



KIDZOOM



REKA



ANTHONY LISTER

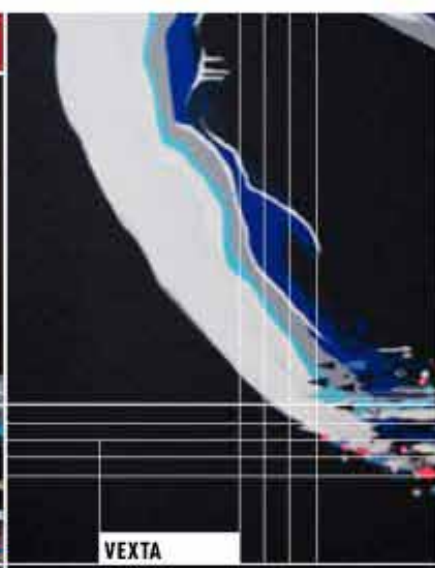


RONE

YOUNG & FREE



MEGGZ



VEXTA



HA-HA




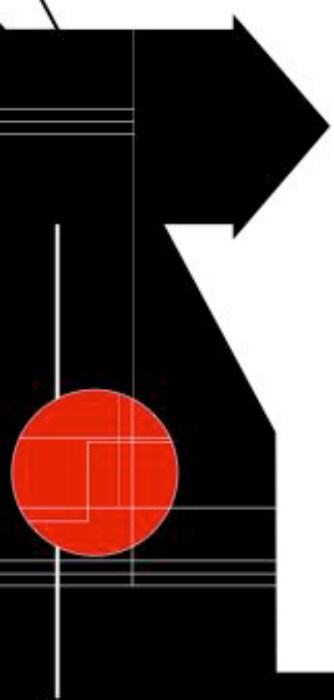
BENFROST



DMOTE



TAKING IT OFF THE STREETS



FROM ITS ORIGINS AS FREE EXPRESSION ON SUBURBAN WALLS, AUSTRALIAN STREET ART IS TAKING A BIG STEP TOWARDS MAINSTREAM ACCEPTANCE COURTESY OF THE **YOUNG & FREE** EXHIBITION HITTING SAN FRANCISCO THROUGH SEPTEMBER AND OCTOBER. **LIZ GALINOVIC** LEARNS HOW CO-CURATORS **SANDRA POWELL** AND **ANDREW KING** ARE NOT JUST SHOWCASING THE WORK OF **ANTHONY LISTER**, **BEN FROST** AND **VEXTA** AMONG OTHERS, BUT HELPING THEM CONNECT TO THE WIDER ART WORLD.

In a 1994 interview with *Artlink*, the Sydney based researcher Linda Forrester discussed some of her perspectives on the “creative culture of graffiti” gained after several years of study. According to Forrester and the article’s author, Frances Butler, “Nowhere is the art of Sydney’s youth more obvious than in the public sphere” – on walls, on trains, on bridges and under them. And it’s certainly not confined to Sydney, a city which in terms of revolving street gallery standards pales in comparison to her chief competitor in everything – Melbourne. But what Forrester also found was a mainstream reaction to this “creative culture” that ranged from


what Forrester also found was a mainstream reaction to this “creative culture” that ranged from one of outright (and often misplaced) fear to a “that’s-not-art” disdain perpetuated by the art world and the media, with historically entrenched academic studies labelling youth culture as “rebellious” and “delinquent”. “The media are horrible,” Forrester told *Artlink*, “because as soon as I say ‘youth culture’ they say ‘gang’, as soon as I say ‘graffiti’ they say ‘crime’. And so that old naming paradigm continues.”

It's a common perception and one that Melbourne art collectors Sandra Powell and Andrew King themselves held before they delved deep into Australia's street art scene. “Living in Melbourne we knew there was a street art scene but we'd never really been that interested in it,” Powell recalls. “I think we really saw it as being young thugs and vandals and illegal goings-on so we never really took much notice.” But now they have found themselves the curators of an exhibition to take place in San Francisco in September, the aptly titled *Young & Free*, featuring some of Australia's most-respected street artists in the one space. **ANTHONY LISTER, BEN FROST, DMOTE, KID ZOOM, VEXTA, NEW2, DABS & MYLA, MEGGS, HA-HA, REKA, RONE and SOFLES** have varying degrees of exposure in the mainstream art world, from the lauded Lister with his international following to Rone's very recent debut solo exhibition at Collingwood's Backwoods Gallery. They vary in style and scope – from self-taught to professionally trained, from graffiti artists in the purist's sense to fine artists with street beginnings, style and influences. “There's a momentum building,” Sydney-based Ben Frost says of the local street art scene. “The world's opening up a lot more and there's really amazing and talented artists in Australia and this is going to be a great expression of that. I can't think of anything in this vein that's been exposed to an international setting.”

For 30 years *Young & Free* curators Powell and King ran a successful fashion business, something Powell believes paved the way for an inevitable interest in art which, around 15 years ago, they began collecting voraciously. Inside their home the white walls are visible only in patches, inches here and inches there, slithers of white peeking out between the numerous works that cover their walls. If it weren't for the unmistakable household fittings such as kitchen cupboards and dining settings, you could be forgiven for thinking you were in an art museum. And “museum” would fit given the stature of some of the artists in their collection.



SANDRA POWELL AND ANDREW KING



“What we started collecting was really the modernists,” Powell says. “Sidney Nolan, Joy Hester, Charles Blackman, the artists that were painting from the 40s and the 50s and the 60s, and that sort of gradually lead us to an interest in pop art, Australian pop art as well as international pop art. Then we were continually progressing like I suppose we do in our fashion business and that lead us to ‘Well, what’s the absolute latest thing that’s happening right now in the world?’ and there is absolutely no doubt that the hottest latest thing happening in the world is street art.”

It was while on a business trip in London that King picked up Banksy’s *Wall and Piece* and the couple’s preconceived ideas about street art changed. “The image on the cover of the Banksy book is *Love Is In The Air*, where you’ve got the masked urban guerrilla and instead of throwing a molotov cocktail he’s got a posy of flowers in his hand,” King explains. “I just looked and it and thought ‘what a great image’ – it really attracted me... It amused me but it was also very poignant, the message he was trying to get across. So... I started thumbing my way through it and I just thought ‘oh, gotta get this book’.”

It wasn’t long before Powell herself was flipping through the pages and coming out with a lust for more. “When we came back to Australia and dug a little deeper,” she enthuses, “It led to this amazing tunnel that we’ve fallen into and now it’s life encompassing – we’ve become completely besotted and obsessed.”

King and Powell began searching out Australian street artists, turning up to their shows and their live paints, begging to be able to purchase works, commissioning them to be painted freshly onto the walls of their home and selling their Sidney Nolans to be able to finance the new found passion. As well as decking out their walls with their very own Banksy, Shepard Fairey and Blek le Rat works, King and Powell have become bona fide patrons of the Australian street art scene, inviting artists around for big boozy lunches, encouraging them, advising them and paying them for their work. As Powell points out, “The best way to help them is to buy their art... and it gets to the stage when they’re really interested in what we know. We’re from the collector scene and we know how that works and they don’t know how that works and so we introduce them to other collectors, we introduce them to galleries. What Andrew and I want to do is we want to see them survive as artists.”

While a street artist can be commissioned to paint murals and other legal works, on the street, and be paid relatively well for it, it’s not the same as being an artist who resides in the gallery world, where they’re encouraged and given the necessary exposure to sell work. Over the past 30 years, street art as a credible art form and hot commodity has been steadily on the rise – mainly in Europe and the United States where galleries and

exhibitions are far more common than they are in Australia and where attitudes appear a lot more open to the movement. As King explains, "The gallery scene for street art overseas is a heck of a lot broader than it is in Australia. There are some galleries that just totally specialise in street art. The market in Europe and the United States is so much bigger than it is here."

It says something of the shift in attitudes toward a "creative culture" historically perceived as thoughtless vandalism, but here in Australia the shift is happening at such a slow pace you can almost hear heels dragging. Here, it is unlikely you would find buildings selling for more money than they're worth, or having their walls ripped off, simply because the wall features a particular street artist's work – this has actually happened overseas when a building has featured a Banksy work, but in Enmore, Sydney, a particular Banksy stencil is routinely painted over. Yet Australia has a vast array of talented and accomplished street artists, many of them with international standing and many more who are just as deserving.

The problem for street artists resides in the perception that their work is not art in the same sense that Picasso's is – that it's not conceptual, merely a defacement. Somewhat self-explanatory by definition (though defining "scenes", "movements" and "subcultures" can be controversial), street art is art on the street. It encompasses everything from tags to pieces (most commonly understood to be what constitutes contemporary graffiti), the use of stencils (stencil art or stencil graffiti, depending on who you talk to) paste-ups (paintings or drawings or stencils on paper and pasted up, traditionally using wheat paste), stickers (similar principle to paste-ups but often smaller and using more modern adhesive technology) and there's a Sydney woman who knits items for sign posts and telegraph poles.

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THE WAY STREET ART IS PERCEIVED IN AUSTRALIA."

It is usually acknowledged that this not a new phenomenon but an evolving practise existing since the days of the cave painters. The greatest difference between their work and the work of contemporary street artists like Banksy or Blek le Rat is that the former used it as a means for making records: of events, the land, the flora and the fauna and so on. Today's street artists, more often than not, are using it as a means to challenge, question, provoke, poke fun and subvert – it's hardly lacking in concept. As Frost says of his work, "It's very pop art [in style]. It's very much about taking logos and icons and characters that are well known and changing them and subverting them into new, often challenging and controversial readings. There's a push and a pull between attraction and repulsion so there will be something very beautiful to look at and if you look more closely you'll see I've subverted it in some way so the characters or the logos [are] doing the opposite of what you imagine. Or there's lots of drips happening, it's about disintegration and looking past the facade of the information that we're receiving every day in contemporary life."

According to Melbourne's Vexta, her images of people floating or falling through space while sprouting iridescent wings out of their hands have evoked reminiscences of Icarus flying too close to the sun, "which is like a warning of man changing his world and the things that can go wrong with that. And other people will look at it and think of this transformation into something better... I mean one of the first things that lead me to making these people that were flying was ideas about how we move through our cities and move through our urban world that we've created and creating imagery that will make people think about new ways of being in our cities. And I'm interested in making work that hopefully has references to things from the past but also looks to the future. Sort of modern day mythology I guess."

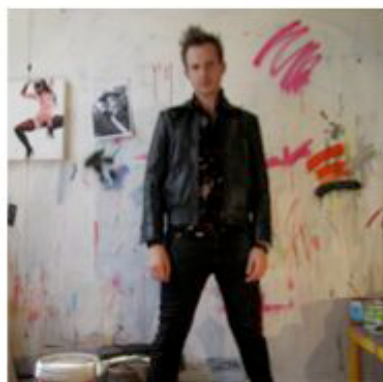
Many street artists like Frost and Vexta make moves from the street into the studio where they begin to push their way into the gallery system. They do this because as artists there is an innate desire to explore, experiment and broaden their creative ideas –it's also the best way to earn a living from their work. But this doesn't mean they turn their back on the street, argues Lister. "It's like saying you are going to make a move to eating indoors

the street, argues Lister. "It's like saying you are going to make a move to eating indoors more than outdoors. For all this time I've maintained two disciplines, I like to eat out and I like to make food at home and I kind of just try to live with both of those works and their different worlds."

TOUCH PIC FOR ARTIST GALLERY



VEXA



BEN FROST



ANTHONY LISTER

While *Young & Free* is a fabulous opportunity in that it will expose the individual artists to a market much larger than the one that's been growing at home, it would be much harder to achieve without Powell and King. But it's not just international exposure that these two patrons are giving to the artists – they have the connections, the funds and the reputation to help change the way street art is perceived in Australia. And according to Powell, that is just what they're trying to achieve. "Andrew's and my sole interest is completely about the artists and getting their work out to a wider audience. Whether that's a wider audience in Melbourne, like we agreed to do that article in *The Age* [because] what you're actually doing is showing heaps of people around Australia that these are people who collect art, and we can collect whatever we want to, we can go and buy another Sidney Nolan or a Brett Whitely if we want to, but we don't want to do that anymore. We actually believe we're putting our money with our voice and we're investing in these young artists now and if that can encourage other art collectors to look more seriously at this genre then that is fantastic."

***Young & Free* shows at 941 Geary, San Francisco from 10 September to 22 October.**

WEBSITE

