

Allison Tate

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Photography 1

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Give Up: A Multilayered Obsession with an Anonymous Image



I went out onto my trek to find something that I could write about, an image that would capture my interest enough to write four to six pages on, and what did I find? Well I asked the

Fotofest headquarters guy of a good gallery to go to, and he suggested we visit the M2 gallery. There I found Matt Adam's artwork. The moment I saw it I was fascinated with the imagery, and specifically moved by the image above titled "Give Up." The series of prints were an alluring mix of political, abstract, and beautiful. "This I can talk about," I thought. It wasn't until after I got into a conversation with the gallery owner, Max Harrison, that I realized it might be a bit difficult. "They are all pictures of different taggers' artwork," he said. Wait... so these aren't original to the artist? I felt somewhat disappointed, but still intrigued.

Harrison then turned our attention to a book filled with images from another photographer, Daniel-Kayne. This particular subject of tagging and the tagger's work appears to be a true fascination for Daniel-Kayne, as I have found it to be for myself. There were easily hundreds of prints within the binder found for sale at the M2 gallery. Tags found not only here within the city of Houston, but as far as New York and even Japan. As I flipped through the portfolio of Kayne's work listening to the curator's description of the tagger subculture my fascination did not waiver, but intensified. It was beautiful and thought provoking. It was definitely art, but was it the photographer's art? He took the images in sections and pieces, he manipulated the images as he saw fit, but it wasn't his original message, it was someone else's message that he was capturing.

"Tagger" is the title assigned to those who partake in the growing off-shoot of traditional graffiti to include illegally welded artwork on the sides of buildings¹, spray painting political and ideological images using stencils and silk screen², and even knitting sweaters on the trees³. A new wave of vandalism with a message other than a simplistic "I was here." Harrison of M2

explained to us that these taggers use their art to express themselves and communicate with their fellow taggers, sometimes even getting into “Tagging Wars” with each other. Fighting not with weapons or words, but with thought provoking images that will be pressure washed away only days later. “I wish I could get in touch with people like Give Up,” the curator told me. Give Up, he explained, was the tagger’s pseudonym, anonymously stenciling his artwork around downtown. Through email correspondence I had with Daniel-Kayne, he explained the need for keeping taggers’ names secret, “if one did know the identity of a street artist, tagger, or street painter, one would be breaking a code by divulging their birth name... unless that person requested such a release.”

I had never seen the tagger’s work, in fact I was not even familiar with this type of artistic expression before visiting the M2 gallery. So are photographic artists like Matt Adams doing taggers like Give Up a favor by exposing his work to a larger audience, or is this free and public work being stolen by another artist to be in turn sold for a \$1400 set of prints? A lot of these taggers believe that public space should be just that. “Often a stencil artist’s only protest comes in the simple act of painting the sidewalk, thus reclaiming public space,” commented Valdez in her article “Public Images” in the Philadelphia Weekly⁴. Adams commented to me over the phone that he had questioned lawyers before submitting the picture to the M2 gallery on whether there could be any legal ramifications of his attempted sale, and he said they assured him that the image was on public property and unclaimed, and therefore free for public use. There are taggers, however, who simply have no interest in putting a price on their work, and perhaps this could be a central philosophy behind the code of a tagger. In a recent New York

Times article a notorious, yet reclusive, tagger who goes by the pseudonym of Rev was quoted as saying, “To me...once money changes hands for art, it becomes a fraudulent activity.”⁵

This reminded me of another artist my sister-in-law Row was trying to get me into several months ago about. She exposed me to Andy Warhol’s graffiti-artist friend Basquiat, who also shunned the ideal of marketing his artwork, making art specifically for the sake of making it. It is created and you know so soon after it will be washed away or painted over. Your message is there and gone. Quite the opposite from what we attempt to do with imagery in photograph. The clash of ideals almost makes the piece ironic in that sense.

In reading several news articles about the topic of taggers, which also included interviews I wonder, is this their version of “fuck you” to the ever-growing commercialization of art? Like Basquiat, making money off their art is something almost shunned. Rev refuses to sell his artwork, except once in an auction to pay his lawyer after being arrested for underground graffiti, and instead makes his living as an ironworker. Their motivation is specifically in the art itself, in their expression of personal and political viewpoints. They embrace the ideal of impermanence and reject the concept of an attempted gain monetarily for simply expressing their view.

I later contacted Matt Adams via his e-mail address found at his website, AdamsImagery.com, and requested his firsthand knowledge of the piece. Adams created this image using his Nikon D70 and utilized a technique combining slow shutter speed while zooming the lens with the shutter open to achieve the effect created in this image. I was amused when he told me this, as I had commented to my friends when viewing the image that the

seeming refraction of the image appeared to be done using the lense, or a filter of some sort. I gleaned a small bit of joy from having guessed so close to the truth. He has often been asked if he used PaintShop to derive the effect, but only used the image-modifying program for a black and white version of the print. “I have used the technique on other subjects but am particularly pleased with the angelic effect and this particular subject,” he said.

I questioned him on where his interest in the image lay and why he chose this random unsigned poster on a public utility box. He told me he saw the image out of the corner of his eye while driving and that he “immediately was struck by the guy posed like an angel/jesus but wearing black with a razor blade on his chest.” Regarding the technique he used to take the image and why, he said, “My experience with zooming provided me with a method to enhance my immediate reaction to the poster.” He went on to describe his more personal feelings about the image, stating that he envisions it as dichotomous in nature:

“I consider it a mirror for you to look at and interpret. If you interpret it as a message of hope, as if it is saying, "Give up your problems, there is better." I believe you are an optimistic person. However, if you look at it and see a message of despair, it could very well be the case that you're a pessimist by nature – someone who's cup is "half empty." I have gotten many peoples' interpretation of the piece and offer to them that it acts as a mirror by which they can judge themselves.”

Once he described to me his perspective of the image in that way yet another path of consideration for this image opened up to me, a profound “aha!” I had become so entwined in my fascination with the concept of tagging I had nearly forgotten the individual message so

cleverly captured by the tagger in the first place. I then recalled the strong reactions both my friend Zippy and I had when we first began to focus our attention on the piece. My friend Zippy had an instantly strong reaction to the image as well. She said it really disturbed her. Not that she was offended by the image, but because she had such strong and sudden emotion drawn out of her due to it. She was unable to specifically explain why, but said only that she couldn't tell if the birds were bats or demons. For me it instantly reminded me of our battle with addiction. Although after reading that some would assume that I associated the razor with cocaine, but that was not the reason the image provoked that memory for me. The total image brought back the desperation and the hopelessness I felt at the time, just prior to and shortly after my recovery. Even though that may sound like I might be the "glass half empty" kind of girl, there is that duality in it too. Give up as in "give in to it, there is no real escape, ever." Then there is also give up as in give in to the submission and humility that goes into finally admitting you have a problem, and submitting to outside help to deal with it, because you can't do it alone. Both emotions are present.

While on the phone with him we circled back around to the topic of the fact that this was someone else's work, and he had put his own price tag on it. He expressed that the image meant something to him, that he had manipulated the imagery and expanded on the theme begun by the original creator of the image enough that it was more a compliment to the original artist than anything else, a form of flattery. He also informed me the only reason a price was set on the piece at all was because the gallery required one. He was involved in Fotofest for the simple joy of being involved with it, and his desire to express his views on violence, which was one of the main themes of this year's exhibit. He also pointed out the fact that the piece has not sold, and

he is currently in works with Amy's Icecream in Houston on the corner of Shepherd and 59 to have the series displayed there. So the next time you go out for a smoothie you may have this haunting image of life and death starring back at you as your server asks if you would like sprinkles or whipped cream.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/18/arts/design/18revs.html?ex=1271476800&en=ae71d7f94523678d&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>

He has made dozens of works using construction-grade steel and other metal parts and has sought the permission of building owners to weld and bolt them to the outsides of buildings in the meatpacking district, the East Village, the Gowanus Canal area and Dumbo, where the gentrifying but still half-deserted streets have become a veritable Revs gallery.

² <http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/view.php?id=8112>

³ <http://www.houstonpress.com/issues/2005-12-15/news/news.html>

These unfinished swatches of comfort and color used to be scattered around her house -- fuzzy testaments to crafter's ADHD -- but two months ago she figured out a slightly illegal, completely irreverent way to get rid of them: graffiti. Knit graffiti.

⁴ <http://www.philadelphiaweekly.com/view.php?id=8112>

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/18/arts/design/18revs.html?ex=1271476800&en=ae71d7f94523678d&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland&emc=rss>