

The Long Beach Museum of Art presents *Vitality and Verve: Transforming the Urban Landscape*, one of the first leading exhibitions in North America to open its doors to new urban and contemporary artists, inviting them to transform the museum walls with ephemeral murals and multi-media installations. An ambitious collaboration with *Thinkspace Gallery* and *POW! WOW! Long Beach*, these locally and internationally celebrated artists were given the freedom to experiment within the museum space using new techniques to create dynamic large-scale works. Participating artists include Aaron Horkey, Alex Yanes, Andrew Schoultz, Audrey Kawasaki, Brendan Monroe, Brandon Shigeta, Cryptik, Esao Andrews, Greg “Craola” Simkins, Hot Tea, James Bullough, Jeff Soto, John S. Culqui, Low Bros, Meggs, Nosego, Nychos, Saber, and Tristan Eaton.

Their work, traditionally outside of the institutional mainstream, is typically seen in and around public spaces. In this exhibition, the artists infiltrate the museum (and beyond) with hyper-realistic imagery, abstract lettering, sharp symbolism, dense patterns, and saturated colors. Each mural installation tells a story and invites the community to connect to a visual network of global perspective. Painted directly onto the walls, the murals are impermanent and will be removed at the culmination of the exhibition. Juxtaposed together, they create loud visual vibrations that will remain only in memory.

Intangible by nature, murals on the streets can survive as little as days, months, or a few years. By design, these works cannot be collected or owned; they are created for the public masses. As a powerful conduit, public art can transform the landscape, amplify social and political concerns, beautify neighborhoods, and generate dialogue. Often, they create a sense of place and cultural pride. Whether sanctioned and censored or illegal and radical, public art is categorically polarizing and subversive. Acting as a double-edged sword, public art can stimulate positive change or be at the precipice of dynamic controversy. Progressively, it continues to be both. For this project, the work of these artists is presented both inside and outside the walls of this institution, providing multiple opportunities for accessibility. This experiment creates a bridge that invites those who do

not normally visit a museum to come in, and propels museum-goers to get out onto the street and view art with a fresh angle.

With more than forty years in the making, contemporary urban art has come a long way from the graffiti art of the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. No longer isolated as “underground art” or “sub-culture” that originated in city subways as a stereotyped genre, urban art has risen with unquenchable voracity. The once large gap between “high-brow” and “low-brow” categories is continuing to diminish due to the hybridization of contemporary culture with the encouragement of diverse styles and backgrounds of people.

Though the stigma of academic art continues to remain a strong criterion, today other conditions have become more elevated, which leads to questions such as, “Does the work embrace interactive experiences, produce public impact, or provide inclusive educational opportunities that are accessible? While any art form has the power to do so, large-scale murals are more noticeable and site-specific. Since the expression of art is an inherent right to all of us, mural projects are provocative as they can connect to everyone regardless of social or economic background. Increasingly, murals and integrated open-process art projects are being sponsored and created to generate interest in art participation at a young age. They promote an early collective consciousness that teaches students that art, when given a chance, changes lives. Congruently, civic surveys continue to document how the effects of art and cultural roles influence the community and how they may be incorporated into city planning.

In a discussion about public art, iconic contemporary urban artist Banksy eloquently said, “Art should comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable.” As with any rite of passage, shattering expectations from formal understanding is key to spurring new concepts and raw creativity. Banksy continues, “Think outside the box, collapse the box, and take a fucking sharp knife to it.” Starting from scratch is a metaphorical slash-and-burn that cleanses the ground and provides a chance for regrowth and innovative concepts. At times, guerilla-style tactics are necessary in order to catalyze social change.

Sharing visual space with corporate billboards is competitive. The population is accustomed to receiving ideas from influential marketing signage rather than inside the art institution. This can be intimidating to the casual viewer. By integrating their works on the streets, artists are free to transform the environment, influence others, and take social and cultural business into their own hands.

Vitality and Verve: Transforming the Urban Landscape is represented by artists who have created something broader than the artistry of their murals. They have inspired collaboration and cultural change that is happening now in the city of Long Beach. They transform our perceptions of art, and how we negotiate, interact, and adapt with each other in a continuously evolving environment. The public exchange of art and ideas is palpable and magnetic, and is part of a process that continues to mobilize critical paradigm shifts and promotes the discovery of our collective dreams.

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Exhibition Essay
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