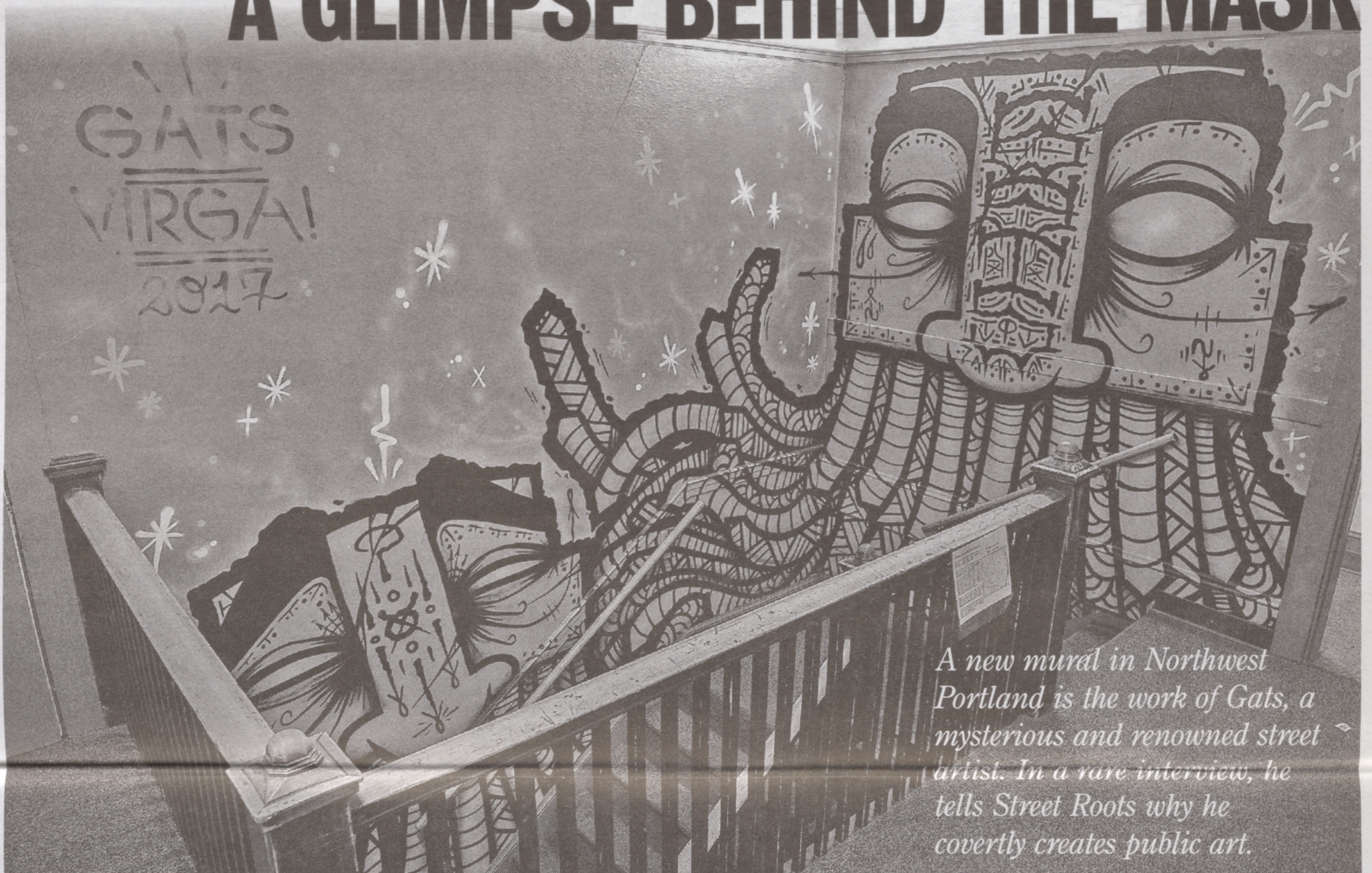


A GLIMPSE BEHIND THE MASK



A new mural in Northwest Portland is the work of Gats, a mysterious and renowned street artist. In a rare interview, he tells Street Roots why he covertly creates public art.

PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Gats, or Graffiti Against the System, painted this mural at Janus Youth Services in Northwest Portland. His trademark mask represents anonymity, he says.

BY STEPHEN QUIRKE
STAFF WRITER

It isn't every day that a phantom comes to Portland.

Gats, or Graffiti Against the System, is a mysterious street artist known for the ubiquitous mask he paints across the country — especially in the mossy underbelly of the West Coast.

Gats says the mask represents anonymity — the only way to survive in a society bent on police surveillance.

No one has ever seen the face behind the mask, yet Gats' public art may be among the best known on the West Coast — and has won him international acclaim as an icon for graffiti.

Gats values anonymity — and for good reason. In addition to his print-making, indoor murals and gallery exhibits, he's also been tied up in the controversy surrounding graffiti.

It's only in the past few decades that graffiti has fallen into disrepute as U.S. police forces have stepped up their efforts to control public space and clear it of all public markings. This has been bolstered by the "broken windows theory" that facilitated the displacement and mass incarceration of poor communities — including their artists.

After a recent mural painting at Janus Youth Services in Northwest Portland, I had the opportunity to sit down and interview the artist. Because of the controversy around unpermitted art, I've been asked not to share certain details from my interview with Gats. If only to fill the gap, I have re-imagined our meeting for my own amusement, which I suspect is no less believable than "broken windows theory." The interview, I assure you, is 100 percent real.

The whole adventure began with a mysterious package from a haunted post office, and concluded some time later, around 3 a.m., when I encounter a man in a ski mask beneath an Interstate 5 overpass screaming along to a tiny boombox playing "We're Not Gonna Take It" by Twisted Sister. Somehow I knew this had to be Gats. I approached cautiously with my hands in the air, offering a level-5 secret handshake. He accepted my handshake and signaled me to follow him. I did my best to keep up as he vaulted over walls with spray-paint cans blasting from both hands — instantly plastering masks on either side. As I finally caught up, I started to faintly hear words over the roar of paint and sick '80s guitar riffs. Just then, he tossed me a tattered notepad and said, "Start writing."

Stephen Quirke: *Does Gats have an everyday life, like Clark Kent? Before engaging*

in street art, do you have to enter a phone booth at high speed, or fly into a circular door?

Gats: I used to jump into those blue post office boxes to change, but then the USPS's budget got cut, so the boxes are less common now. You can still find my tags inside them though.

I'm actually more like Godzilla, laying in wait to destroy the city. Or maybe later Godzilla where I'm trying to save the city but still damaging a lot of property.

In all seriousness, though, we all play many roles. Graffiti is just a lot more literal when you're trying to blend into your environment.

S.Q.: *Do you paint many free murals, like the one at Janus?*

Gats: The majority of my work is done outside without permission or pay. I prioritize making the artwork accessible. I view it like donating a book to the library. When it's in the streets, everyone owns it and no one owns it. Everyone can enjoy it.

S.Q.: *What motivated you to do the Janus Youth mural?*

Gats: I paint for the houseless because they are my most true audience. Most of my work is on the streets, under bridges, in

Janus Youth Services provides more than 40 programs for adolescents experiencing homelessness and addiction across Oregon and Washington. It is among the largest such providers in the Northwest, launching in Multnomah County in 1972.

"We don't have to wait around for funding. Art will happen if we have to smash the pavement up and stack rocks. There are no limits to our creativity and our hunger for genuine experience. What is revolution if not the product of human creativity?"

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