

On the Street and In the Galleries

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ABSTRACT

Graffiti art is all too often misinterpreted as an eyesore rather than an emotionally evoking art form. My research explores the positive and aesthetic nature of graffiti as a genre of artistic expression that is bold, spontaneous, and communicative. During my research I compiled a digital-photographic journal of my research including an analysis of the elements of art incorporated within graffiti that is found on the street and in the galleries of Chicago, St. Louis, and Minneapolis. The significance of my research is to unveil the positive motivation and inspiration for creating this type of art. In addition to my research, I have applied my knowledge of graffiti to create a body of work influenced by this style and methodology.

INTRODUCTION

Graffiti is known as inscriptions or drawings on walls and ancient ruins and has existed since ancient times in the form of cave drawings, hieroglyphs on Egyptian monuments, and in the catacombs of Pompeii. In 1970, graffiti emerged on the streets of New York City with the arrival of “Taki 183” written primitively on subway cars. Since then, graffiti has quickly developed in style and technique and exists in a variety of forms including tags, throw-ups, stencils, and elaborate masterpieces. Today graffiti art has evolved to become a high stylized art form that aims at self-expression and creativity.

My research examines the artistic expression of graffiti as an aesthetic art form in both legal and illegal environments in Chicago, St. Louis, and the Twin Cities. Each location was selected based on the abundance of graffiti found on the streets and in the galleries. Chicago and St. Louis were selected as main sources of graffiti to provide contrasting examples of programs that are implemented within a city. Chicago developed a program called “Graffiti Busters” which has become the nation’s top graffiti taskforce, while St. Louis has created a community program to encourage local artists and children to create graffiti art legally on a two mile stretch of flood wall. These two cities provided great examples in defining the difference between legal and illegal forms of graffiti art and the stylistic differences that are apparent between them.

Graffiti is frequently overlooked and under appreciated as an art form. My research examines graffiti using the elements of art: line, shape, value, color, and texture to support my reasoning for graffiti being art. The focus of my research is centered on examples of graffiti art that were created with artistic intent and strongly display the elements of art.

METHOD

Observation and photographic documentation was the method of research that I implemented to document examples of graffiti art that I discovered. My research methodology consisted of exploring Chicago, St. Louis, and the Twin Cities and photographing both legal and illegal examples of graffiti in urban environments. With the aid of books, maps, and my personal research I had done prior to traveling, I was able to discover many examples of graffiti art that were exciting and unexpected. In total I photographed over 100 works of graffiti art that range in both style and methodology. During my research I discussed graffiti art with local art gallery workers. Through this I was able to acquire additional information about graffiti art and was also able to gain additional sites where graffiti is located.

RESULTS

The first outcome of my research included compiling my findings in a photographic-journal. This documentation included an analysis of the visual elements of graffiti. I chose to analyze graffiti using the visual elements of art because in order to be consistent with standard practices of formal analysis in the disciplines of art and design. I organized my photographs geographically and according to the order in which I discovered it during

my research. The photographic-journal illustrates the wide variety of material and methods used by graffiti artists, in addition to notes about the artwork. I included notes from conversations I had with local art gallery workers and people that I talked to about graffiti throughout my research.

The second outcome of my research incorporated graffiti inspired techniques with my own style of art that created a series of paintings that cross graffiti art into the gallery setting. During the creation process, I utilized my photographic-journal and analysis of the elements of art to carefully choose my materials and methodology for creating my own graffiti inspired artwork. Surface preparation and layering were vital in the creation of my artwork, in addition to texture, color, and value (see Figure 1, Figure 2, and Figure 3).



Figure 1. Media: acrylic, pumice, oils, and spray paint



Figure 2. Media: oils, spray paint, and permanent markers



Figure 3. Media: pastel chalk

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of my research prove that graffiti in both legal and illegal environments is indeed art; the location of the art does not make it any less artistic. Every individual has their own unique definition of what qualifies something as a work of art. However, by using the elements of art as my standard to analyze graffiti, I was able to make my case more widely understood and appreciated since the elements of art are so commonly used in defining

and identifying what is classified as art. My photographic-journal and analysis of graffiti provides evidence that graffiti contains a variety of visual elements, including line, shape, value, color, and texture. Not all graffiti may be classified as aesthetically pleasing, but the bold, unexpected, and outspoken artistic statements of graffiti are aesthetic in nature. My research shows that art is everywhere, from a simple line scribbled on a sidewalk, to an elaborate mural stretching two miles, and everything is art. Graffiti is easily recognizable as art due to the inclusion of the elements of art and will hopefully begin to be recognized more widely within the art world as a modern art form.

FURTHER PLANS

The next step in my research is something that I am already working towards. I have been fortunate enough to present my research to middle school students. In addition to this I have worked with high school students to create their own graffiti art within the classroom using traditional art materials (See Figure 4). I have included a photograph of one of many examples of graffiti art made by high school students. I am also currently in the process of writing a lesson to teach to 4th and 5th grade elementary students about graffiti art and give them an opportunity to create their own type of graffiti art this semester during my student-teaching experience. As for my personal artwork, I will always carry the knowledge that I gained from this experience, and sub-consciously it has already positively affected the way that I look at and create art. My goal for the future is to create a program that would educate people about the positive aesthetics of graffiti art and feature graffiti made by community members using various graffiti methods.



Figure 4. Created by Alex Oelfke using colored pencil

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There were many people who helped guide me through my research process, and without them I would not have gotten to where I am today. Most importantly I would like to thank Jennifer Williams-Terpstra for all of her time, enthusiasm, and encouragement throughout this entire process. If it wasn't for her I would not have been brave enough to take on such an exciting adventure. I would also like to thank Eric deNeui for inspiring this research grant and his patience and support throughout the process.

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