, but he certainly waged one of the more vicious campaigns of suppression. In the official view, graffiti murals and tags, like the ones in Chalfant's images, were the work of a underworld criminal population hellbent on destroying public property for their own fleeting enjoyment, or as another coded act of aggression in the endless back-and-forth between night-stalking gang members out for the next kill.

The MTA remembers it thusly: "The practice turned the subway system into an unwelcome underworld where it seemed that all official control had been lost. Subway cars and stations were covered with grime and layers of graffiti, which gave the system an air of rot and decay. During this period, ridership plunged, crime soared and a generation of subway riders was left thinking that things would never get any better."

While Chalfant was snapping photos of New York's graffiti explosion in the late 1970s, "subway cars were so completely 'tagged'," according to the MTA, "that it was nearly impossible to see out of the windows." Starting in 1981, the city enacted heightened security measures with dogs, higher fences, and razor wire. Officials even went to the trouble of painting "hundreds of subway cars" bright white in 1983. In hindsight, they realized it was "a virtual invitation to an army of graffiti vandals who took full advantage of a fresh canvas."

Clearly, pressure from the authorities only emboldened the artists whose work Chalfant doc-

umented— everyone from well-known artists like Daze to forgotten “toys” (aka newbies, hobbyists, and less-than-talented practitioners). It would take several more years and the MTA rolling out new stainless steel cars before the cleanup efforts finally started making a dent. The decline was owned in part to the crack epidemic, in full-swing by 1984, which made going out at night to tag up subway cars and whatever else, even more dangerous.

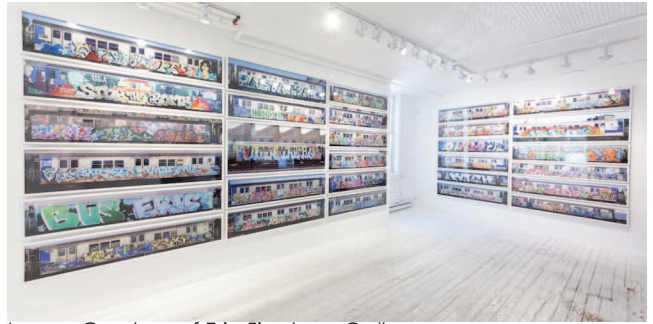


Image Courtesy of Eric Firestone Gallery

Even the established art world had a hard time understanding graffiti. Basquiat might be popularly accepted as the first street artist to make it big, but he wasn't exactly embedded in the same street-level graffiti culture found in Chalfant's images. As one legendary writer, Bil-Rock, recalled: "The only time Jean-Michel Basquiat ever went to a train yard was with me."

It's pretty telling, too, that New York/No Wave, the landmark art show held at PS1 in 1981, which was dedicated to the intersection of a new wave of youth culture, music, and pop culture, included Chalfant's images, which technically, dwelled at a safe, arty remove from the graffiti movement itself.

There's an ArtForum video that was shot soon after the show's opening in which a TV reporter asks Diego Cortez, the curator, whether or not most of the artists are "professionals." Cortez seems a bit taken aback. "Yeah, I mean, I don't really worry about the word 'professional,'" he nearly guffaws. "What's a professional?" Instead, the show was about "building a sociology of elements that make up a scene, or depict a scene."

Cortez might not have been addressing graffiti culture specifically, but inadvertently, he couldn't have offered a better description of its importance to hip-hop and interplay with street culture as a whole.

Setting aside the official rejection, the misunderstanding, even the corporate coopting we're seeing now, it's important to remember the roots of street art: the graffiti scrawled across train cars was a bottom-up reaction, led by the people who suffered the most from a static city sapped of resources, thanks in part to Koch's dismantling of public services in order to pull the city out of its downward spiral toward bankruptcy.

Sure, vandalism was all a part of the excitement (a stark contrast to where we are now, when street art is often made at almost no risk to the artist), but it's hardly accurate to say that graffiti writers were out for total destruction. Instead, they adorned their banal, grey cityscape with colorful, artistic self-expression, an antidote to boredom, and a means of powerfully fighting back against injustice and inequality. Chalfant's show couldn't come at a better time: while many of us are trying to escape the current bleakness in any way we can, a detour back to tough times might offer insight into how we can tackle the future— dogs and razor wire be damned.