

Portland's subversive sticker culture

Two street artists show us why Portland's underground paste-up community is internationally renowned



Portland street artists Skam and Kitska peruse a wall near Northeast 17th Avenue and Alberta Street. Skam estimates there are 50 active paste-up artists locally.

PHOTO BY EMILY GREEN

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If you know where to look, you may have noticed: Portland is plastered with little pieces of guerrilla art.

Along main drags in popular neighborhoods, street artists have adhered their miniature works to the backs of street signs and on utility boxes and poles, bike racks, newspaper bins and dumpsters.

Their stickers are often politically charged, aimed at consumerism or political figures. Some are whimsical, others are gory, and styles range from conceptual and comical to photorealistic or abstract.

What they all have in common is that they're the product of an unrelenting subculture of artists who, over the course of the last decade, have elevated Portland to the sticker capital of the U.S. and, some argue, the world.

"Portland is quite remarkable in the level and quality of our stickers," said Tiffany Conklin, an urban researcher and co-director at Portland Street Art Alliance.

She attributes Portland's rise in sticker fame to the do-it-yourself nature of its artists' skillful work, and the way the community pools its resources to purchase printing machinery and support one another.

"They've created this pretty complex

system to make all of this happen and get really good quality results out of it," Conklin said.

These same artists are also responsible for the papier-mâché-like posters attached to overpass columns, beneath bridges and on the sides of various buildings around town. Created in a studio with hand-cut stencils and spray paint or hand drawn, they go up quickly between layers of homemade paste mixtures hastily brushed under and over the posters to keep them in place.

These days, it's not uncommon for international paste-up artists to make a point of passing through Portland to add their mark to the urban landscape as well.

Recent visitors have included Parisian artist PolarBear Stencils; Tenet, of Melbourne, Australia; Pyramid Oracle, from Berlin; and London's D7606 and C3, his wife, who came to Portland on their honeymoon.

While here, these foreign renegades hang out with the local street-artist community, hitting the town at night and slapping up stickers and posters together along the way.

One of Portland's best-known street artists, Skam, estimates there are currently 50 active sticker makers locally, of all ages.

Periodically, he said, a new artist will pop up and "smash the city," covering it with quality artwork, but then disappear in a year's time, or a "sticker season."

Each paste-up artist has an alias and



STICKER ART BY SKAM

unique angle or character they're known for replicating.

For Portland artist Placebo Effect, it's pill and syringe characters with legs and wind-up keys protruding from their backs.

Skam's angle is shaming figures in popular culture who he deems "scammers." In the past, he's featured Jerry Falwell, both George Bushes, Casey Anthony, Charles Manson and Bill O'Reilly. He's also known for a sticker that reads, "Save the planet, kill yourself," with an image of a man in a suit and tie blowing his brains out.

Many artists use the free Priority Mail stickers from the post office to display their work, also known as Label 228s. They collect, gift and trade different editions of these labels for drawing, stenciling or Photoshop printing.

In Portland, many stylized images are mass produced with stencils, woodblocks or silkscreen printing on adhesive vinyl sheets, which are more durable.

Shepard Fairey made famous this approach to street art beginning in 1989. His Andre the Giant Obey stickers went up

coast to coast, thanks to his very busy network of friends.

Character creation caught on among the majority of sticker artists about 10 years ago when California artist Yo909 created a character and invited other artists to design their own versions of it, Skam explained. That's when he came up with his: a redneck representing ignorance.

For many, street art is a way to spread their message, communicate with each other, and propel their online followings and increase their visibility.

For Portland artist Kitska, it was a David Bowie poster she pasted up at Seattle's Pike Place Market the day after his death at the start of last year that gained her hundreds of Instagram followers.

Skam, who's been making stickers since 2004, said he first networked with other artists in the now-defunct online forum Sticker Minions, along with Myspace. The worldwide community later moved to Flickr,

See **STICKERS**, page 5