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abandoned buildings, on trains, in public restrooms and on dumpsters. I probably have some well-off fans, but they will never know the true scope or context of my work.

When you're houseless, you don't own a wall, let alone art to hang on it. Most people in that situation don't browse Instagram for entertainment or feel socially comfortable hanging out in galleries. A mural to someone in this situation will have infinitely more meaning than someone purchasing a painting to decorate their house.

I paint houseless shelters to give the building soul. Oftentimes they feel institutional. Your environment has a huge effect on your psyche. If your room looks like a jail, you're going to act like you're in jail. If your room feels like a home, you're going to take pride in it.

Also, when you're low, you don't want to be bombarded with over-positivity that comes off as insincere. I just wanted to make the place look cool without it feeling preachy. The last thing you want is to feel like you're being judged when you ask for help. Seeing something familiar when you walk into a space makes you feel like you're in the right place.

S.Q.: Have you ever been houseless?

Gats: Yes, but my struggles were not comparable to the hardships many other people have gone through.

S.Q.: I recently saw a project where Bay Area artists cut down billboards and used the material to make homeless shelters. What's the statement being made here? Why are these shelters telling us to eat more burgers?

Gats: I used to paint over billboards a lot. It's the thing to do in Southern California as it's such a car-based culture. In the late 2000s, the billboards switched from wheat pasting paper to stretched vinyl. After a while, cutting down the billboards became more fun than painting them, as we genuinely hated being advertised to. One time, Optimist and I cut our names in giant stencil lettering out of a billboard.

While in Mexico we noticed people



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Gats' mural at Janus Youth Services.

re-using vinyl billboards to tarp their roofs off in small squatter villages. I think the evolution of billboards into tents came naturally, but PEMEX was definitely the first to act on it and make it happen. We usually collect tents and tarps and various other things to give out around Christmas time in Oakland, so the billboard vinyl killed two birds with one stone.

S.Q.: You do a lot of international travel, including to places like the Philippines. What do you do there? Is your art well received?

Gats: I try to paint with local artists where ever I go. Graffiti culture and norms are not universal, so it's good to respect what they have going on. Through those friendships, I learn a lot about other cultures and other possibilities of organizing society.

The artwork is well received by most. People are always wary when you start and then excited by the time it's done.

S.Q.: What are the biggest misconceptions people have about street art?

Gats: They group everything together. There is a difference between putting up a sticker, free-handing a huge character with spray paint or painting a legal mural. Not that these things don't cross over.

S.Q.: Street art and murals have always played a significant role in political movements – especially anti-fascist movements. How do you see the role of political art in the current political climate?

Gats: People may argue that the internet meme has replaced the political poster, but political graffiti still plays an important role. It establishes a presence in real life. You feel comfortable or uncomfortable in a space depending on what the graffiti says on the wall. It shows who controls the streets, and the streets are real. With social media algorithms showing you only your own opinion, graffiti is a way to pop that bubble.

S.Q.: You've been vocal in the past about economic displacement in the Bay Area. What's the relationship between gentrification and street art? Can artists help us reclaim public space?

Gats: It's a way to vocalize our objections. You can kick us out of the building, but you can't stop us from painting the walls. You can use art to push public opinion towards rent control and other policies. In a more direct, anti-bureaucratic way, they can shut down the galleries, but they can't shut down the streets.

S.Q.: In "Art As Experience" (1932), the philosopher and democratic reformer John Dewey argued that modern capitalism had essentially siphoned all art away from the production process, and effectively abolished art and esthetic experience from everyday life. Do you think public art can push back on this, or is some larger economic revolution needed?

Gats: We need a cultural shift to demand art in everyday life. John Dewey was concerned that capitalism compartmentalized artwork into museums and away from people's daily experience. However, a good portion of artwork is donated to museums by wealthy individuals. While these are most likely capitalists, it's a social act. Ego may be a big motivator, but the donors usually do not profit monetarily from this act, rather socially. If we create pressure and demand for public art, these same people might fund larger public works

... possibly motivated by ego or the desire to give back, but effective just the same.

That's just an idea, but 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?

S.Q.: I understand that you once had an art exhibit where you gave away free vegan burritos. Can you explain this? Are we under-appreciating the aesthetic of the burrito?

Gats: Well, I suppose you could blame the movement from tacos to the burrito on capitalist production as workers needed a to-go food that they could eat all day. If anything, we are losing the esthetics of the taco. The pride in the handmade tortilla and the experience of sitting at a taco cart and chatting up the cook. That wasn't my thought process with the free burrito installation though.

Sometimes art and graffiti get overly serious, and you forget to have fun. For some reason, it just popped into my head that a newsstand full of burritos would make everyone very happy. Something about an everyday object that already says, "Free – Take One," but then is full of something unexpected that you love just plastered a grin on my face. Can you imagine a world where everything operated like that?

At the time, I had \$100 to my name. I walked in to the taqueria and asked, "How many burritos can I get for \$100." It was the best moment of my life. I felt like I was carrying a newborn child home. I didn't have a dollar for food, housing or gas to get home, but I had faith that if I bought everyone a burrito, things would somehow work out.

S.Q.: Any advice for readers who are beginning artists, or other people struggling?

Gats: Think of something you really wish existed in the world, and then make it. Ignore anyone who tries to tear you down for doing something different. Eat beans and rice until you have a little money set aside for emergencies.

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