

# Concrete CANVAS

Risking fines and jail time, street artists install pieces that (temporarily) enhance bleak cityscapes.

By **Gretchen Kalwinski**

If you traverse Chicago's North and Northwest Sides with an eagle eye, you'll soon start seeing art where it doesn't belong. On mailboxes, parking signs, abandoned buildings and windows, art ranging from a painting in the shape of a kiwi to a sticker proclaiming **YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL** to a paste-up of a swooping bird brightens the urban landscape.

The artists installing this "guerilla" art (mostly in the warmer months and the dark of night) call themselves street artists and often hide their identities from cops by using nicknames. Most have jobs as designers, art directors or production artists and don't consider their art vandalism because it's usually not on private property; they favor surfaces they believe belong to all of us—signs, newspaper boxes, lampposts and construction sites. But don't confuse their work with gang graffiti or tagging: It's illegal, but there's an altruistic mission to their madness (for more on street art versus gang tags, see "The writing on the wall," page 17).

Beyond coming from different demographics (most gang taggers

are teenagers; the artists we talked to are between 28 and 38), street artists aren't claiming territory—they're just trying to beautify the city. One anonymous source bristles at the idea of being mistaken for a gangbanger.

"I've never met a street artist in a gang," he says. "Just because you put up art in the streets doesn't mean you're a gang member."

These artists aren't busting out gang tags, but that doesn't protect them from the law; they risk arrest if the police catch them in the act, and Graffiti Blasters or thieves often remove their work. So why risk it?

For some, it's activism. "It's a social/political act first and foremost," says Chris Silva ([flickr.com/people/chrissilva](http://flickr.com/people/chrissilva)), who was part of "Tragic Beauty," a 2005 AV-aerie street-art show (in which art made from scraps of furniture and signs was installed, then reassembled around town postshow). "I have used my street work to promote the concept of love. Even if that message is cryptic in a particular piece, there is love in sharing my work with the public."

Matt Smith isn't feeling the love. As spokesman for the Department of Streets and Sanitation (which runs Graffiti Blasters), he's proud to say the city's removed 66,568 graffiti tags from January 1 through the end of May 2008. He includes street art in this category. "Vandalism is vandalism. . . . If you leave your permanent mark of



**MEMORIAL DAY** Artwork at a West Loop intersection honors SOLVE, a beloved street artist who was recently killed.

expression on the public way, you are committing a crime," he says. "If you create art someone can look at, [a viewer] might want to put it in their house. But if you put it *on* their house, we will remove it."

## "I have used my street art to promote the concept of love."

Some artists say it's not so cut-and-dried. "A lot of [my art] is put up with screws, tied to fences or leaned against walls," says "Sighn," who specializes in paintings and text-based wood-cut installations in Wicker Park/Bucktown ([sighn.net](http://sighn.net); [flickr.com/photos/sighn/](http://flickr.com/photos/sighn/)). "If removed, it leaves almost no damage."

Others don't think getting busted would be a big deal. "I read through the Chicago municipal code about vandalism," says "the Grocer," a producecentric artist who creates stickers and acrylic

paintings that he affixes to surfaces with matte medium ([flickr.com/photos/thegrocer/](http://flickr.com/photos/thegrocer/)). "[According to the code,] my work is technically 'postering,' not 'graffiti,' because I'm not painting something on a wall. There's a fine, but [it's] nothing like what graffiti [incurs]—only, like, max \$200 an incident."

The beef these and other covert creators have with laws against their art is that advertisers can plaster the city with messages, but artists can't employ that medium. "I do [street art] because I don't want to be another person who allows our world to be filled with what advertisers dictate," explains a female street artist who goes by "Pooper" (find examples of her work at [flickr.com/photos/\\_pooper/sets/345465](http://flickr.com/photos/_pooper/sets/345465)).

"We've done a lot of wheat-pasting [gluing art on paper onto another surface] on top of other 'fly posters' [posters installed illegally by advertisers]," an anonymous artist says. "Going over those doesn't seem like a bad thing."



**ESKIMO DIE** Young Alaskans get a tough break in Pooper's piece on the Heaven Gallery wall titled *Yetis Eating Eskimo Babies*.

# Going, going, gone

Take our street-art tour before these fleeting works disappear.

## The Loop

At State and Adams Streets, the building on the southwest corner features three blue-brown mushroom stickers (about 1.5 feet by 3 feet) positioned 25 feet from the ground. Why mushrooms? “Everyone identifies with fruits and vegetables; it’s universal,” says the Grocer.

Several blocks north on State between Washington and Randolph Streets, you’ll find legit street art: In 2006, the Department of Cultural Affairs commissioned anonymous collective You Are Beautiful ([you-are-beautiful.com](http://you-are-beautiful.com)) for a piece on scaffolding repeating the phrase in several languages. (Previously, YAB was notorious for its mostly illegal installations on the CTA and water towers.) “The reason [for] the project,” a founder explains, “is the grind of daily life can be tough. The barrage of advertising makes you feel like you’re not good enough. We wanted to give people a breather

from that and say: ‘You are perfect as you are. You are beautiful.’”

## West Town

Check out the big, gray industrial building at the intersection of Halsted Street and Milwaukee and Grand Avenues. An installation stands honoring “SOLVE,” a 24-year-old street artist killed in June; the street-art community collaborated afterward on this work that includes photos of SOLVE, paintings and woodcuts of animals—one proclaims R.I.P. SOLVE (photos at [flickr.com/photos/bonussaves/2581450378](http://flickr.com/photos/bonussaves/2581450378)).

“[SOLVE’s death] hit everyone like a train wreck,” says “Bonus Saves” ([flickr.com/photos/bonussaves](http://flickr.com/photos/bonussaves)), who installs paintings of plants and animals, including a snow leopard in the West Loop.

## Wicker Park

The alley behind Wooden Gallery sculpture studio (1007–1015 N Wolcott Ave) features frequently updated artwork. The buildings belong to sculptor Jerzy Kenar, who began commissioning alley art in 2003. And by *commissioning*,



**CHERRY BOMB**  
The Grocer decorated a planter at the Pontiac Cafe in Wicker Park.

we mean he gave neighborhood teens \$100, a can of paint and some Coca-Cola and had them go to town on his garage doors. Since then, the alley has been filled with cartoons or graffiti-esque letters. Teenage boys work on the garage with their girlfriends in tow, “smoking and passing cans of paint,” Kenar says.

Pooper’s work also shows up in this ‘hood; one piece, *Yetis Eating Eskimo Babies* (which depicts exactly that), is viewable from the Blue Line (just south of the Damen stop) on Heaven Gallery’s outside wall. “It’s a story line where yetis and Eskimos are at war,” she says. “I’ve had people say, especially in wintertime, [my artwork] makes living in Chicago bearable.”

## Near South Side

Custom-painted stickers and designs by “Codo,” often utilizing his trademark Aztec bird (see examples of his street-art photography at [flickr.com/photos/senor\\_codo](http://flickr.com/photos/senor_codo)), blanket Pilsen and downtown. “I’ll also mount collages and paintings [on wood panels] to unused and abused buildings in the neighborhood,” he says.

Sighn has projects on the South Side and in Wicker Park. One work near 36th Street and Kedzie Avenue is a 15’ x 40’ mouse painted on a set of abandoned train tracks (pictured at [multipolarprojects.blogspot.com/2008/06/its-been-good-amount-of-time-since.html](http://multipolarprojects.blogspot.com/2008/06/its-been-good-amount-of-time-since.html))—a collaboration with Italian artist “Ericailcane” ([ericailcane.org](http://ericailcane.org)).

## Northwest Side

Many artists plaster stickers on signs, newspaper boxes and mailboxes in Humboldt Park. At Western Avenue just south of Foster Avenue, You Are Beautiful installed its catchphrase (SOLVE painted the *L in beautiful*) on a grocery-store wall.—GK

# The writing on the wall

A graffiti expert breaks down the differences between gang tags and street art.

Is that scrawled crown on your neighbor’s garage a gang-related tag (hint: It is) or just a street artist leaving his mark? “Codo,” a well-known street artist and graffiti photographer who’s spent the past 14 years living in and shooting inner-city Chicago neighborhoods, helped us crack the code.



## Street art, near Metra tracks in Brighton Park

Instead of quickly scrawled letters and symbols, this has “colorful letters with more focus on words and typography; [this] points toward graffiti writers,” Codo says.

The words and phrases seem random because “most tags are writers’ [street] names or the names of their crews. Sometimes there are call-outs to their friends or girlfriends.... Graffiti writers will involve hand styles [how they write, connect and flow the letters together] that are not necessarily meant for the [general public] to understand or read.”

That the lettering is elaborate and involved climbing on train tracks suggests the work of graffiti writers, because “their work often involves locations with a certain amount of risk,” and “graffiti writing is also about the ability to write letters in new ways.”



## Gang graffiti, garage in Pilsen

“Generally speaking,” Codo says, “if the graffiti is semilegible in terms of letters, mainly old English, most likely it’s gang graffiti.” Plus, known gang symbols such as the star and pitchfork are a “big giveaway” that this was done by a gang member claiming territory. “[Gang members] don’t care about colors used, just the message,” Codo says. “And pitchforks aren’t exactly happy-go-lucky symbols.”

“The pitchfork is upright as a sign of strength and respect to the gang who put up the graffiti [Satan’s Disciples]. The star split in half and the upside-down flag with an *R* are disrespects aimed at the other gang [La Raza].”

This graffiti “is all about the group’s message. There is no mention of any individual,” Codo explains. “You will hardly ever see [individual] street names used for gang members.”

The lettering is slapdash, and there is no artistry or cleverness to the location where the graffiti is done, unlike street artists who tend to make a game of trying for unique spots to draw. “Gang graffiti is found in easy-to-get-to places, like the sides of buildings,” Codo says.—GK