

ELPH

Edinburgh-based artist ELPH took some time out from adding splashes of colour to the grey Scotch mist to answer some of our questions about the direction of street art, his personal creations and, of course, his views on vintage beach balls. Arguably a pioneer in the rise of the Scottish graffiti scene, from gallery shows to murals, this guy does it all; and he does it well.



***An Elfberg interviewing an Elph!
Where did your name come from?***

He he. Writing Elph came pretty much from having a school teacher who was into Lord of the Rings and read it to us at the end of each day, it sort of stuck in my head. I also was quite into Hawk the Slayer. Is Elfberg Swedish?

Something like that. But enough about me...

Did you start out as most street artists do, bombing and tagging in your youth?

In the beginning I started writing my name on lampposts and bus stops with my mates, but my full name, not a tag or anything – it's quite common in Scotland to do that. Then I got "Subway Art", got a tag and spread out of my area and beyond.

A lot of your street art pieces are really vibrant and colourful, have they always been that way?

I think so, I had an art teacher at school that was pretty strict on colour theory, about never using black in paintings, similar to the way the Impressionists painted. Scotland is grey, wet and cold, so painting colourful stuff is an opposite to that I suppose.

stuff up in the streets will make you 'big' or make you money will lead to disappointment. It might have done a few years ago, but not now. As soon as it doesn't matter if you've done work in a street, then you'll see a difference and those folk will go do a new craze like painting vintage beach balls dressed as sailors.

I'd totally buy one of those.

You did your first Australian exhibition in Melbourne at the end of last year, which must have been amazing. What was the theme of your show and how was it received?

Melbourne is a good city but I was only there for a short time (just over a week). The show was called Data Loss and the theme was kind of based around spending too much time on the computer, but also featured a lot of images of experiments I'd done that usually never see the light of day. Mostly there was the usual mix of characters and lettering that I have always done, but I think the breakthrough for me was the gouache paintings.

The folk I met were all pretty productive and there seemed to be a good support

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Do you think the day will come when old ladies will pass a piece of street art and think 'gosh that's incredibly skilled and really brightens up the area' instead of jumping to the conclusion of vandalism?

Possibly, but as the inflated costs of graffiti clean-up seem to be on the news during a time when no-one has any money, people will probably grow to dislike it more. They have a policy now in Edinburgh where a piece of graffiti has to be cleaned within 24 hours and a private company is paid to do it. But they can't clear a bit of snow in the winter! (I sound like an old lady).

Politics, eh? Ruining everyone's fun as always. What would you say about the accusation that a lot of street art these days is put up by artists because they are trying to 'make it big'?

I can see folks' point and to a degree it's sort of true, but believing that sticking

for the arts there. I felt pretty lucky that Ghostpatrol got me over. I also got to paint with one of my favourite writers, Lush, which was a bonus.

You've done a lot of gallery shows in the last few years, what's your opinion of this crossover from predominantly working on the streets for all to see; to putting on shows that people choose to see?

I think I've slipped into going for more exhibitions than outside work, I still paint pieces but haven't done posters for a while now.

With painting in the street there is complete freedom, you can do whatever you want, everyone says that but it's totally true. On the rare occasion I get out to the pub I still enjoy the drunken tagging journey home, basic but fun.

With gallery painting you have to be

a bit more concerned with trying to sell something maybe? I've done a few 'conceptual' shows and sold nothing which has been a bit grim.

Do you think you'll ever move completely away from working on the streets?

Not for a while yet, I like mural painting so maybe never, until the arthritis ruins my hands and I can't paint outside.

Now you have a family, does the illegal aspect of graffiti concern you?

Not too much, I only think about it from time to time. The sentence for writers is ridiculous though, compared to other more serious crimes. It's doubtful I'm a priority case anymore compared with how much the younger guys are hammering it.

Is your son interested in art yet?

Just in a mess-making way, he enjoys throwing paint around, but seems more interested in the world of make-believe stories with puppets, dancing about.

How does the Scottish graffiti scene differ to elsewhere?

It's quite small, which is good but compared to when I was younger it's grown so much, quite a mix of styles. There definitely used to be what was considered an 'Edinburgh style', which was mainly painted by the crew I'm in - Many Styles Crew (MSC). 'Glasgow styles' were 3D letters painted by a writer Mak, whom everyone pretty much followed. The guys from Dundee had a mad take on the 80s Nonstop styles, which was good. I'm not sure it differs to any other scenes now, except geographically, but the internet has a lot to do with that. You can check out some more on scottishgraffiti.blogspot.com

I understand you were involved in a movement a long while ago to cover up National Front graffiti with your own work; do you think there is a strong association with graffiti and racism in the area in connection with this?

"In Edinburgh a piece of graffiti has to be cleaned within 24 hours and a private company is paid to do it. But they can't clear a bit of snow in the winter!"

Sounds right up my street.

As well as graffiti you are also highly skilled in pencil, oil, pen and digital art. Does the difference in medium affect your choice of subject matter?

The last few years I've managed to get a style that works in similar ways with most mediums, I tend to go for a fast process and layering it up. So for big pieces, spray paint and emulsion, for smaller pieces acrylic and gouache. Oil painting was as bad as using spray paint for the smell.

What influences your character-based designs?

Mode 2 was a giant influence, but I think he influenced not just me but a whole generation. Comic artists Paul Pope, Ashley Wood, Al Columbia, Kent Williams, George Pratt, Moebius, the list could go on for a long time! Anime and manga too, definitely.

The characters I draw now are a mix of drawings I did for flyers, fashion images, WW2 soldiers and comic books. I used to draw a lot of alcoholics, but not so much anymore.

One year there was a whole load of NF and BNP graffiti in my area so we just decided to cross it all out. My mate Bob wrote 'You're dead skinhead' underneath, it rhymed and everything. We ended up getting the hall of fame in my area for painting over similar stuff because we went to the council and said we'd paint it off our own backs, I was only about 14 then. Nationalism is a building block for hatred. And Mel Gibson ruined Scotland anyway.

You did an exhibition a few years back in memory of Robert Burns, which must have been a great honour. Are there other literary figures who have inspired you?

The Robert Burns show was a theme shoehorned in to coincide with the 250-year anniversary of his birth, I didn't know much about him to be honest, just that he liked to get bevvied and sleep with lots of women. I liked the story of Tam o' Shanter, which I knew as a child, so I illustrated that. Burns had a pretty interesting life; he was outspoken in a time when Scotland was in the grip of



religious stupidity, as always with reading behind the myth, some elements of his life were pretty dodgy.

I'm bad for reading books, definitely Tolkien inspired something, Ray Bradbury too, the last few books I've read were about The Clash and Joe Strummer. I mostly just look at the pictures.

You've been described as a 'visual addict' but what other non art related things inspire you?

Bad 80s movies, bad movies in general, Soul, hip hop and a bit of folk music. I've also been messing around making some electronic music and actually have an album coming out on Gamma Proforma under the name Pilot Nishiko if I ever finish the artwork, I'm no musician, I'll just say that now, but

it's good fun to make noise.

Who would you pinpoint as a great up-and-coming artist in Scotland at the moment?

Coco-Pops and Debts are good, Azby is decent, I like Fraser Gray's paintings and ODRA - he's not quite Scottish, w but we've adopted him.

What's next for Elph?

Well I had a show in Recoat Gallery in Glasgow (recoatdesign.com), called One One Three Three, that started on 15th April. Hopefully I will have a show in London in the summer, but that is still in the planning stages. There is talk of a Many Styles Crew show, but it maybe later rather than sooner!

Oh, and purchasing a shed.

www.akaelph.com

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