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Photography & Art >> The Urban Art Movement Gains Momentum

by Enzo Scavone

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Ever since Barack Obama's victory in 2008, the artist Shepard Fairey has made a rapid rise to stardom. The poster he created with Obama's portrait and the slogan "HOPE" played an important role in the publicity efforts of the presidential campaign. To express his gratitude, Obama sent Fairey a message. It reads, in part: "Your images have a profound effect on people, whether seen in a gallery or on a stop sign." Fairey, as the most famous figure of an emerging artistic movement, had been commended by the leader of the free world. Urban art had officially arrived.

The movement has risen in popularity and sparked the interest of a broader public. But to those not active in the art scene, the term remains vague. In a first step to improve the understanding of urban art, one needs to look at where it originated: the movement started on the streets of urban environments where works were put up illegally, conveying messages the artists felt were otherwise not being heard by the masses. At this stage--when it can't be sold or exhibited in a gallery--urban art is considered street art.

This street art, as defined by John Fekner, one of the first street artists in the scene, is "all art on the streets that's not graffiti" (*Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* by Cedar Lewisohn). However, that still leaves a vast spectrum. In his article for *The Journal for Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Nicholas Alden Riggle tries to narrow it down: "The definition implies that street art is likely to be, among other things, illegal, anonymous, ephemeral, highly creative [...]" Once these conditions are met, street art can utilize various media to convey its message. Among them are for example stencil, sticker art, wheatpasting, or street poster art.

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by Gabrielle Acierno
There are upwards of 11 million people living and working in the United States, in every state and city, who face the perpetual threat of physical exile from their lives and their homes, to be banished to a country they barely know or in which they can barely survive. The only crime most have committed was to cross an arbitrary confine seeking a better life for themselves and their families. Although their plight appears disconnected from ours, this threat involves every American who cares about their country and values their ancestral history.
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An observer might get the impression that this art is rather playful, free-spirited, and not bound by rules. But just as street art can be playful, its brother, urban art, can be serious business. The market that deals in urban art is generally not different from other art markets. However, when considering buying urban art, some characteristics about the urban art market stand out. According to Gareth Williams, Specialist-in-Charge of Urban Art at Bonhams auction house, it is subject to unpredictable fluctuations, and at this stage it “[...] is really in its infancy still so it is difficult to know how things are going to turn out.” Other observers see great opportunities in the market but at the same time warn of the risks. Holly Ellyatt of CNBC.com finds that generally there are good prospects in the urban art market but advises caution. With the rise of some widely-known and iconic artists, there are also free-riders who ride along the wave. Mat Gleason delivers a rather crushing verdict in the Huffington Post where he warns that a similar development with neo-expressionism in the past led to a bubble that eventually burst and left collectors who had works of artists that were less than top-tier with strongly devalued pieces.



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The markets for urban art in the United States and Europe show some differences. Urban art enjoys a greater appreciation outside of the U.S. and according to Angelo Madrigale, Street Art Specialist at Doyle New York, America may be losing an opportunity to stay on the cutting edge of this cultural development. “[...] at the moment their [street artists’] work is seeing more mainstream attention in Europe. My concern about this is that this era of artwork is an essential part of American culture and is currently leaving the States; it would be a shame if by the time our country realizes this, the artwork is not available to be seen,” he says.

For now the big names in urban art have enough celebrity to lure people to exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic. Banksy and the above-mentioned Shepard Fairey are two examples. The Banksy artwork “Love Is in the Air” was sold at Bonhams at last year’s Urban Art Auction in Los Angeles for \$20,000. The Vespa Scooter by Shepard Fairey was sold at Doyle’s Inaugural Street Art Auction in New York for \$12,500



Clearly such prices suggest that one has to have a substantial amount of disposable income to own urban art. However, there is the possibility to consider less critically acclaimed, but still intriguing artworks like Banksy's "Pulp Fiction" depicting Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta as their *Pulp Fiction* characters wielding Bananas instead of guns for \$2,250. Leaving the iconic Banksy, one can take a conceptual piece by Chaz Borjórquez' titled "Locos" into consideration which is valued at around \$2,000.

Because the urban art market came about only recently, there is little experience or information to rely on. In an attempt to provide some clarity, Alain Schibli, publisher of *Amateur Magazine*, an urban art magazine and an urban artist, proposes that factors determining the quality of a work of art

are its style, which should be original, and the artistic skill, which needs to show refinement.

Brittany Moorefield, a fine art consultant for Franklin Bowles Galleries in San Francisco, recommends answering some specific questions when determining the quality of a work of urban art. Some of these include, “How old is the artist and what is their reputation? How much artwork have they produced in the past and are they currently producing? Where is their art being exhibited? [...] How has the artist differentiated themselves from other artists? In their materials, methodology, etc.?”

The answers to these questions help in qualifying a work of art. However, the work should also speak to the buyer and fit into his concept of what he values in art. If that foundation is not given, any further considerations are useless. Angelo Madrigale concurs: “I think that collectors need to be passionate about what they collect. There is plenty of great work out there -- collect what speaks to you. [...] My recommendation is to get involved...”

Galleries, such as Deitch Projects, a renowned urban art gallery in New York and the auction houses Bonhams or Doyle New York offer plenty of opportunities to experience and purchase valuable urban art.

Ultimately, however, the buyer is the one who has to decide on which artwork strikes a chord. Brittany Moorefield offers this advice: “Try to develop your own tastes for what you like and what you don’t like, and understand the whys as well as just the ‘feelings’ that go along.”

Author Bio:

Enzo Scavone is a contributing writer at Highbrow Magazine.

Image 1 - Vattkopa

Image 2 - Andreas Praefcke

Image 3 - Victor Grigas

Image 4 - Banksy, Love is in the Air-- Courtesy Bonhams Image

Image 5 – Shepard Fairey, Untitled--Courtesy Doyle New York

Tags: [shepard fairey](#), [Banksy](#), [urban art](#), [street art](#), [doyle new york](#), [dietch](#), [bonhams](#), [victor grigas](#), [vattkopa](#)

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