



THE
WRITING
ON THE
WALL

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For those who associate graffiti only with the defacing of public property, a visit to Terracycle, the sprawling recycling center on Trenton's New York Avenue, might quickly dispel that image. In the complex's gritty courtyard when the weather cooperates, or even when it doesn't, a group of artists can often be found with spray cans in hand, turning the interior walls into wildly stylized murals ablaze with color.

At the center of them all is Leon Rainbow, a Trenton-based “aerosol artist” with a growing reputation not only for street art, but for fine and commercial art as well. The 35-year-old native of San Jose, California has for the past several years been inspiring young artists while perfecting his own, site-specific portfolio. Rainbow teaches general art classes for the Princeton Young Achievers program at the Henry Pannell Center. He also leads a 15-week course at Terracycle on painting with aerosol.

Rainbow (his real name; his father is from the Cuechan tribe in Yuma, Arizona) has pieces all over Trenton. His work has been represented in numerous small shows; most recently at the “Pinot to Picasso” spring fundraiser at the Arts Council of Princeton. He paints murals for children’s rooms. He has done body-painting. He counts projects for Louis Vuitton, Staples, Infiniti; ads and logos for a ski resort and Blackberry on his growing resume. Among his most recent projects is a design for a lunch truck.

This is not to say that Rainbow hasn’t tried his hand at underground graffiti – the kind that appears overnight on train

cars, in subway tunnels, back alleys and on the highest walls of buildings, all on the sly. “That’s sort of a young man’s game,” he says. “It can be very dangerous. I’ve known people who have fallen through roofs. It’s risk vs. reward in graffiti. You have to figure out if the reward is worth the risk.”

During his childhood, Rainbow watched a lot of movies about subway graffiti. He was captivated by “Style Wars,” “Wild Beast,” and “Beat Street.” “Part of it was the colors,” he recalls. “And it was the idea of having so many people see your work (on trains). It was that whole idea of, ‘How did it happen?’ How did it get there?” that fascinated me.”

Rainbow’s mother recognized her son’s aptitude for art and she encouraged his interest. “My Mom is an artistic soul. She always inspired me to do art,” he says. “I started drawing young. I built things with Bristol Blocks. Then in my early teens, I really got interested in graffiti art.”

Rainbow’s stepfather moved the family to Trenton in 1995. He enrolled at Mercer County Community College two years later, earning an associate’s degree

in web design. He supplements his artwork with a job as a web designer for Inforest Communications in Princeton.

Balancing his burly frame on a wobbly wooden picnic table at Terracycle one sunny afternoon last month, Rainbow worked on a section of a mural taking shape on the side of an old, abandoned trailer. Moving his arm in graceful arcs as he filled in slices of surface area with gold aerosol paint, he made it look easy. It isn’t.

“Aerosol is a process that takes years to learn,” Rainbow said. “I would challenge anyone who underestimates it to try and use a spray paint to create work. To get can control is challenging for anyone. It is developed over time. It’s in the way you move your arm. And you have to know which nozzle to use.”

While associated with a certain contemporary edginess, graffiti is actually nothing new. The earliest forms date back to 30,000 B.C.E., in the form of prehistoric cave paintings made with animal bones and pigments. In more recent times, graffiti experienced a major boom in the 1980s. It is a period that continues to influence Rainbow.





"I've learned a lot from that time, from artists like Blade, Lee, and Futura. The list goes on," he says. "But not from Keith Haring or Basquiat. I feel they used street art to get into the gallery system. Blade did 5,000 trains. To me, that's impressive."

After the 1980s' boom, graffiti slipped from mainstream culture until the Internet reinvigorated interest. Today, it is found all over the world in various forms and styles; done legally and illegally.

"There are two different styles: permission graffiti, which is actively commissioned, and underground graffiti, which is done on the sly," Rainbow explains. "It's kind of a contradiction, but it's always going to be there. I think they could stamp out legal graffiti before illegal, because it's easier to get 'permission' walls shut down than it is to catch people randomly painting graffiti illegally."

Graffiti artists tend to work in groups, or crews. Rainbow's is called Vicious Styles, and they create as a team. "You need a group for walls or big jobs," he says. "We have a strong community. We built our scene from the ground up. There are about 10 of us right now. Different

crews do different things. We do murals, mainly; others do street stuff. We work off each other."

That collaborative part of the process is a positive influence on the young people with whom Rainbow has worked, not only in the locally-based classes he teaches but on projects in Philadelphia, New York, Washington, Florida, and Virginia. "Kids learn to work as part of a team," he says. "And learning this gives them confidence. The murals at Terracycle might take up to 10 people to create."

The background of many murals is applied with a roller, but aerosol paint is used for the bulk of the work. Rainbow loves it. "It's so quick. It dries instantly, so you can go right back over it when you make a mistake," he says. "I've been doing about 50 pieces a year for the past eight years with aerosol. It makes it hard for me to use another medium."

But he does, on his own projects and in the classes he teaches. Children in his every-other-Friday course at the Henry Pannell Center learn about different forms of art. "I was lucky enough that

they let me write my own curriculum," Rainbow says. "We do not only graffiti, but things that are going on in art now. We paint hats in some classes, bird houses in some others."

In August, the Vicious Styles Crew will hold their sixth annual "Jersey Fresh Jam" at Terracycle. Rainbow is expecting artists from up and down the east coast, hopefully topping last year's tally in the courtyard of between 150 and 200 including artists and spectators. He is hoping to organize a canvas show that would take place before the jam.

"Graffiti starts to give you a different view of the world," Rainbow says. "I really enjoy the process, and I enjoy being in different environments and different places. I travel a lot. Painting in Albuquerque is different from painting in Philadelphia. Every place has its own subculture."

Between his commercial projects, web design, shows, teaching, and the murals he creates with his crew, Rainbow has a full plate. "I feel like I'm a working artist," he says. "I'm a Renaissance man." ■