

LEON RAINBOW

ENERGIZING THE TRENTON ART SCENE WITH GRAFFITI

MAYBE IT'S A ROUGH NEW JERSEY NEIGHBORHOOD, a tough nut to crack, and there in the heart of it there's a very plain wall. You'd think anybody going at that wall with rattle cans was looking for trouble, but you'd be wrong. His name is Leon Rainbow and he's earning his bread by the sweat of an artist's brow. With a whole lot of color and style, he gives back to his community. The urban wall has long symbolized limits and ghettos, restraint, seething rebellion, degradation and captivity, but here on its surface is its renaissance in symbols of hope and a climb upward.

Artists like Rainbow pull together a little bit to celebrate their diversity and common love of beauty. They nod to the traditions and style of taggers, but Leon Rainbow and his partners work hard in the heat and they are wearing respirators. They shake their cans with permits in their pockets. They spray a bit of the First Amendment over Trenton, D.C., inside and outside the original 13 U.S. colonies for today's citizens and city fathers alike to enjoy. Graffiti is painting and a performance art, too, whether on rotating solid prism displays at the Folklife Festival at the Smithsonian, the side of an industrial lunch truck, at Trenton's Ellarslie Museum, or a city swimming pool.

Other city centers suffer from frankly ugly tagging, sprayed on in ten frantic seconds, perhaps while an accomplice distracts law enforcement. Vandalism is vandalism, Rainbow says, and these days that is just uncool. Time is the quality that an artist adds to the elements of this self-expression to take tagging to a higher plane where it becomes a gift rather than an annoyance. City

art is the transformation of urban spaces by artists intent on giving back to their communities. Their talents are commissioned and compensated. An artist gets permission, obeying ordinances. For a reward Rainbow has enjoyed museum exhibition, good publicity, and word of mouth that leads to the next project. Art like his remembers its roots in urban squalor, recalls once oppressive conditions and the rebellion of creative but misunderstood youth. Rainbow paints something exuberant, celebratory, uplifting and still honest.

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Thus the street paracosm behind graffiti culture is growing up and finding itself a place in today's popular art. Rainbow defines tagging as just making one's swift mark on a territory. Graffiti can't really become art until it has something more complicated to say, more time to plan and of course permission to work where the public can see it.

Today there is no good excuse for bad graffiti—premium paint comes in the humble old rattle can. Leon Rainbow likes Liquitex, Montana 94, and Belten Premium from Europe, sprayed on along with markers or even a brush for detailed work. Today's spray paint dries in seconds, covers earlier coats completely, escapes the can in safer solvents than yesterday's paints. Lower can pressure gives the artist a power of subtlety the tagger-vandal couldn't appreciate. Graffiti as a grown-up style goes on to a base-coated wall and follows a unified plan and composition.

Graffiti artists in the Trenton area have energized the local art scene. Artists collaborate frequently on big





projects. Rainbow has worked with brush painters, mural painters, and even with collagists. As many as 5 to 10 artists can work together on one project, especially with the help from the qualities of quick-drying spray paint, new materials, and communication via the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace and email. It is easier than ever to plan big projects and schedule big exhibits. Sometimes the "canvas" is a wooden or even corrugated steel fence, a brick wall, or thin panels of wood to make a portable museum exhibit. New and exciting

art paper (see sidebar) supports mixed media designs like never before. This is teamwork way beyond gang sign on a hopper car. "Be ready to bend a little bit to make everything come together when you work with other artists. Be open to lots of different ideas and don't have too firm a vision of the outcome like you have when you work by yourself."

One of Rainbow's biggest solo projects was an autobiographical set of 49 wooden panels that looked like four permanent walls in a museum exhibit at Ellarslie, Trenton's

Museum of Art. "It's a loose interpretation of my own life story," he says, "set up in the museum for the exhibit. Now I have it in storage and I'd love to set it up permanently somewhere. You see the baby in the spray can and my Native American ancestry. That's where I come from and what I'm born to be. You see me as a little kid having fun in the urban life, but as I get older I made some bad choices. You see me half-dead due to drugs, through negative things I thought about myself, and the darker life, the razor of



CRESCENT'S NEW RENDR PAPER!

BY MAYS MAYHEW, ARTIST AND INVENTOR OF
RENDR NO SHOW-THRU PAPER

Like most artists I use a sketchbook to brainstorm, conceptualize, and come up with ideas for my larger work. My sketchbooks are very important to me. I want to use the best materials in my work. One of the most annoying problems with sketchbooks is using heavy media/mediums that soak through the page and make the reverse side useless. Or worse, just finishing a meticulous drawing and then using media on the other side that ruins it. I've heard other artists complain about this, too, but since it was always like this, artists accepted it.

But as a product developer for Crescent I have the unique ability to invent new products. I don't have to accept annoying problems. And as an artist, I wanted a sketchbook that I could ink up one side and then use the other side of the page. The goal was that every page was a clean slate, a blank canvas. I wanted a sketchbook that allowed every page to matter.

My team and I worked with several paper mills to develop the perfect paper that not only prevented inks to bleed through but also didn't have any show-through on the other side—not even a ghost image. It took a year. It wasn't a simple task.

There were several challenges creating a paper with no bleed-through, an artist-grade paper and one that artists could afford.

The result was a phenomenal paper that exceeded all of our goals. RENDR paper is smooth enough for marker and inks with a slight tooth for pencil. Now you can get a sketchbook with full confidence that every page will start as a clean one. A sketchbook documents an artist's journey. It's important to respect that journey by using quality materials. Take pride in your work. Use RENDR—No Show-Thru Paper sketchbooks.



self-destruction, the pills. But then through art I get to climb out of that, up to a billboard, out of negativity. I found a different way of life, books and learning, and then giving back what I learned. This set looked like a whole room, windows masked off and everything. I'd love to find a place for it. A large corporate office maybe, a non-profit? Somewhere to keep it visible but safe."

The business of art has been transformed by the computer and the internet and this is also helping to change the perception of graffiti and graffiti artists. Leon Rainbow tries to be professional at all times, working always to strengthen his relationships and improve his social networking. He stays as active as possible in different projects. One project tends to lead to another and another, friends and customers tend to lead Rainbow from opportunity to opportunity almost as a side-effect of networking. "Answer email promptly," he advises, "and send biweekly updates and pictures of current projects to anyone who inquires

and to previous customers as well. Keep your presence known in the art business world and be willing to try new things."

In the studio, Leon uses Crescent Cardboard's new RendR Paper. "It's very smooth, not much tooth to it, and you can use whatever medium you like including acrylic spray or even paint markers, on both sides. It doesn't dry out the markers we use. You can treat both sides like canvas and it'll take

a full mixed-media approach. For some design stuff, I use Prismacolor markers, or that type of marker, colored pencils and ink pens." Leon thinks that this paper couldn't be better for designing walls, planning murals, or just sketching and playing.

"The paper can be rolled up and transported to a bigger project, or framed and hung as a finished painting. The piece actually is a painting." ■

