

MAYS

THE  
MAY LANE  
STREET ART  
PROJECT

This exhibition is supported by Visions of Australia, an Australian Government program supporting touring exhibitions by providing funding assistance for the development and touring of Australian cultural material across Australia.



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## **MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project**

Featuring works by: Adam Hill, B.U.G.A.U.P., Chor Boogie, Cultural Urge, Deb, Die Laughing Collective, Dlux!, Dmote, Jumbo, Kamion, Kenji Nakayama, Luna, Mare, Mini Graff, Nails, Numskull, Otis, Peque, Peru, Peter Burgess, Phibs, Scram, Spice, Taring Padi Collective, Zap and Zombe.

Curated by Tugi Balog.

Project coordination by Sarah Gurich.

Photography by Sharon Hickey.

A Bathurst Regional Art Gallery touring exhibition in partnership with May Lane Arts Association Inc.



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Published by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery 2010

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[www.bathurstart.com.au](http://www.bathurstart.com.au)

All dimensions are in centimetres,  
height before width.

Catalogue and exhibition titling design  
by Niels Oeltjen at [www.elbone.com.au](http://www.elbone.com.au)

## **Touring nationally in 2010, 2011 and 2012**

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery NSW  
*15 October – 28 November 2010*

Artspace Mackay QLD  
*11 March – 1 May 2011*

Samstag Museum of Art SA  
*13 May – 1 July 2011*

Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery NSW  
*29 July – 11 September 2011*

Belconnen Arts Centre ACT  
*24 Sept – 22 October 2011*

Cockatoo Island NSW  
*5 – 27 November 2011*

Gosford Regional Gallery NSW  
*4 February – 1 April 2012*

Latrobe Regional Gallery VIC  
*28 April – 24 June 2012*

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Title                      | May's: the May Lane Street Art Project.   |
| Edition                    | 1st ed.   |
| ISBN                       | 9780947301828 (pbk.)  |
| Notes                      | Exhibition curator Tugomir Balog ; contributors, James Dodd, Blair French, Kurt Iveson ; photography, Sharon Hickey.                                |
| Subjects                   | Street art--New South Wales--Sydney--Exhibitions. Graffiti--New South Wales--Sydney--Exhibitions. Public art--New South Wales--Sydney--Exhibitions. |
| Other Authors/Contributors | Balog, Tugomir.<br>Dodd, James.<br>French, Blair, 1967-<br>Iveson, Kurt.<br>Hickey, Sharon.<br>Bathurst Regional Art Gallery.                       |
| Dewey Number               | 709.94  |

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# Foreword

## Minister's Foreword

As Federal Arts Minister I am often privileged to see firsthand the extraordinary work of Australia's emerging artists.

In 2005 Tugi Balog, an entrepreneur with a strong interest in street art and concern for a safe space for graffiti artists to work in, put his vision into action. Tugi turned the exterior walls of his business premises into an outdoor gallery for street artists.

Over the last five years celebrated Australian and international street artists have worked in this space and the results are now brought together in this touring exhibition, *MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project*, a partnership project between the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery and the May Lane Arts Association Inc.

What makes this exhibition such an important part of Australia's modern culture is that the *MAY'S* project sets out to educate about this vibrant artform.

It shows us the difference between graffiti and legal street art, encourages us to question our own perceptions about high art and street art, and demonstrates so clearly that this is a genuine vehicle for artistic expression.

The works in this exhibition span a broad range of street art styles—New York graffiti, spray paint, paste ups, and stencils.

*MAY'S* draws from works by artists from Canberra, Melbourne, Hobart, Adelaide, and Sydney as well as international artists from Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, the UK, and the USA and includes many of the well known names of this artistic field: Adam Hill, B.U.G.A.U.P., Chor Boogie, Cultural Urge, Deb, Die Laughing Collective, Dlux!, Dmote, Jumbo, Kamion, Kenji Nakayama, Luna, Mare, Mini Graff, Nails, Numskull, Otis, Peque, Peru, Peter Burgess, Phibs, Scram, Spice, Taring Padi Collective, Zap and Zombe.

I am extremely pleased that this cutting edge exhibition is touring beyond its original home. Over the next two years the exhibition will tour to seven venues in New South Wales, Queensland, the Australian Capital Territory, South Australia and Victoria, becoming the first of its kind to tour nationally.

The tour is supported by assistance from the Australian Government's Visions of Australia program.

The Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, who initiated the exhibition, has received over \$103,000 to develop and tour the exhibition which will give audiences across Australia the opportunity to engage with contemporary Australian and international street art in a gallery context.

The Visions of Australia program ensures that high quality exhibitions are made accessible to more Australians, particularly in regional and remote areas—an important contribution to Australian cultural life.

I congratulate everyone involved in this exciting and ground-breaking project and encourage you, as a visitor to the exhibition, to immerse yourself in the talents and artistic vision of the artists on display.

**The Hon. Peter Garrett MP**  
 Minister for Environment Protection,  
 Heritage and the Arts  
 July 2010

# Introduction

Gordon Darling Foundation



An important role of the Gordon Darling Foundation has been to support scholarly publications associated with major art exhibitions.

*MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project* is an excellent example of such an exhibition and publication. This exciting and innovative touring exhibition about the cultural phenomena known as street/graffiti art is the first of its kind in Australia.

The 25 large-scale works included in this exhibition by Australian and international street artists were executed over the last five years in a Sydney laneway in St Peters.

The catalogue funded by the Gordon Darling Foundation includes three important essays by leaders in their field: Dr Blair French, Executive Director of Artspace, Sydney; James Dodd, artist and cultural commentator; and Dr Kurt Iveson, Senior Lecturer in Urban Geography at the University of Sydney.

This exhibition and the publication debates many of the issues associated with this contemporary art movement, including the concept of public art space, the debate around legal graffiti, and issues concerning 'quality of life' within the community.

The Gordon Darling Foundation is proud to support this innovative exhibition and publication.

**Mrs Marilyn Darling**

*Deputy Chair*

Gordon Darling Foundation

# The Writing's on the Wall ...

Director's Foreword



*MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project* is an important partnership project between Bathurst Regional Art Gallery and May Lane Arts Association Inc.

I had known about May Lane in the inner Sydney suburb of St Peters for several years and often photographed its street art. But it was a chance meeting in 2008 with Tugi Balog, Director of the May Lane Arts Association Inc. at a Breenspace opening that put a face to the project and proved to be the genesis for this exhibition.

*MAY'S* is the first touring exhibition in Australia to give a comprehensive overview of what is happening nationally and internationally in street art. The works in the exhibition span a broad range of street art styles: New York graffiti, spray paint, paste-ups and stencils.

The art of graffiti dates back at least 17,000 years to wall paintings such as are found in the caves of Lascaux in southern France. The paintings at Lascaux depict animals from the Palaeolithic period that were of cultural importance to the people of that region. They are believed to be spiritual in nature, relating to visions experienced during ritualistic trance dancing.

The history of contemporary graffiti/street art dates back only 40 years to the 1960s yet it also depicts images of cultural importance to people of a particular region — the inner city — and their rituals and lifestyles.

Not much has changed ... The writing's been well and truly on the wall for over 17,000 years.

The 1960s were a time of enormous social unrest, with authority challenged at every opportunity. It is no wonder that graffiti, defined by strong social and political agendas, hit the streets, walls, pavements, overpasses and subways of the world with such fervency.

I was in New York in 1979 and was blown away by the graffiti that covered every surface. When travelling the subway it was impossible to see out of the carriage due to the graffiti over windows.

A year later, a 21-year-old Keith Haring drew his first *Radiant Baby* in white chalk onto unused advertising panels found in New York subway stations.



In 1984 Keith Haring came to Australia and produced two temporary wall-works — one at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne and the other at the Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney. It was amazing to watch how Haring worked without preparatory drawings at the Sydney gallery. Using a vertical lifter he drew directly onto the wall, working his way up and down and along the wall.

Afterwards, in conversation over dinner, Haring was modest in the assessment of his achievements and the important position he, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kenny Scharf held in contemporary art.

The deaths of Basquiat in 1988 of a drug overdose, aged 27 years, and Haring in 1990 from AIDS-related complications, aged 31 years, brought two important careers to a tragic and very premature close.

The legacy of artists such as Haring and Basquiat and the continuing legacy of Scharf is seen in *MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project*. But it is quite apparent from this exhibition that it is new artists with new visions who continue to make this important art movement exciting and relevant.

I would sincerely like to thank all the artists who have participated in the exhibition for sharing their unique vision of the world with us.

Thanks also go to the following people for their assistance in realising *MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project*:

- Tugi Balog, Guest Curator and Director, May Lane Arts Association Inc.;
- Wendy Murray, Project Coordinator, May Lane Arts Association Inc.;
- Dr Kurt Iveson, Dr Blair French, James Dodd, catalogue essay writers;
- Niels Oeltjen, catalogue and exhibition graphics designer;
- Lisa Girault, catalogue editor;
- Daniel Daley, producer, exhibition video documentary;
- Sharon Hickey, photographer.

I would also like to thank the following funding bodies for their generous support of the project: Visions of Australia, an Australian Government program, for their development and tour funding; and the Gordon Darling Foundation, our catalogue publication sponsor.

A project of this scale is only achieved through the dedication and professionalism of the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery staff. I would particularly like to thank Sarah Gurich, Curator, and Tim Pike, Collections Manager.

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery receives ongoing operational funding from Arts NSW and the Bathurst Regional Council.

**Richard Perram**  
*Director*  
 Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

# MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project



We can't ignore or trivialise people's urge to leave a mark.  
This urge can't be the exclusive right of privileged groups.

I wanted to provide graffiti writers and street artists with a safe space for self-expression and develop as permanent a record of their work as they were likely to get. I wanted to provide a place for street artists and graffiti writers to compare styles, to show their skills and hopefully produce shining examples of what people with aerosol cans can do for a drab, generic lane in St Peters. The whole lane now glows with life and vitality, with a kind of unabashed exuberance that only street art can provide. For the passers-by who live or work within the community, what appears on the walls of this suburban thoroughfare to St Peters station is hard to ignore. May Lane invites those who walk through it to engage with their surroundings — love it or hate it, everyone has an opinion.

In 2003 the May Lane Street Art Project took on its formal shape after local residents gave permission for their walls, fences and garage doors facing the lane to be painted. A safe and legal space was hereby created, and graffiti writers and street artists came to know of May Lane as their space to showcase their skills. (Curating the space and keeping the peace between the crews were two different tasks, equally challenging and equally important.) Apart from documenting the ongoing activity photographically there

was no other documentation made. This generated the idea of placing a blank panel, much like a blank canvas, in the recess of an unused roller door. The installation of the first panel in April 2005 by Melbourne-based street artist DLUX!, along with the creation of the *May's* website, exposed May Lane to the world.

The response was encouraging and, at times, overwhelming. The web provided an international platform for the project and immediately we had interest from national and overseas graffiti writers and street artists who wanted to take part. In the first year of the May Lane project we had twelve panels and held a retrospective show in a nearby warehouse. The response was outstanding. The project was soon overwhelmed with submissions from people wanting to paint in May Lane. In response, we sacrificed all of the window recesses of the warehouse and added four additional panels to accommodate more graffiti writers and street artists. A formerly dark and neglected laneway had become alive with colour and people stopping to talk about the latest work appearing on the walls. This initiative gradually gained the attention and support of immediate neighbours and residents from the St Peters community. Marrickville Council also showed their support for the project through a small grant in 2009.

May Lane is not the beginning or the end of the story; it is a part of the ongoing story of graffiti and street art in Australian culture. May Lane is unique not just because of the raw talent it attracts. It is a showpiece of street art culture that is part of the community within which it is located.

Today we are not aware of all of the street subcultures that existed in the past for the simple reason they were not documented. That is one of the reasons why we at May Lane Arts Association Inc. document not only the walls, but the language, stories, rules and any other part of the creative culture that we have the privilege of discovering in May Lane.

**Tugi (Tugomir) Balog** is the Director of the May Lane Arts Association Inc. and Guest Curator of *MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project*. Balog established the May Lane outdoor gallery in St Peters in 2005. Since that time, he has invited over 30 Australian and international street artists to paint at May Lane, and has collected over 100 works documenting the project since its inception.



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MAY LANE

NO  
RIGHT  
TURN  
IF  
SHOULD  
BE  
DRIVE

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# Painting in Situ: Wooden panels and cracked brick walls

— Blair French

Driving by you might not notice it — traffic tends to rip along May Street between Princes Highway and Sydenham just a little too quickly to allow anything other than a peripheral glance at flashes of wall colour. However, face pressed to the window of a lumbering bus, or travelling by bike or on foot, the entrance to May Lane is impossible to miss in passing — two heavily painted brick and concrete walls facing off across a narrow laneway.

**Dr Blair French** is the Executive Director of Artspace, Sydney.

The wall on the left punctuated by grilled window and door recesses with wooden panel insets is that of the mounting and framing company owned by Tugi Balog, founder and coordinator of the May Lane Street Art Project. The murals and works on this wall change regularly with the inset panels removed and retained by the project as an accumulating record of street art practice. A selection of these panels forms the core of the *MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project* touring exhibition. The facing wall provides a larger, more even surface, perfect for large-scale mural works.

This short section of laneway running off the main road is the most readily visible territory associated with the May Lane project. However, turn a hard left around the corner building occupied by Balog's business and running parallel to the main road you find a straight laneway — roughly 200-metres long —

typical of Sydney's inner-west: a rear access-way to the non-descript warehouses and workshops of businesses fronting the main road on one side, and to the scraggly garden courtyards and garages of residential properties lining the other. The far end of the lane opens onto a sparse suburban park with a children's play area, fenced-in football field and defiantly locked up dirt-brown brick sports pavilion. A drainage ditch runs along the park perimeter. Along the laneway there are cracked brick walls, precariously leaning wooden fences, roller-doors, an overgrown vacant lot strewn with rubbish. An old brick chimney rises in the near distance. Aircraft rumble overhead. In mid-summer the heat here shimmers grey.

Providing occasional shortcuts for locals on foot, or pathways for individuals or groups passing through or just hanging about a city fringe caught in a slow transition between manufacturing decline and residential regeneration, such lanes are more generally avoided, particularly after dark, other than for parking access and service vehicles. But any short walk through the laneways of Sydney's inner-west will reveal just how ideal they are as locations for street artists working covertly, out of sight. There is a whole other life to such places. And nowhere is this life more apparent than here at May Lane. Given that

there is a relatively rich array of street art across various sites in Sydney's inner-west — although a general lament regarding the lack of support for such activity relative to overseas cities or to Melbourne is often noted amongst artists — it is important to consider the question of how both visual and social experiences of May Lane distinguish it from or make it stand out within this wider environment.<sup>1</sup>

Few locations in the vicinity provide the intensity of encounter with such a diversity of street art that can be found at May Lane. Almost every surface is worked on — walls, fences, buildings, gates and roller doors. There are complex, explosive letter works, figurative illustrations and aerosol murals, stencil work, poster work and paste-ups. The larger works stretch over surfaces, giving substance and depth to walls. The three-dimensional quality of lettering work creates emphatic, dynamic masses of colour that animate walls and fences, almost making them appear to ripple spatially. And everywhere there is evidence of real intelligence at play in the treatment of surfaces and material structures as patterned and textured backgrounds, under-surfaces and screens for painting.

The walls of Balog's art mounting business with their temporary panels might be the main focus of the May Lane project as a focussed street *art* undertaking, particularly as it is represented in forums such as this exhibition, but the full laneway environment conveys more of the substance of local street art activity and of the scope of Balog's larger project. Artists are invited to create new works on the walls of his building and panels he installs for them. This has come to include artists from elsewhere in Australia and internationally, as represented in the selection of artists presented in this touring exhibition. Information is circulated via email

and the completion of new works marked by drinks held in the laneway. In all this the May Lane project operates in a manner akin to other exhibition spaces. But more broadly through the laneway Balog responds to artists' requests to try out new ideas or make new works. Only a few years ago the laneway was largely devoid of street art other than some tagging. Gaining permission of the majority of the businesses and residents backing onto the lane Balog has become a facilitator of sorts, an organiser and a mentor, encouraging local artists through provision of a 'safe' space to work and a neutral space for street crews often otherwise in conflict with each other. This space has also become a place for artists to meet and talk and look at each other's work and engage in dialogue with Balog to develop useful professional and personal skills. Like any good artist-focussed initiative or gallery, the May Lane project has developed in response to the needs of a local community — building, supporting and advocating for its activity and interests — but has also had such an impact as to create its own constituency of participants and audiences.

The culture of the May Lane project is of concentrated activity and of a constant renewal and painting and pasting over — Balog jokes that the lane has narrowed incrementally as layers of paint build up, one work over another over another. This layering and painting over does, of course, take place with street art generally, although there are authorised spaces or walls and commissioned murals that tend to be left for long periods, or simply works that come to be respected, even loved by local residents and artists' peers who then effectively protect them. But this changing of work, this layering of works over one another and so this transformation of the street environment, is particularly concentrated here. Indeed, it is a

working principle. The project has been established to encourage the working process of street artists — their literal 'practice'. The idea is not to create permanent or semi-permanent commissioned work. Nor is it to see an artist make a work anonymously or without recognition and immediately move on. It is to provide a location for artists to work over ideas again and again, individually and collectively as peers. In this manner, the May Lane project might in part be thought of as both an open artist studio and a changing gallery space. Again there is a parallel here between the May Lane project and a current emphasis amongst various artist-run initiatives towards fostering experimental process through residencies and the like rather than simply exhibition (display) spaces.

Thinking about parallels between the May Lane project and other artist-focussed organisational models does also suggest a different form of encounter with the environment of the lane than simply stumbling upon it when walking the streets. This encounter is that of the motivated, interested, self-conscious audience member with *art*. That is, it is an encounter attuned to the conventions of visiting a gallery. Does this mean the casual passer-by considers the work in any particular or discernibly different manner? Or perhaps more pertinently, does this mean the overall environment of the laneway is being approached and considered differently? As less of an everyday, rather unspectacular element within the urban streetscape than as a place of valued cultural activity? As, potentially, an important 'site' in anthropological terms? Or simply as a gallery? What effect does this bracketing of the work over walls and fences and doors as capital 'A' Art have on our experience and understanding of both the place and the work?



These types of question may appear somewhat removed from the actual work encountered in May Lane and that presented in this touring exhibition, as well as peripheral with regard to the more obvious issue of the importance placed upon the work — its reception — by particular inner-city communities (not just those of the street artists but the people who live and work in the area). However, to really begin to consider its value in the broadest sense it is vitally important to at least alert ourselves to the complexities of its creation, its continued presence in the urban environment and its experience by various audiences. So much of the importance of street art lies in the manner in which it transforms a living environment and what its insertion into that environment reflects in terms of personal and political responses to civic or social convention, the urban environment and cultural power. Street art is first and foremost a means by which to have a vital, creative voice and presence within the community at large, relatively unrestrained by social convention, bureaucracy and the workings of public authority. It is a means of making and/or claiming space; a practice for ‘converting’ an urban setting produced by capital into the artists’ ‘own setting by rewriting it.’<sup>2</sup> At its best it is as visually and communicatively acute a means of personal expression, affirmation or just thinking aloud in public as any other art form (perhaps with more emphasis on the ‘in public’ element). Whilst there are often oblique, witty forms of social commentary (such as in Kamion’s *Smoke Carrots, not Drugs*, 2009) or direct political exhortations apparent within street art (apparent in this exhibition in a work by veteran activist graffiti collective B.U.G.A.U.P. [Billboard Utilising Graffitiists Against Unhealthy Promotions], *Write of Reply*, 2007

as well as in Taring Padi Collective’s *Demolish Our Borders*, 2006), it is the interventionist act and presence in public settings of street art that is generally more important in this regard than specific instances of political content or direct social commentary. So in this sense, it is vitally important to at least consider some of these questions and the structures of process and presentation underpinning the ongoing May Lane project in order to approach some full sense of its significance.

In this vein, it is equally important to consider the remodelling of material from the May Lane project into this touring exhibition form. Most obviously, for an exhibition like this to take place the work has to be relocated from one environment to another, one context to another — from the street to the gallery. There are many precedents for this; for as long as street art has flourished such relocations of work from the street to the gallery (whether commercial gallery, contemporary art space or museum) have been common enough and the ramifications of such actions extensively debated. These include the desocialisation of street art and the severing of sustaining relationships to urban community and environments; the commodification of popular or street culture styles and their resonant associations with ‘authentic’ street experience and their co-option into mass market branding; focus upon a certain cult of the artist figure developing concurrently with a boosting of financial value (potentially at the expense of other values of social collectivity, or simply of the action of making work to be seen en masse on the street rather than by select audience); and private ownership over rather than public access to the work itself. Inasmuch as we are talking of the work of individual artists, such accelerated rush into the art world is

experienced by very few. However, the wider celebration and general, ongoing absorption of graffiti and street art into mass media and corporate culture is hugely significant. It shapes the context and environment in which street art continues to be produced. It is not unusual, including within this exhibition, to discern evidence of a stylistic loop where street art has fed into more commercial animation and visual design areas (including animation and illustration) that in turn create new stylistic touchstones for street artists, and so on. (The basis of early lettering work in 1980s United States hip-hop culture, for example, provides the foundational example of this loop of reference and development.) Indeed, there are a number of artists represented in this exhibition who create work in other contexts as exhibiting artists (Dlux!, Mini Graff, Numskull and others) and/or as designers and commercial artists (Otis, Deb, Nails and others). And so it is only natural that approaches, motifs and ideas will percolate across situations and contexts.

This particular touring exhibition, presented within a gallery setting, also brings with it particular qualities. It is clearly not focussed on any hyperbolic boosting of the individual artist. Although the work of both individuals and collectives is presented and celebrated, it is brought together under the larger shared umbrella of the May Lane project itself. And so, in a sense, the exhibition has a triple subject: the works themselves; the various genre of or approaches to street art (with an emphasis upon the Sydney context) that they represent; and the phenomena of the overall May Lane project. As such it has one foot in the camp of art, the other in cultural studies. This is one of its strengths.

The manner in which the structure of the exhibition openly reveals and admits the recontextualisation of the works themselves is also important. It is a truism to state that street art is utterly site-specific, but one that demands respect. Therefore the panels exhibited here effectively operate as documentation of those same works from their in situ form in May Lane. They are documentation inasmuch as they are both representations and archaeological (literally) artefacts of street art, removed from their primary situation for the purpose here of wider display — they are both aesthetically pleasing and educationally informative objects. And so, while this exhibition is nothing like the context the panels were created for, this does not impute any impropriety in their curatorial repositioning within gallery contexts — it is simply a fact we mustn't lose sight of when viewing them for to do so would then be to deny the underpinning motivation, tradition, social context and visual/aesthetic conventions of the work.

Of course, in stating that the panels have been removed from their primary site, it is important to acknowledge that this was always intended to be the case. The removable-panel structure of the May Lane project was always intended as a way of building up a repository or archive of street art practice, supplemented also by Balog's ongoing process of undertaking and collecting interviews with artists. And so, as well as creating a vibrant platform for current street art practice the May Lane project from the outset also had an eye on building a knowledge base and historical record of such practices and in particular with regard to the experiences and approaches of the artists themselves. This consciousness sets the project aside from most artist-focussed initiatives.

So the panels are both painted by artists as in situ street works and with an awareness of their forthcoming removal, storage and possible re-presentation on other occasions and in different situations. Some artists therefore approach the panel or panels as they might a traditional stretched canvas support. That is, they treat the panel as the total, discrete field of the painting or work, shaped and 'framed' by the four sides of the panel. The panel then sits 'framed' by the façade of the building it is recessed into — the lingering textures and colours of repeated over-painting or remnants of works by other artists. (The works by Deb and by Peter Burgess are good examples of this in this touring exhibition.) Here is it really quite akin to a gallery presentation, if a gallery with rather wildly painted walls. On other occasions artists effectively create a visual context for the central component of the panel painting by continuing certain motifs over the rest of the wall or even just on the wall at the edges of the panel (for example, Phibs' extensive intertwining aerosol patterning). Or they extend the main image just marginally conveying a sense of the core panel painting spreading or bleeding out into the world beyond the frame of the painting, as if the energy of the work cannot be contained (Die Laughing Collective's *Sic Semper Tyrannus*, 2009 is a good example). Often though, the panels constitute sections of paintings that cover the whole wall of the building, and so the works presented in gallery spaces are fundamentally components of larger works. (This is absolutely the case with the works of Otis, Peru, Luna, Spice and Mare, amongst others.) They make for quite extraordinary gallery viewing experiences, but we should always bear in mind that both work and viewing experience are fundamentally different from their initial manifestations in May Lane.

From the initiative of one individual has come such a concentrated platform for street art activity in inner Sydney, not just in the practice of the work but also in the creation of a key social and discursive space where any sense of 'ownership' or belonging lies in participation. This extends to the manner in which a significant number of the works presented in this exhibition have been created by collectives or by artists simply partnering up or working together on the specific work. Collective activity is a crucial aspect of street art generally, but clearly honed by the particular environment of the May Lane Street Art Project, where an incredible range of street art practices and, crucially, artists are welcomed and supported. It is not and should never be an institution in any formal or public sense. Its impact upon particular strands of artistic practice — street art — upon its immediate environment and upon various audience constituencies comes largely from working within the practice and communities that drive it. And as viewers and audiences perhaps new to this practice, it is to this world — whether May Lane itself or any street art location around the country — that we must ultimately turn to take what this exhibition offers and develop it into a greater understanding of street art and its practitioners locally and regionally.

- 1 In addition to various artist web and blog sites, this is best documented and conveyed in Melinda Vassallo's book, *Street Art of Sydney's Inner West* (Fineline Design, Sydney, 2009), notably on unusually long and proudly prominent display in my local inner-west Sydney bookstore ever since publication.
- 2 This claim is made by sociologist Nango Yoshikazu of graffiti (street art) in a public discussion in Tokyo regarding youth culture and the city environment. See Nango Yoshikazu, transcript of public conversation 'The Present State of Youth Culture and Theoretical Discussions of Cities: From street culture to urban redevelopment in the post-'80s', translated by Higashizono Tadatoshi in *Rapt: 20 Contemporary Artists from Japan*, Furuichi Yasuko (ed.), Japan Foundation, Tokyo, 2006, p. 62.

# The May's Show: Beyond the lane

— James Dodd

Someone once told me that the bones of an elephant are buried in Sydney Park, just across the Princes Highway from May Lane. The elephant had apparently been part of a travelling circus, become ill and died. Rather than take the hefty dead weight to another site it was deemed simpler to bury the creature on the spot and let it rest in peace beside the similarly behemoth smokestacks of the nearby decommissioned brick kiln.

**James Dodd** is an Adelaide based artist. He has exhibited widely across Australia in alley ways, artist run, publicly funded and commercial spaces. His work traverses the boundaries between visual street culture, alternative use of urban space and existing gallery conventions. Primarily his work revolves around the use of found text such as graffiti. Dodd principally works as a painter however he often experiments with the construction of objects to paint on for the purpose of large-scale installations.

It struck me at this point that May's is somewhat of a behemoth itself and, likewise, somewhat of an old fashioned travelling circus complete with clowns, animals, trapeze artists and a charismatic, if sometimes crazed, ringleader. It permits further circus analogy in that it is extremely colourful, draws crowds of gawking onlookers and is a cultural freak show. In the context of this touring exhibition, *MAY'S: The May Lane Street Art Project*, it is packing a selection of its majestic armory and setting off on the road.

As a young child I always loved the stories where the protagonist runs away with the circus. I never imagined I would actually find myself living out that very fantasy. It was also as a child that I first developed a taste for graffiti. My grandmother encouraged my siblings and I to draw all over her back porch in chalk. We would spend hours bringing the grey concrete surfaces to life with vibrant colour only to remove the images in a matter

of minutes with the hose that same afternoon. Fast forward a decade or so to where I found myself attracted to the tags and various scrawl marked on walls, benches and moving surfaces of transit vehicles in the cities that I visited. In a similar way to most people of my generation, I was enamored by the contents of perhaps the most stolen books in school library history — *Subway Art* and *Spraycan Art*.<sup>1</sup> To me, this was undoubtedly the coolest freakin' 'art' that I'd ever come across. I loved that it was filled with cartoon characters, wobbly letters and, most of all, I loved the fact that you weren't 'allowed' to do it. It was outlaw. I didn't realise at the time that a generation of New York kids had experienced the cultural revolution of subway graffiti firsthand, before I was even born. This was a generation of predominantly downtrodden youth who were united by visual art — they spent more time devoted to aesthetics than to sport or music — a true phenomenon.

Early documenters of the New York graffiti movement such as Henry Chalfant, Martha Cooper and Jon Naar brought graffiti to the world via what have now become bibles of the culture.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, films such as *Style Wars* and *Wild Style* (both 1983) fuelled global cravings for graffiti and hip-hop culture. It worked for me, just as I'm sure it worked for millions of kids across the planet. I grew up in rural Australia and had never seen a subway car, much less a top-to-bottom, end-to-end burner<sup>3</sup>,

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but I knew that stuff was for me — that graffiti stuff was the best! In the early nineties I would wait in anticipation each month for *Hype* magazine to hit the shelves of our local newsagent. Though the majority of the mag was black and white, Brisbane stalwarts BROKE and SEIZE brought the vibrancy of Australian graffiti to the rest of the nation via full-colour centerfolds. I still can't bring myself to throw out those dog-eared, Blu-tack-stained images from artists such as PUNCH, DUEL, MERDA and PUZLE that adorned my bedroom walls for many years. These days we are spoiled with an abundance of graffiti magazines, not to mention online publications of all orientations, packed with full-colour examples of artwork by first class Australian and international artists.

Australia currently publishes a number of very high quality 'graf' culture mags including the likes of *Kingbrown* and *Artillery*. The most significant contemporary difference in terms of the dissemination of graffiti culture is the internet. Gone are the days of ordering multiple prints of photographs and exchanging them via the post. Artworks can now be posted online within hours of execution. Whilst this may seem an obvious point to make, this has significantly impacted upon Australian street intervention culture. Online mass dissemination has been hugely positive in that it has allowed an immediacy in reaching larger and more diverse audiences.

Sites such as *Stencil Revolution* acted as quite amazing catalysts during the eruption of the Australian stencil movement from around 1999 until 2004. There were many examples of artists posting their previous night's escapades for the explicit purpose of inciting competition from interstate artists. In turn, artists would go out and try and pull off something bigger and

better, then post this online shortly after. They were competitive in a friendly manner and such online competitions often resulted in unique personal and professional relationships that are maintained to this day. Current local websites such as *Melbourne Graffiti* and *Brisgraff* give artists a platform to present and discuss their work. Further to this there is a litany of blogs and individually managed content sites that present artists' work. These keep us connected as a nation of urban creators and up to date with artists and their work on a global scale.

### Soul in a city

I was living in Adelaide around 1998 and becoming increasingly aware of the visual antics of an artist going by the name of SYNC. Everyday I would cycle through the city and everyday I would find a new sticker, a new stencil or a new tag only recently left. Often it would seem as if someone had given a can of paint to a monkey and encouraged it to shimmy up a drainpipe before clambering out on a thin edge of concrete and placing a tag in an obscure, yet highly visible position. I was very impressed by this and remain impressed by quality placement to this day. So, in this way, many graffiti artists are like the acrobats of our touring circus. Just as skaters interpret the city and its objects as unique opportunities for self-expression, so too do urban visual artists. These artists see buildings, stairwells and ledges differently to other passers-by. They see them as physical opportunities for visual expression. They read the existing tags and interpret these, evaluating the cultural value of their position. This corporeal connection with the city is particularly clear when discussing sub-genres of alternative concrete-oriented creativity such as *pixação* and *parqour*.<sup>4</sup>

Climbing, jumping, slapping and scratching are all ways in which most adults do not generally engage with the city. But it is through these acts graffiti writers develop an understanding of urban space. They are playful, and it is important that this play, and its value, is recognised. Just as graffiti writers have a highly sophisticated way of reading scrawl, they have developed a similarly complex understanding of the physicality of urban space that is largely overlooked by the general public. Most people who inhabit our cities consider driving, walking, using public transport or possibly cycling as the only ways to physically negotiate urban space. When compared with the knowledge of urban creative types, these ways seem rudimentary and simplistic.

Another thing that seems to be taken for granted by the everyday Jo Citizen is the idea that a 'grey' city is a 'great' city. I think that urban planners should reflect on the vibrancy of cities such as Madrid, Berlin or San Francisco that are filled with colour and imagery. Some may argue that advertising provides adequate coloration for our prefabricated concrete walls. Whilst advertising and signage may well provide us with visual stimulation, the majority is cold, robotic, digital or generic. It lacks soul. We should remind ourselves of the importance of visible handmade artforms in urban visual culture. Urban creative types provide us with valuable handmade gestures that have soul and heart. The Marrickville Council should be applauded for their support of a project such as May's that is determined to bring back individual spirit and expression to the streets of its city. Certainly there are positive benefits evidenced in other Australian cities, particularly Melbourne, where local councils support street art. The visual culture of Melbourne has been

greatly enriched by graffiti and street art, and thousands of international and interstate tourists, as well as generally interested punters, flock to places such as Hosier Lane to gawk at the art and have their photographs taken with the talent. The energy and vibrancy of Melbourne's laneways is actively cultivated by the city's inhabitants.

### **Backyard studio**

May Lane is kind of like a big backyard. Not necessarily your 1950s nuclear family backyard with a Hills Hoist, two-car garage and a spread of lush green lawn but more like a backyard full of tyre swings, climbing trees and maybe a half-dismantled car or two. It's a 'safe' space for artists to paint during the daytime. It also acts as somewhat of a drop-in centre for both established and aspiring artists, providing a training ground and the opportunity to engage with peers, share experiences and learn from one another.

Most weekends passers-by can see a couple of painters at work. This works to demystify the image of the graffiti artist as some sort of violent night creature. The artists who choose to paint here are polite to the general public and happy to make graf small talk. They are also more or less comfortable appearing in tourist happy snaps of the lane while they work. In turn, the laneway visitor experiences a chance to personally identify with the painter and feel more at ease with the aerosol community as a whole. Such socialisation of graffiti is important as it opens the medium up to being accepted within the broader community. May Lane is simultaneously a 'safe and friendly' place to paint as well as to visit. It assists in steering the broader community away from the lazy, subjective and negative portrayals of graffiti art often present in the media.

### **Creative family**

The May's family cannot be easily pigeonholed as one thing and needs to be celebrated as the cultural smorgasbord that it is. The values that bind the May's family together — freedom of expression, rebellion, cunning and a healthy dose of disdain for authority — create a force to reckon with.

Artists of varying generations have been drawn together by this project and it has been through May's that lines of dialogue have opened up between younger and older practitioners. One of the more senior artists, Peter Burgess, has been busy since the 1980s, while some members of the B.U.G.A.U.P. movement were in their 30s and 40s when they began improving billboard advertising back in the 1970s. May's challenges the popular image of the graffiti artist as that of the disillusioned teen running rampant through the night; it is a place where considered commitment and experience count. The fact that some of the more senior artists became active in the first waves of Australian breaking and hip-hop graffiti means that they have been practicing for more than 25 years. Artists such as SCRAM, MARE and DMOTE were there at the beginning and long ago reached legendary status within Australian graffiti history. Then, of course, there are the many younger artists who have come to urban creativity more recently and bring a freshness and youthful buoyancy to the mix. Up-and-comers such as TWOONE and BONSAI are representative of some of the finest aerosol art in Australia today — their practice of fusing elements from both old school graffiti and new school street art, combined with their eagerness and openness, makes them leaders in the field.

Another characteristic of this project is that it unites camps that might not always be aligned. Just as brothers and sisters will not always see eye-to-eye, artists within the May's ranks are sometimes polarised by their creative beliefs. For example, artists who revere train painting as the height of urban creativity often have different values to those artists who enjoy spending many hours creating delicate and intricate stencils. However, within the context of May's these differences are put aside and it is the common vision of excellence within the broader perspective of aerosol art that binds everyone together.

These different camps of ideologies and practices require different labels in order to be understood and discussed with more clarity. Some of these labels are more resolved than others. The most obvious discussion point is that of 'writing' versus 'street art', whereby the 'writer' is a practitioner whose interests are defined by the New York tradition of tag marking and letter-form masterpieces, and the 'street artist' is a someone more likely to value communication to a broad audience through image-based outcomes. Commonly, 'writers' may argue that the heightened physical and legal risks taken to execute their craft are of higher value than those taken by 'street artists'. This, of course, ties into much of the bravado and testosterone-fuelled culture of graffiti. To continue our circus analogy, the lions and tigers are roaring at one another and the lion tamer is trying to get them to settle down before someone gets bitten. It is very much the role of Tugi Balog as the ringleader and gifted big cat tamer to bring each of the camps together and have them perform in harmony with one another. It is to be remembered that projects such as May's are actually quite rare in being able to foster this unison and it is the resulting



blend that maintains progression within the greater ecology of urban creative culture.

The May Lane Street Art Project offers us the perfect opportunity to begin to examine some of the more specific genres of aerosol art as a culture. The word ‘graffiti’ is problematic; it means many different things to many different people. Graffiti has evolved very rapidly over the last 40 years from its elemental form of simple messages and names scrawled on public surfaces to become a highly sophisticated and diverse group of visual subcultures. The May’s project does an outstanding job of representing this diversity in all its glory. Current descriptions of styles that come under the heading of graffiti no longer simply denote the ways in which letter forms are approached; they denote a huge range of aesthetic, social and economic influences. Whilst the majority of you would no doubt be familiar with distinctions between a ‘tag’ and a ‘wildstyle’ piece, I invite you to determine the following sub-genres presented within the May’s collection: ‘New York discipline’, ‘retro revival’, ‘happy graf’, ‘stupid style’, ‘neo super tech’, ‘neo folk aerosol’, ‘graphic design geek crossover’, ‘socio-political’, ‘culture jamming’, ‘muralismo’, ‘stencilism’, ‘street comic heroism’ ... The list could go on. Each of these labels can be applied to each of the individuals that create their respective different graffiti orientations. Despite this broad diversity there can be no denying that there are common cultural parents, motivations, tools and *modus operandi* that bind them all together.

### The vault

This collection of work in this touring exhibition reflects many of the unique qualities of the May Lane Street Art Project. The May Lane project is not like a mural project that demands

longevity and maintenance of a wall, nor is May Lane like a graffiti jam wall that is in constant evolution and documented only in photographs. The project fosters creative excellence in artists who have tendencies towards street outcomes by offering them a 3 metre squared panel, the surrounding wall and a small budget to work with. The finished work is celebrated by way of a laneway ‘opening’ and at the end of the exhibition cycle the painted panel is removed, stored and replaced with a fresh one, ready for the next artist. The physical scale of the artefacts presented here is one of May’s most important achievements. The collection of works exhibited are ‘wall scale’ — as a viewer, you can stand in front of the pieces and be truly immersed in them, just as you would in a street setting.

In terms of square metres of art, this would have to be one of the heftiest in the nation. This is also true of its cultural weight. These various snippets of culture represent not only talented groups and individuals — many of whom have moved on to careers they could never have imagined — but also important examples of Australian visual culture. The works highlight the interests and endeavours that continue to resonate in these artists’ practices and have greatly influenced the creative intentions of many others. The May’s collection is invaluable in its summary of the Australian alternative urban subcultures that it represents and could only have been made possible through ongoing engagement with these communities.

### Outro

May’s touring exhibition makes light work for the viewer. Visitors to the show are presented with a comprehensive package to consume; they can walk out of the gallery feeling like they have a handle on contemporary Australian

aerosol art. It is important, however, to acknowledge all the hard work involved in this project and the many long hours artists have spent perfecting their craft, most often in the middle of the night in filthy, cold environments. (In actual fact, the majority would feel more at home in a litter-strewn alley than a floodlit gallery!) Each of the panels in this exhibition is representative of years of artistic experimentation and practice. The broad range of styles exhibited here represents the rich plethora of street artists and graffiti practitioners that are active across the streets of Australia as a whole. We are fortunate to have a very progressive street culture community and one that is extraordinarily productive, given its relatively small scale.

It is crucial to note that all of this brilliant art would not be possible without the decades of hard work of aerosol artists who have paved the way for this current wave of attention. The strength of contemporary aerosol art in Australia is only possible on top of the solid foundations formed by those who have painted before.

So, in closing, I invite a round of applause for the May’s show! Let us give a warm standing ovation to the ringleader and all of his performers whose combined efforts have given us a phenomenal amount of visual, political and social inspiration.

1 Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant, *Subway Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1984; Henry Chalfant and James Ratliff, *Spraycan Art*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1987.

2 *The Faith of Graffiti*, by photographer Jon Naar and author Norman Mailer, is a groundbreaking exploration of the New York street art movement (Praeger, New York, 1974).

3 A train carriage completely covered by an elaborately painted sequence of letters and images.

4 *Pixação* is a unique form of graffiti native to São Paulo, Brazil; *parçour* is a form of street gymnastics and was originally formed in France.



# The May Lane Street Art Project: Making a better city through better graffiti

— Kurt Iveson

May Lane should really be dead. On the planner's map, its main function is to provide rear access to houses and businesses (including a brothel) with addresses on the Princes Highway and May Street, St Peters. But May Lane is alive.

**Dr Kurt Iveson** is a Senior Lecturer in Urban Geography at the University of Sydney.

The May Lane Street Art Project has helped to transform this out-of-the-way little lane into a dynamic space of creativity and interaction, which has now become a destination for people from far and wide. As this exhibition demonstrates, some great artwork has adorned the lane's walls during the life of the project. But what an exhibition of art panels does not necessarily convey — and what is equally important — is that the project has also produced a great *urban space*. The ongoing transformation of May Lane is a powerful demonstration of the ways that making space for graffiti and street art can actually make cities better. Before considering how this has happened in more detail, I want to consider the wider context in which the May Lane Street Art Project exists.

## The long war on graffiti in Sydney

Sydney is an increasingly hostile city for graffiti writers and street artists. In the name of 'quality of life', governments of all persuasions have

waged a war on graffiti that has now lasted almost three decades. They have pursued a range of strategies in an effort to win this war. They have increased fines. They have introduced community service orders and custodial sentences. They have established specialist police squads. They have restricted the sale and possession of spray paint and ink markers. They have given urban authorities new powers to remove graffiti from private property without needing permission from property owners. They have deployed rapid removal teams to paint the town grey. They have erected countless kilometres of barbed wire and thousands of surveillance cameras. They have even censored graffiti magazines and computer games. And they have been assisted by companies who have developed 'graffiti-proof' materials and new forms of surveillance. This long war has cost hundreds of millions of dollars. In NSW alone, the removal of graffiti is now estimated to cost well over \$100 million every year.<sup>1</sup>

Historically, this repressive approach has been offset by the existence of a few safe spaces for graffiti writers and street artists. For example, some community-based youth services such as nearby Marrickville Youth Resource Centre

have run legal aerosol art programs, often with state government funding. Some local governments have established ‘permission walls’ for legal graffiti. And a few enlightened property owners have commissioned graffiti pieces or even made free spaces available for artists. But even these programs and spaces are increasingly under threat. The current NSW Labor Government has withdrawn its support for legal graffiti programs, claiming there is no proof that they will eradicate illegal graffiti.<sup>2</sup> (Of course, that has never been their sole purpose, but that’s another story.<sup>3</sup>) Many local governments are heading in the same direction. The City of Parramatta has recently demolished its legal graffiti walls, in a process vividly documented by Cameron McAuliffe.<sup>4</sup> The City of Sydney has even authorised its contractors to paint over commissioned street art and graffiti, regardless of the wishes of property owners (who are now required to seek formal planning approval if they want to commission art on their property). And in some parts of the city, gentrification is also taking its toll alongside state and local government repression, reducing the amount of ‘leftover’ space for artistic expression. Such gentrification pressures led to the eventual closure of the old Graffiti Hall of Fame in Alexandria, for example.<sup>5</sup>

So, is the war being won? Those waging the war can point to some localised victories — a particular ‘hot spot’ attracts less graffiti, maybe, or an individual graffiti writer is prosecuted. These victories are talked up by both the politicians and the growing graffiti-removal industry, which is profiting handsomely from the war. But even if some battles are being won, the war is being lost. As is plain for all to see, graffiti has not been eradicated from the city at large. Rather, the war on graffiti has had two perverse outcomes.

First, waging war on graffiti frequently results in the *displacement* of graffiti. For every ‘hot spot’ that is cleaned up, a new one springs up to take its place. Consider Sydney’s trains. Years of efforts to make them graffiti-proof have had some success in reducing (although certainly not eradicating) the piecing and tagging of train exteriors and interiors with spray paint and markers. But over the same period, we have witnessed an increase in the amount of tags scratched into train windows. This form of graffiti has grown because it doesn’t expose its writers to as much risk of arrest, and it can be executed rapidly. It’s also pretty ugly, and it is damaging and costly to remove; it is hard to see how this could be defined as ‘success’.

Second, the attempt to eradicate graffiti is actually reducing the *quality* of graffiti. Policies like rapid removal, harsher penalties and expanded surveillance are intended to stop graffiti by increasing the risks of graffiti writing and decreasing the exposure of completed work. The outcome, however, is quite different. In reality, we are pushing the culture towards quick and dirty styles that are less risky to execute, and can be reproduced in bulk no matter how many times they are covered up. The zero tolerance approaches discourages graffiti writers and street artists from investing the time and effort it takes to complete a complex piece. Even worse, it attacks the very graffiti culture that regulates quality. Pushing this graffiti culture underground through criminalisation only serves to isolate young people who feel the urge to pick up a spray can or marker and express themselves. This doesn’t stop them writing, it simply stops them developing the skills and ethics that might improve their efforts beyond serial reproductions of their tag.

This last point about the quality of graffiti is very important, given that the war on graffiti is waged on behalf of ‘quality of life’. Those who wage the war refuse to engage in a discussion about the quality of graffiti. They are only concerned with the *quantity* of graffiti — for them, more is bad, less is good, it’s as simple as that. Of course, there’s a reason they want to focus on quantity and not quality. To admit that there might be aesthetic criteria for talking about the quality of graffiti would be to admit that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ should not be reduced to ‘less’ or ‘more’ (or ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’, for that matter). It would be to recognise that rights to the city are broader than property rights, and to acknowledge that some forms of graffiti might actually contribute to quality of life in the city.

### **From eradicating to curating graffiti: the outdoor gallery and the graffiti commons**

All of which brings us back to May Lane. The May Lane Street Art Project has carved out a small space in the city that models an alternative to the war on graffiti. The goal of the project is not to eradicate graffiti, but to *curate* it. The curatorial process is, at its heart, pretty straightforward. There are three core principles at work. First, provide some space where artists can invest some time in their work without fear of arrest. Second, invite some artists to paint it. Third, document and promote their work. This curatorial process inverts the incentive structure associated with the war on graffiti — it reduces the risk, and encourages exposure. The result is that May Lane has *more* graffiti than your average lane, but it also has far *better* graffiti than your average lane. This is because at May Lane, you can paint any time of the day or night, you can take your time with your work, and you know that lots of other artists and art lovers will be coming through the lane to check



out the latest work. Simply put, at May Lane artists have the opportunity and incentive to do good work.

The panels in this exhibition give you some sense of the quality of the work produced for the project, but they are only a part of what is going on in the lane itself. In situ, the commissioned art bleeds off the panels and onto the walls, and viewing the panels in their wider context gives you a completely different perspective on them.<sup>6</sup> JUMBO and ZAP's panels from 2009 are a case in point — mounted in May Lane on the Graphic Art Mount building which hosts the project, they were surrounded by some seriously loud typography that lent them another scale and impact entirely.<sup>7</sup> Alongside the works commissioned for the project, an ever-changing display of graffiti and street art now extends well beyond the Graphic Art Mount building itself and further down the lane. For instance, while DMOTE was at May Lane producing his skull panel (*Untitled*, 2010), he also painted a fabulous throw-up on the wall opposite.<sup>8</sup> Alongside large-scale pieces like this, street signs and telegraph poles have been plastered with stickers and wrapped with yarn. The gutters and footpaths are covered with paint drips, tags and stencils. These little interventions are vital to the character of the laneway, another reason to keep coming back. To appropriate the language of the anti-graffiti crusaders, May Lane is definitely a 'hot spot' ... to catch some fantastic graffiti and street art!

Now, to say that this curatorial process is relatively straightforward is not to say that it is *easy*. What makes things tricky is that the space being curated is not a white cube, but an inner city laneway. The notion of an *outdoor gallery* generates a series of conceptual and practical challenges that don't really exist for a conventional indoor art gallery. This is

because the outdoor gallery has a very different relationship to the public sphere.<sup>9</sup> Where the indoor gallery is designed and set aside solely for the artistic public invited into its space, the outdoor gallery is *in public*. As such, it shares its space with a range of other folks including neighbouring residents, neighbouring businesses and their customers and suppliers, and pedestrians and drivers passing through.

As with any public space, the sharing of May Lane by these different users is supposed to be managed through a combination of planning regulations and laws that prescribe and proscribe the activities that can take place there. Now, we know that the orderly sharing of space imagined by these plans and laws is never achieved — indeed, graffiti is an example of a practice that refuses to recognise the authority of the authorities to dictate the potential uses of urban space.<sup>10</sup> The art project in May Lane sits somewhere in between the orderly arrangement of people, practices and places imagined by planners and the anarchic confiscation of private property practised by graffiti writers in other parts of the city.

The project does not overturn private property rights, but it puts them to work in a fairly unique way. Tugi Balog, owner of Graphic Art Mount and curator of the project, has worked tirelessly over many years to organise several other property holders on May Lane to make their property available for use by graffiti writers and artists. The result is that private property rights have been pooled together to make certain parts of May Lane into what we might call a 'graffiti commons' — a street canvas available for use by anyone who wishes to participate. A couple of property owners have tried to opt out of the commons. Unprepared to cede any sovereignty over their patch, they've put up signs either requesting or

warning people not to paint on their property. Fair enough. The occasional blank spaces produce interesting juxtapositions, reminding us of the differences of opinion that exist on urban aesthetics without resolving those differences completely by favouring of one view over the other (as typically happens when a 'zero tolerance' approach is applied).

Remarkably, given the wider anti-graffiti context in Sydney, the existence of the outdoor gallery and the graffiti commons has been condoned, and even tentatively supported, by the local planning authority, Marrickville Council. This is very significant given that the rights of private property owners are limited by planning codes that regulate permitted uses on behalf of the 'public good'. Notionally at least, the council has the power to prohibit private property owners from making their property available for graffiti writers and street artists.<sup>11</sup>

Part of the reason Marrickville Council has been prepared to allow the outdoor gallery and graffiti commons in May Lane is because it is an out-of-the-way location, rather than a highly visible and highly trafficked public space. However, even when they are out-of-the-way, the outdoor gallery and graffiti commons raise interesting dilemmas for council planners. As noted above, the artistic activity on May Lane tends to spill over and beyond the explicitly permitted spaces, and this makes the 'graffiti commons' impossible to map in a conventional sense — its boundaries are fluid and fuzzy rather than rigid and clear. This tends not to sit well with planners, who are used to permitting land uses by drawing a line on a map that tightly defines the space where an activity is permitted. In this context, the question of whether Marrickville Council will seek to contain the place of graffiti more rigidly is one of the most interesting questions for the future of May Lane.

Pressures to do this are perhaps inevitable, given that relatively expensive apartment complexes have been constructed at either end of May Lane in recent years.

Of course, the complex layering of commissions and permissions on May Lane is not only shaped by property rights and planning codes — there is also the ‘code of the street’ to consider.

In May Lane, we are directly confronted with the fact that maps of property boundaries and permitted land uses interact with other maps of the city, made by different groups of people with different ways of using urban space.<sup>12</sup> We would do well to remember that it is the graffiti writers and street artists who are ‘giving permission’ here, not just the property owners or the council.<sup>13</sup> The graffiti commons has not just been granted, it has also been *claimed* through the actions of artists and writers who insist that they have a right to do what they do, even if this means breaking the law. There was graffiti in May Lane long before anyone invited or curated it, and without the approval of graffiti writers and street artists, the May Lane Street Art Project would not have survived and thrived. As such, the outdoor gallery and graffiti commons are profoundly shaped by the codes of conduct operating in the graffiti writing and street art scenes.

This is where things get interesting, for these codes of conduct are far from settled. In curating graffiti and street art, the May Lane Street Art Project has turned the lane into a space where criteria for defining ‘quality’ are negotiated and sometimes contested. The fraught relationship between more ‘traditional’ forms of graffiti and newer forms of street art is a case in point. Unfortunately, in my view, these scenes are often separated and sometimes hostile to one another. But the project has invited artists working across a range of styles

to paint there, and both the art panels and the rest of the laneway bears witness to the diversity of artists who value the opportunities it affords. For me, one of the great things about May Lane is that it is a space where some kind of dialogue takes place between artists working across this spectrum of styles. That dialogue is frequently mediated, and occasionally heated, but no less interesting and important for that.

A few years ago, for instance, Mini Graff stencilled a little urban skyline on top of a piece in the laneway facing Graphic Art Mount. I loved it — like lots of Mini Graff’s work, it felt like a kind of reward for paying close attention to the wall. And to me, the stencil was taking part in a respectful conversation with the piece in question. However, the artist who did the original piece — DMOTE, a legend of Sydney graffiti — was not amused. He felt his piece had been capped and disrespected, and he told Mini Graff as much when they met at a May’s exhibition a few weeks later. No disrespect was intended, and apologies were made. A couple of years later, in an unrelated incident involving another player, Mini Graff (along with Deb) found her own commissioned panel tagged on the very night it was launched. In this case, disrespect was certainly intended, and veiled threats were made. Putting your art on the street — even when that street is a laneway curated as a kind of ‘outdoor gallery’ — is an unpredictable business that makes the work open to modification.

At the outdoor gallery, these debates about quality also involve others who are not connected with the graffiti and street art scenes. One piece by Josh2000 was infamously censored after it generated complaints from nearby residents and passers-by for its use of the word ‘sluts’. While the piece would have created less fuss had it been hung in an art

gallery somewhere (where critical commentary and controversial imagery is meant to be contained), its exposure to wider publics in a laneway gallery gave it a different meaning and impact. The open street invites commentary — and given that the graffiti writers and street artists who paint in May Lane are often the providers of that commentary in the city’s public spaces, it would be a little weird if May Lane was somehow roped off from that dynamic.

### **The quality of graffiti and ‘quality of life’ in May Lane**

The shift from eradication to curation, then, generates a series of interesting questions and tensions. How are all these tensions likely to be resolved? As the May Lane Street Art Project and its associated graffiti commons have expanded and gained wider recognition, we have reached an interesting moment in their history. Can different graffiti and street art scenes continue to share the space relatively amicably? And perhaps most importantly, will Marrickville Council allow the experiment to continue, or will we see an attempt to reimpose the legal and planning codes that it challenges? In the end, this last question should indeed be answered with reference to some wider concept of the ‘public good’. I want to conclude this essay by arguing that the May Lane Street Art Project and the graffiti commons make an important contribution to the public good. Yes, May Lane has become a haven for graffiti lovers and practitioners. But that is only part of the reason that the experiment is worth supporting. Just as importantly, May Lane is now a vibrant, lively space of *encounter* in the city.

The experience of May Lane demonstrates that what is good for the quality of graffiti and street art can also be good for ‘quality of life’ in the city more generally. This is a crucial point, for it



"CENSORED!"

シメンチ

Shannon

puts a different twist on the ubiquitous ‘broken windows’ theory of crime prevention that is used to justify the war on graffiti. Purveyors of this theory argue that, like a broken window that goes unfixed, graffiti sends a message to people that no-one cares, that minor crime is flourishing, and that further dangers must surely lurk around every corner. This establishes a vicious cycle, where fewer and fewer people are prepared to use the space, which makes it feel even less safe, which further reduces the number of people prepared to use the space, and so on — or so the theory goes.<sup>14</sup>

Now, what the ‘broken windows’ theorists have got *right* is that our perceptions of safety in a given place are indeed shaped by visual cues, and these perceptions are crucial to whether or not we will use that place. What they have got *wrong* is the notion that graffiti by definition sends a message of danger and disorder that makes everyone feel uncomfortable. This fails to recognise that there are different kinds of graffiti, which send different kinds of messages to different kinds of people. In fact, the process of curating good quality graffiti in May Lane has had the opposite effect to the one predicted by the ‘broken windows’ theorists. The art project and the graffiti commons have brought *life* back into May Lane, rather than turning it into a dead space. This has happened in a number of ways. The regular painting sessions and the launch parties have been directly responsible for populating the laneway at certain times. And beyond these events, the ever-evolving art on the lane has become an attraction that many people are now going out of their way to see on a regular basis. By bringing these people into the laneway, a *virtuous* cycle is established whereby others feel more comfortable using the laneway because it is populated. What is more, the graffiti and street art in May Lane actually send

a message that there are people caring for this laneway, that it is not a neglected space. Even for those who don’t like the art, it provides a visual cue that the lane is cared for.

I was powerfully reminded of all this on Sunday, 2 May 2010, the day that the NSW Government teamed up with Keep Australia Beautiful to stage their very first ‘Graffiti Action Day’. The aim of their event was to paint over as much graffiti as possible, in yet another strategy designed to help win the war on graffiti. I spent that Sunday in May Lane watching PUDL and SET from Sydney graffiti crew Big City Freaks paint a truck with fresh pieces. We were taking part in an alternative event called ‘Keep Australia Colourful’, which involved a bunch of graffiti artists and graffiti lovers taking a stand for graffiti art and culture by beautifying the city in our own way — with legal graffiti pieces.<sup>15</sup> As usual, May Lane was full of life. PUDL and SET attracted some teenage onlookers, who hung back to watch the accomplished artists in action. A few well-known graffiti artists dropped by to check out the pieces in progress. Locals walked past on their way to and from nearby St Peters railway station. A few stopped to say hello, and most took away a leaflet I was handing out about the campaign. Some car enthusiasts stopped in the lane to use its artwork as a backdrop for photos of their freshly polished and modified rides. A couple of university students making a documentary about graffiti came by to get some footage of PUDL and SET in action and to ask them a few questions. They also interviewed another young artist who was producing a piece on a garage door further down the laneway with his father watching on. A steady stream of amateur photographers came through to document the latest artwork in the lane — including a very respectable middle-aged couple who regularly

pop in to May Lane to check out the walls on their weekend bicycle rides from the Sutherland Shire, several kilometres away. As they told me, ‘We don’t have anything like this in the Shire.’

To find all this life in a semi-industrial back lane on a Sunday is pretty remarkable. In caring for and populating the lane, then, the May Lane Street Art Project has turned a formerly dead space into a lively place. And because it is a space where many different people’s trajectories cross, it is now a valuable space of encounter in the city, where people have learnt how to share space with others who are different from themselves. Crucially, the encounters between graffiti writers, street artists and the wider public that take place in May Lane suggest an alternative to the long and futile war on graffiti. In May Lane, members of the community who know nothing about graffiti and street art beyond the hype they’ve seen in the mainstream media might come to realise that there is a wide variety of styles, some of which they like and some of which they don’t. They might even see some of the artists in action, and find out that there is a high degree of skill involved (and that they aren’t going to try to sell you drugs or mug you when you walk past!). Similarly, I know that some of the artists who paint in the lane are constantly surprised by the sympathy and support they have received from some passers-by. It turns out that not all older people hate graffiti! Here lies the prospect that prejudices on both sides can be broken down. None of these encounters are possible when graffiti writing is pushed to marginal spaces in the dead of night, as it is by the zero tolerance approach.



Of course, we should be wary of overly romanticising these encounters. It's not as though everyone who passes through the lane stops to admire the art and talk to an artist. And it's not as though everyone who does stop and talk to an artist has positive things to say about their work! But we don't need to romanticise the nature of these encounters to recognise their importance for the quality of urban life. That's because our capacity to engage with difference is central to urban social justice.<sup>16</sup> Even where prejudices are not transformed through encounters like those on May Lane, in such places differences of opinion are placed on a more even footing whereby they have been negotiated politically rather than settled forcefully.

Precisely because genuine encounters are unpredictable, they can only take place in spaces where some measure of disorder is allowed. This is why our society's response to graffiti is significant — it is a kind of barometer of our collective capacity to live peacefully with some level of disorder and difference in our cities.<sup>17</sup> Forty years ago, American urbanist Richard Sennett argued that our cities seemed to be increasingly characterised by an 'inability to deal with disorder without raising it to the scale of mortal combat'. He worried that every instance of disorder was turned into 'a situation in which the ultimate methods of aggression, violent force and reprisal, seem[ed] to become not only justified, but life-preserving. It is a terrible paradox that the escalation of discord into violence comes to be, in these communities, the means by which "law and order" should be maintained'.<sup>18</sup> This neatly sums up the logic that has resulted in the escalating war on graffiti. May Lane is so valuable because it provides us with some clues about how to end the war and make a decent and just peace.

Certainly, there was no better place to be on Graffiti Action Day. The stated aim of this event was to make the city better by getting members of the community to take care of their neighbourhood by giving its walls and fences a fresh coat of paint. This accurately describes what has been going on at May Lane for several years — except that in May Lane, graffiti writers and street artists have actually been included as part of the community in this process, rather than excluded as enemy combatants. And that makes all the difference in the world.

- 1 Kurt Iveson, 'The war on graffiti and the new military urbanism', *City*, vol. 14, issue 1–2, pp. 115–134, 2010
- 2 Crime Prevention Division, NSW Department of Justice and Attorney General, 'Graffiti Vandalism: The motivations and *modus operandi* of persons who do graffiti', October 2009
- 3 Kurt Iveson, 'War is over (if you want it): Rethinking the graffiti problem', *Australian Planner*, vol. 46, issue 4, pp. 24–34, 2009
- 4 See <http://ccr.uws.edu.au/writingways/>
- 5 Kurt Iveson, *Publics and the City*, Blackwell, Oxford, Blackwell, p. 130, 2007
- 6 The May's website has pictures of most works in context; see <http://www.mays.org.au>
- 7 Pictures of pieces in their wider context can be found on the May's website: <http://www.mays.org.au/>
- 8 A good glossary of graffiti terms can be found here: <http://www.graffiti.org/faq/graffiti.glossary.html>
- 9 Joe Austin, 'More to see than a canvas in a white cube: For an art in the streets', *City*, vol. 14, issue 1–2, pp. 33–47, 2010
- 10 Alison Young, 'Negotiated consent or zero tolerance? Responding to graffiti and street art in Melbourne', *City*, vol. 14, issue 1–2, pp. 99–114, 2010
- 11 This is the policy adopted by nearby City of Sydney Council.
- 12 Jeff Ferrell and Robert Weide, 'Spot Theory', *City*, vol. 14, issue 1–2, pp. 48–62, 2010
- 13 Mark Halsey and Ben Pederick, 'The game of fame: Mural, graffiti, erasure', *City*, vol. 14, issue 1–2, pp. 82–98, 2010
- 14 The original formulation is James Wilson and George Kelling, 'Broken Windows: The police and neighborhood safety', *Atlantic Monthly*, pp. 29–32, March 1982
- 15 See <http://www.keepaustraliacolourful.org>. The truck was kindly donated to the campaign by Gould's Book Arcade in Newtown.
- 16 Ruth Fincher and Kurt Iveson, *Planning and Diversity in the City: Redistribution, recognition and encounter*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2008
- 17 Kurt Iveson, 'War is over ...'
- 18 Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal identity and city life*, Knopf, New York, pp. 45–46, 1970





# Adam Hill

Adam Hill has been painting consistently for twelve years, producing works that range from the size of a postage stamp to the size of a five-story building. It was ten years before any commercial gallery came to recognise Hill's creative talents and dedication to his practice. Born in Penrith, and with no formal education in painting, Hill regards his emergence as an 'Aboriginal Artist' as predictably onerous. Perturbed by a culture of nepotism, Hill has steadfastly refused to qualify his work or identify his 'niche', believing his art will find its own resolve (and audience). The work, on its own accord, has ascended the tallest eucalypt atop the highest hill in that vacant paddock in the midst of summer ... and nested.

**ADAM HILL**

*In 'K's of emergency, 2007-2010*

360 x 276cm

Acrylic on primed board

Stenciled aerosol on 120L wheelie bin

© the artist



NAN LEARNED ME THAT ALL DOGS GETS FED THE SAME WHEN THEY COMES SNIFFIN...

# B.U.G.A.U.P.

The B.U.G.A.U.P. (Billboard Utilising Graffitists Against Unhealthy Promotions) movement began in October 1979. B.U.G.A.U.P. 're-faced' billboards, using humour and satire to subvert the advertiser's message. Despite their clandestine image, B.U.G.A.U.P. was often quite public and added an element of street theatre to their work. Lachlann Partridge, fascinated by graffiti and its potential as a medium of political and social expression, was drawn to B.U.G.A.U.P. in the early 1980s. He was known to adopt the guise of the Lone Ranger while Billy Snow — one of the founders of B.U.G.A.U.P. — sometimes appeared as the Phantom. Activist and artist Kevin McKay, an admirer of the audacious wit that found expression in spray painted responses to billboard advertising by B.U.G.A.U.P., joined the movement in 1983. Partridge and McKay have worked together on various projects since meeting in 1983, the most recent being the mural in this exhibition, *Write of Reply*, 2007.

**B.U.G.A.U.P.**  
*Write of Reply*, 2007  
360 x 276cm  
Aerosol and acrylic on primed board  
© the artists



# Chor Boogie

Chor Boogie is an artist who understands himself and the world through colour. He is one of the masters in the pioneering craft of spray paint. Chor Boogie was raised in Oceanside, California. His drive and passion is fuelled by the study of Renaissance artists, such as Michelangelo and Rembrandt, and modern artists, such as Klimt and Dali, combined with the influence of contemporary spray paint 'mentors', such as Phase2, Vulcan and Coma. Chor Boogie underwent a transformative recovery from addiction nearly a decade ago, altering his life and his art and inspiring new styles of color therapy techniques. He moved to San Francisco in 2007 to pursue a full-time career in art. His practice of using an inverted can slows down the pressure of the paint to create dense, rich tones that produce geometric shapes and highly detailed imagery. In this, Chor Boogie seeks to ignite the hearts and minds of viewers through his art.

**CHOR BOOGIE**

*The Colour of Sydney*, 2008

360 x 276cm

Aerosol on primed board

© the artist



# Cultural Urge

Cultural Urge is an artist, graphic designer and all-round creative type who strongly opposes the ethos of asking for permission to create art! A love for heavy metal, hip hop, graffiti, tattoos, skateboarding and comic books has led Cultural Urge to create artworks that contain remnants of such 'disorderly' influences. His approach to the application of his art is similar to that of a surgeon wielding a scalpel — instinctively calculated on the rules of engagement. Creativity and imagination, combined with a very methodical technique, result in intricate dream-like visions.

**CULTURAL URGE**

*The Odious, 2007*

235 x 160cm

Stenciled aerosol on primed board

© the artist



# Deb

Deb is an eclectic Melbourne-based artist with a passion for street art and is highly active in the Australian art scene. She has painted many public spaces in Melbourne and Sydney, and has also completed commissions in other cities throughout Australia. Her inspiration is drawn from her own life experiences and a fantasy world that she has created, which she enjoys exploring in her art.

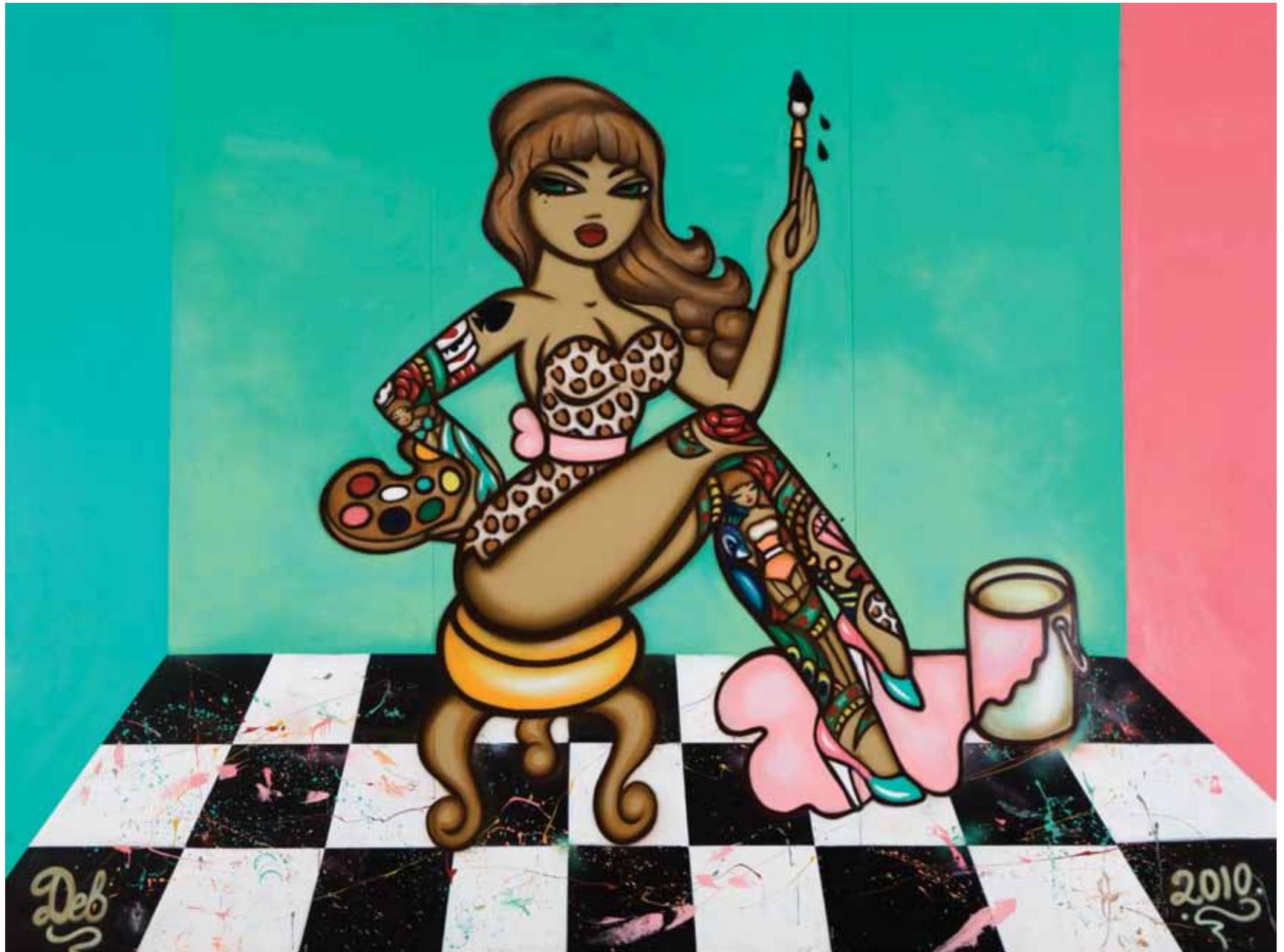
**DEB**

*I See You...and Raise You One*, 2010

360 x 276cm

Aerosol on primed board

© the artist



# Die Laughing Collective

Die Laughing Collective was formed in 2004 by Jamin, Paicey and Empire. The collective was immersed during its formative stage in an artistic, ideological and geographic synergy, producing work that confronted the rise of neo-conservatism, Howardism and a resource-based war, from the unique vantage point of Hobart, Tasmania — a place seemingly removed from global affairs and yet mothering its own micro-scale resource war and neo-conservative upswing. The street, and the immediate nature of street-based methods such as spray cans and stencils, provided the perfect lubricant to foment the collective's anti-establishment bent. The collective has been scattered across various parts of Australia and the globe since 2008. The war continues. The neo-conservatives and their values remain entrenched. Die Laughing Collective will continue to resist.

**DIE LAUGHING COLLECTIVE**

*Sic Semper Tyrannus*, 2009

235 x 160cm

Aerosol on primed board

© the artists



# Dlux!

Dlux! was an artist who was busy on the streets of Melbourne from 2000 until around 2004.

**DLUX!**  
*dlux boneyard*, 2005  
360 x 276cm  
Aerosol on primed board  
© the artist



# Dmote

Dmote started painting Sydney's streets in 1985 at the age of 15 years. He has been a consistent contributor to the graffiti art form ever since, bridging the gap between his roots in street paintings and a culturally sensitive approach to commercial work. Writing graffiti has taken Dmote and his artwork to subways, streets and galleries the world over, from New York to Tokyo to Sarajevo. Dmote's work has also been published in numerous street art and culture magazines and documentaries. He continues to stay true to the fundamentals of the art form by remaining active as a street writer and artist. Dmote currently lives and works in New York.

**DMOTE**  
*Untitled, 2010*  
360 x 276cm  
Aerosol on primed board  
© the artist



# Jumbo & Zap

Growing up in the suburbs of Sydney, Jumbo was influenced by skateboarding, comic art and the background hum of 1980s TV shows. He went to study printmaking at the National Art School, Sydney and has continued to experiment with different styles, resulting in a scatterbrain of images that explain his interest in surrealism. Today, the world of Jumbo is divided between art shows, street posters, commercial work and bread-and-butter signwriting.

(Zap bio on page 76)

**JUMBO & ZAP**

*Monster City (Panic Attack)*, 2009

360 x 276cm

Acrylic and paper collage on primed board

© the artists



# Kamion

Born in the rural outskirts of Sydney, Kamion is currently based in London. Since 2007, Kamion has been manipulating the scroll and pinstripe designs of interstate trucks, which he grew up travelling in along the east coast of Australia. Producing one-off stencilled and screen-printed designs, he creates works that are precise in execution and rich in graphic texture.

**KAMION**  
*Smoke Carrots, Not Drugs, 2009*  
235 x 160cm  
Stenciled aerosol on primed board  
© the artist



# Kenji Nakayama

Kenji Nakayama is originally from Hokkaido, Japan. He is currently residing in Boston, Massachusetts, where he works as a designer/artist. Instead of attending art school, as he would have liked, Kenji graduated from a technical institute and started working for industrial firms as an engineer. In his spare time, however, he remained devoted to his art and in 2004 decided to leave the engineering industry in order to pursue his passion more seriously. Kenji has created a visual identity that speaks to the disconnection of individuals from their urban settings. Using hundreds of layers of stencils, he creates installations, murals and canvases and has exhibited work around the globe. Kenji is a member of NYC/Boston based Artists Collective 'Project SF'.

**KENJI NAKAYAMA**  
*Brooklyn Train Track, 2008*  
360 x 276cm  
Stenciled aerosol on primed board  
© the artist



# Luna & Peru

Things that help Luna to create (in no particular order): chocolate, Haribo, The Abominable Iron Sloth, Stanley Kubrick, Style Wars, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, Blade Runner, The Crimson Ghost, Rowland S. Howard, Hanna-Barbera, The Jesus and Mary Chain, Kurt Vonnegut, Bees, Stan Lee, A Confederacy of Dunces, Big Black, Solaris, Hayao Miyazaki, Nosferatu, He-Man, The Life Aquatic, Jay Reatard, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Celtic Frost, Event Horizon, cats, family, friends, ice-cream.

(Peru bio on page 62)

**LUNA & PERU**  
*Untitled, 2008*  
235 x 160cm  
Aerosol on primed board  
© the artists



# Mare

Mare is one of Sydney's most prolific graffiti artists, who has been active since 1984.

**MARE**

*Untitled, 2005*

235 x 160cm

Aerosol on primed board

© the artist



# Mini Graff

Mini Graff stencils and prints images on to a variety of media (walls, boards, vinyl, paper), which strongly relate to a given environment and community, transforming anonymous urban landscapes into unique and personal art forms. Parody, humour and social commentary are common themes in Graff's work — notions that are translated into experiments of scale in public spaces, from discrete interventions to large-scale installations. Graff has participated in several public art projects including Sydney's 'Art & About', and she has coordinated and presented numerous printmaking workshops in high schools, tertiary institutions and public art galleries. Graff's recent *Suburban Roadhouse* series explores concepts of trademark and ownership in public and domestic space.

**MINI GRAFF**

*Suburban Roadhouse no. 5, 2010*

235 x 160cm

Acrylic, stenciled aerosol on primed board

© the artist



# Nails

Nails emerged from the street art scene that was blossoming in Melbourne in the early to mid-2000s after re-locating from Tasmania. He was quickly recognised by his contemporaries as an innovator, with a distinctive approach and a unique style, and he had a reputation for pushing new ideas into the movement. Feeding into Nails' street work are the influences of a fine art practice based in painting and installation. The quick pace in the evolution of his work reflects his unending energy, free-spirited approach, and hunger to explore new directions.

**NAILS**  
*Troubadours*, 2007  
235 x 160cm  
Aerosol on primed board  
© the artist



# Numskull

Numskull is a Sydney-based artist. He was born in Tokyo and grew up in Sydney's northern suburbs where his interest in cartoons, fantasy film, comics and all things TV began. This later developed into an obsession with skateboarding, graffiti and street art. Entirely self-taught, Numskull was mentored throughout his early days by older traditional graffiti artists. A favourite on the street and in the gallery for his epic mashes of text, pop iconography and stencil figures, Numskull's work critically explores themes of love, hate, mystery, fantasy and false heroes as portrayed by corporate advertising that dominates the public space. Numskull's work has been shown in both his own pop-up spaces (self-curated) and all around Australia and overseas, including London, Japan, Hong Kong and Paris.

**NUMSKULL***Killer Zombies of Surry, 2007*

235 x 160cm

Stenciled aerosol, acrylic and paper  
collage, mixed media on primed board

© the artist



# Otis & Peru

Otis is a creative and vagabond who resides and works out of a treehouse in North Carlton, Melbourne. He is obsessed by all that lives and breathes, and transforms his passion for living things in his work by exploring the realm where the natural world and the 'unseen' collide in a powder puff of color, shape and repetition.

Peru's interest in graffiti began with a journey to the Americas in 2000. In the grimy streets of São Paulo, Brazil, Peru saw first hand the massive walls and throw-ups of the Os Gemeos twins and the cryptic script of pixação. That same year Peru was exploring San Francisco and came across Barry McGee's Twister work. It was then Peru decided to pick up a marker and a black book. He has since set out to learn the craft in variety of ways, observing the traditions of 1970s New York subway styles, the traditional funk styles of Sydney, and murals with a mixture of disorderly art influences. Peru perceives words not only in their graphic form but as a much stronger entity. In his practice, he often swaps the placement of words to explore the shapes and possibilities of more letters, invoking different meanings from the words themselves.

**OTIS & PERU**  
*Untitled, 2008*  
235 x 160cm  
Aerosol on primed board  
© the artists



# Peque

Peque is an illustrator, aerosol and airbrush artist from Mexico who has won international recognition. While he has visited Australia a couple of times, ‘you can take the boy out of the barrio, but you can’t take the barrio out the boy’ — as evidenced in Peque’s art. Peque’s cultural roots, along with his social and political commentaries on ancient and contemporary Mexico, are the principal themes in his artwork. His work has been exhibited in various institutions in Mexico, Australia and the United States; however his favourite galleries remain the public byways and city streets.

**PEQUE**

*Ya Llegamos Carnal, 2009*

360 x 276cm

Aerosol on primed board

© the artist

Pegle  
VKS '09



# Peter Burgess

Peter Burgess studied Architecture at NSW Institute of Technology, Fine Arts at Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education, Sydney, and received his Master of Fine Arts from the Pratt Institute, New York in 1981. He has exhibited extensively in group exhibitions across North America and Europe, including Documenta 8 (Kassel, 1987) and The Decade Show (New Museum, New York, 1990), as well as national exhibitions such as Australian Perspecta (Art Gallery of NSW, 1983) and Prints and Australia: Pre-Settlement to Present (National Gallery of Australia, 1989). Peter Burgess lived and worked in New York for twenty years and relocated to Sydney in 2000, where he is currently a Lecturer in Print at the National Art School. He regularly exhibits at Milani Gallery, Brisbane.

**PETER BURGESS**

*(718), 2009*

360 x 276cm

Stenciled aerosol on primed board

© the artist



# Phibs

Originally from Sydney, Phibs has been painting graffiti for well over a decade. He is well known for his incredibly detailed cut-back technique and tribal influenced style. Now in Melbourne, he continues to push himself by bringing his style to new areas of design working not just on walls, but canvas, skateboards and clothing. He has recently toured Asia as part of K-Spray and been commissioned to create artwork for Absolute Vodka.

**PHIBS**

*Temple, 2005*

360 x 276cm

Aerosol on primed board

© the artist



# Scram

Scram started graffiti work back in 1984 under the influence of the film *Beat Street*, the seminal book *Subway Art*, and the mind-boggling pieces produced by the first wave of graffiti writers to hit Sydney. Scram still creates graffiti and has exhibited his work in galleries throughout Australia.

**SCRAM**  
*Untitled*, 2008  
235 x 160cm  
Aerosol on primed board  
© the artist



# Spice

Spice is world renowned for her longevity and contribution to the Australian hip hop culture since the early 1980's. She is Australia's first female MC to produce a song pressed to vinyl under distribution of Virgin Records and to tour with international icon Ice T. Spice pioneered in legal wall workshops and established Outreach Through Art classes; she continues to work as a Youth Recreation Officer for one of Australia's major councils. Her work has featured in various magazines, websites, stage productions and books and been exhibited in Brooklyn, New York, Amsterdam and various galleries Australia-wide. She is currently a feature writer for *Hell Yeah* magazine and has been immortalized in the Powerhouse Museum's *The 80s Are Back* exhibition in Sydney (2009–10).

**SPICE**  
*Cosmic Slop*, 2008  
235 x 160cm  
Aerosol on primed board  
© the artist



# Taring Padi Collective

Taring Padi is a community of underground artists in Bantul, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. They formed in 1998 during the general upheaval that followed the resignation of President Suharto. Taring Padi are well known for the production of cartoon-like posters embedded with political and social justice messages, using the cukil (block printing) technique on paper or canvas. In addition to their print work, they also create kinetic sculptures, street theatre performances, punk rock and techno music. After the fall of Suharto, Taring Padi occupied an abandoned art school, which they use as a residence and workspace for creating art, music and theatre. Works by Taring Padi have been shown in Indonesia's National Gallery in Jakarta. Taring Padi was also included in the group show *Sisa: re-use, collaborations and cultural activism from Indonesia* (2007) at the UTS Gallery, Sydney.

**TARING PADI COLLECTIVE**

*Demolish Our Borders*, 2006

360 x 276cm

Acrylic on primed board

© the artists



# Zap

Zap was in various street gangs from the age of 10 years. He did it tough in his adolescence, and he sometimes stole in order to eat. During these early years, however, Zap's passion for graffiti and skateboarding grew. As opposed to the typical Australian 'sporty' stereotype, Zap was always involved in creative pursuits and has since developed a unique graffiti style of his own. Psychedelic abstract forms, shapes and spaceships are symbols of the artist's journeys through time and space.

**ZAP**  
*Untitled, 2007*  
235 x 160cm  
Aerosol on primed board  
© the artist



# Zombe

Zombe is one of Sydney's most prominent graffiti artists and has been active since the early 1990s.

**ZOMBE**

*Untitled, 2006*

235 x 160cm

Aerosol on primed board

© the artist



# Acknowledgements

## Every artist who has contributed to May's

ADAM HILL, ALASKA, ALPHA CREW, ANGEL, B.U.G.A.U.P., BAYU WIDODO, BEASTMAN, BENZO, BERTY CADILHAC, BONSAI, BRIDGE, BUNKWAA, BUTCHER, CAINS, CHOR BOOGIE, CRACK ONER, CRAZY KADE, CULTURAL URGE, DAKS, DEB, DEN5, DESTA, DIE LAUGHING COLLECTIVE, DLUX!, DMOTE, DOER, DOLL, DREAM, DREWFUNK, DRIP KING, DRUGS, DRYPNZ, DUET, EARS, EMILY HASSELHOOF, EYESKI, FREDROCK, GONZO, GRRL+DOG, HAHA, HAZZY BEE, JAYR, JOHN DOE, JOSH2000, JOTA ONE, JULES, JUMBO, JUNKY PROJECTS, KAB101, KAGENT, KALIBER, KAMION, KAREN ELIOT, KASH, KENJI NAKAYAMA, KERUPT, KID ZOOM, KILL PIXIE, KONSUMTERRA, LIMIT, LUNA, MAKE, MARE, MERDA, MICKIE QUICK, MINI GRAFF, MISTERY, MOVEMENT CREW, MR SIKS, MR. CARTOON, N4T4, NAILS, NUMSKULL, OTIS 54, OKIPA, OMEN, PAVE, PEQUE, PERU 82, PETER BURGESS, PHIBS, PRINS, PTERADACTYL MAN, PUDL, RADIO, REAS, RIT ONE, RUN COLLECTIVE, SAME SAME, SCRAM, SET, SIX, SMC3, SPACE, SPICE, STICKUPKID, STORE, STRIKER, SWARM, TARING PADI COLLECTIVE, TEAZER, TOY SOLDIERS, TWOONE, VARS, VEXTA, WATER, WILL COLES, XABIER, YOK, YOKO, ZAP, ZOMBE , (718)

## Exhibition acknowledgements

Tugi Balog would like to thank: Graphic Art Mount for providing financial support and other necessary resources; Wendy Murray for her tireless attention to detail and dedication to the May's Project; Scram for sharing his knowledge about graffiti culture and advice; Dianna Balog for her support and enthusiasm; Eva and Greta Balog; Daniel Daley for his enthusiasm and documentation of the project; Hana Shimada for her creative contribution to the design of the first cycle logo and flyers; the St Peters community for their support; and Marrickville Council. He would also like to acknowledge previous project coordinators: Jimmy Singline, greatly responsible for the birth of the May's Project; Tim Leha; Chris Tamm; Paul Milecharane; and Juan Mon.

In addition, Tugi thanks BRAG Director Richard Perram for his vision and acknowledgement of the project; BRAG Curator Sarah Gurich for making the tour possible and not missing a single beat; Blair French, James Dodd, and Kurt Iverson for articulating and capturing the May's Project in words; Niels Oeltjen for design of the stunning tour catalogue; and Sharon Hickey for her excellent work in photographing the May's tour panels. The May's team thanks the many people who have offered their support to May's since it began.

Kurt Iveson would like to thank Tugi and Dianna and Wendy for their hospitality and conversations, which made writing his piece for this catalogue so much fun.

Text and headlines set in Sentinel by H&FJ.

This catalogue was printed by Finsbury Green using a carbon neutral process. Paper stocks FSC Certified.

