

Painting Portland's culture on the walls

Forest for the Trees, a nonprofit responsible for dozens of public murals, is about to create more

BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT
STAFF WRITER

Since 2013, summers in Portland have experienced a public art renaissance. Each August, contemporary public murals pop up on once-blank walls throughout the city. The transformation of these spaces happens quickly and quietly but leaves a loud mark.

Images such as "Keep Your Chin Up" on Northeast Alberta and 21st Avenue and the purple visage of Ice Cube looking down at the corner of Northeast 28th Avenue and Sandy Boulevard have quickly become beloved landmarks of the neighborhoods they belong to.

This annual tide of public art is the product of Forest For the Trees, a nonprofit mural project started by painter Gage Hamilton. Inspired by Hawaii's yearly Pow! Wow! mural festival, Hamilton and Hellion Gallery director Matt Wagner are responsible for coordinating 35 new murals in Portland over the past two years by local and international artists alike. FFFT has facilitated such works as "Everything is Everything" by Zach Yarrington at Southeast Sixth Avenue and Division, "Capax Infiniti" by Faith47 at Southwest 11th Avenue and Washington Street and "You Are Only Confined by the Walls You Build Yourself" by Blaine Fontana at Northeast 22nd Avenue and Alberta Street.

This year, with \$13,500 from the Regional Arts and Culture Council and nearly \$11,500 from its IndieGogo campaign, FFFT, which recently became a nonprofit organization, is set to paint the city again Aug. 24-30. Local artists and international artists representing eight countries will paint on walls throughout Portland.

I recently sat down with FFFT founder Gage Hamilton to talk about what the project has in store for Portland walls this year.

Ann-Derrick Gaillot: *Why did you start FFFT?*

Gage Hamilton: I'm from Portland. Whenever I'd go to other cities, I'd always see a ton of murals. I was always jealous. I always thought there was so much culture through that you could just pick up on as soon as you arrive in a city and take the train or whatever, you immediately get to see the culture written on the walls. So it always really frustrated me that Portland didn't have a lot of that, especially considering it's supposed to have this sort of creative hub.

I was already painting large, and I was just curious about painting murals, and at the time a friend in Tokyo introduced me to a friend of his in Hawaii that had a mural project. I was trying to go out there to paint a mural but just didn't have the money at the time to work it out, so then I was



PHOTO BY ANN-DERRICK GAILLOT

Gage Hamilton stands in front of "Ozymandias (DeSoto Detached)" at Northwest Broadway and Couch Street. Hamilton, a painter, is the founder of the nonprofit Forest For the Trees.

thinking, Why can't we have it here? And that's kind of how it just came up.

For a long time, it was illegal to paint walls in Portland so I think a lot of people just felt like it still was because they didn't know how to go about it. All that I heard from everyone when I was starting it was that the city's gonna shut it down or sue you or whatever, so I got the permits, but I didn't really tell any of the main organizations like RACC about it because I didn't know how they'd react, and then they reacted positively when it was done.

A.G.: *What was the first FFFT like?*

G.H.: It was a much smaller budget, much smaller walls. It was a lot of just figuring out who's around and available and able to paint at a certain scale, and it was mostly inner Southeast.

All the artists just stayed with other artists. I had like four people on my floor. It's kind of expanded a bit from there, and I'm trying not to let it get too out of hand. Just naturally this sort of thing wants to get bigger and bigger, but I'm trying to keep it pretty small.

A.G.: *How did you find the buildings you wanted painted?*

G.H.: Just cold calling, walking around. There's different guidelines of which walls you can paint so I just figured what those were and I would just walk into places and talk to the business owners, or I'd look up online and try to figure out who owns it. It

was a lot of just calling people. A lot of people said, "no" right away and occasionally you get someone who's interested.

A.G.: *This year, did you still have to do cold calling?*

G.H.: Yeah I do, although there's maybe six or seven buildings that hit me up before I ever called anyone, so I already had those ready.

A.G.: *I know that you put the money you raised toward travel and equipment and paint, but you also say that FFFT provides artists with the creative freedom to make these pieces. What does that mean?*

G.H.: Basically, if you were to go out and talk to a property owner about painting a mural, then nine times out of ten they're going to try to direct you on what they want it to be, especially if they're giving you (money). Even if they've given only a hundred bucks, I still feel like they've bought it.

I've just found it easier to raise money separately from the property owners because then once they give you money, they feel like they have some ownership in giving you creative direction, whereas the whole point of the project is not to force some artist to paint a Boston Red Sox mural. It's to let the artist paint what they want to paint, what they would be proud of painting and would think of as reflective of their work. So basically, the property owners will see past examples of their work and sort of trust in them based off of that. They usually always will see a sketch before they paint, just to make sure it's not some curveball or something crazy that they wouldn't be happy with. But I make sure that you can't nitpick over things or try and

direct this too much.

It's not a commission. And most of the artists, if they were to paint you a commission mural, it might cost you like 40 grand. So it's just much easier, I feel like, to keep the money separate from the owners at this point. Sometimes there's cool owner's and they'll pitch in with lifts, things like that. But having the creative freedom is the most important part.

A.G.: *What is new about FFFT this year?*

G.H.: The curation is a bit different than it has been in the past. This year I think it's a lot more thoughtful in how the artist will work with what's nearby and matching them up together and just trying to make more transformed areas really and trying to create a different experience in that regard. We're doing some artist panel discussions at (Pacific Northwest College of Art). We're gonna have a couple nights this year throughout the week where there will be either music performances or dance art video performances and stuff like that that I think will add a different element to it.

A.G.: *What do you think FFFT has brought to the city?*

G.H.: I definitely see a lot more murals aside from what we've done. That's an obvious part of it, but also just letting people know that it's an option. I think it's just opened up the floodgates a bit for that, but also getting property owners and the art institutions that have been around forever, getting them to open up to the idea of that as being something that's exciting that they want to be involved with. Because at first there was a lot of property owners that would just immediately shut down the idea

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For Forest For the Trees mural locations and event listings, visit forestforthetreesnw.com.