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ART REVIEW: Rochester Contemporary's "State of the City"

By [Rebecca Rafferty](#) on August 14, 2009

Somewhere along the line, someone insinuated that graffiti was simply vandalism, the sign of a declining, violent neighborhood, and many people mistook it for the truth. We too often succumb to the urge to simplify the world along distinctly black and white lines. But that's idiotic. It's neither fair nor wise to make quick assumptions about a topic and drop it. Your gray matter can handle the grayscale, and all of the beautifully complex colors in the spectrum, too.

The result of this sort of thinking is the toxic notion that street art equals unsafe 'hood, end of story, and to hell with the lives and the culture of everyone who resides there. The question is, do you want to be the kind of person who thinks and connects with others, or let other people decide about your neighbors and your home for you? The annual "State of the City" show at Rochester Contemporary provides an opportunity for us "to learn about our cities through different artists and their creative projects," says Director Bleu Cease. This year's show pairs the two subcultures of urban exploration and graffiti art in a show of work by a photographer from Buffalo and Rochester's oldest and best-known graffiti crew. Both exhibit art that conveys the defiant resilience and unexpected beauty of the urban setting.

At the artists' talk this past Saturday, photographer [Lesley Horowitz](#) described growing up in Buffalo amid "alive" industry, which provided an "intense assault to the senses" of a child. By 1981, during the industry's collapse, she left Buffalo for New York City, but her father's health called her back to Buffalo many times, and she began taking pictures of her hometown's industrial decline, eventually trespassing with urban explorers on abandoned sites.

Horowitz shoots first, then digitally alters the pics, she says, to retain the "scary-dark-dangerous-and-toxic" feeling she got from the "magnificence of those structures, isolated in the landscape." Her images bear the heavy apprehension of a horror flick, lending the feeling of suspended breath and strange aftermath.

Horowitz braves the spaces to point out "something else that's there besides the dilapidation," and her art can be seen as an homage to

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Artwork by a member of the FUA Krew, showing at Rochester Contemporary through September 20. PHOTO PROVIDED

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Lesley Horowitz's "Indigo Morning," at Rochester Contemporary through September 20. PHOTO PROVIDED

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places that allow her "to exist as an artist" - her academic family was blue collar a few generations back, and she's aware that factory workers built the middle class. "Decommissioned" is a series of industrial towers, the title alluding to the buildings as well as workers themselves. Many of her photos are studies in chiaroscuro, where bright lights inhabit profound darkness. "Daylight Factory" features a small gap in a broken ceiling, through which light and wires pour in like stalactites, reflected at the bottom by a stalagmite-esque mound of collected snow. This cave-like image perhaps best captures the "urban exploration" in its most urban-wilderness incarnation.

Facing the wall of Horowitz's photos is the work of the [FUA Krew](#) (FUA stands for "From Up Above"), a collaborative spray-paint piece by members Range, Zone II, Sno, Ozone, and Melo 147. The self-taught artists exhibit serious talent resulting from years of extremely hard work despite impoverished and often dysfunctional upbringings. Each got into drawing and graffiti at a very young age: Melo explains that he "never had a mother who said 'That's good work, son,' but to have your peers say that...that's powerful." Range started drawing and tagging the neighborhood to "be in the crowd," but ended up creating his own group, FUA's second generation.

The unwritten rules in graffiti culture are about talent-based dominance: if you tag somewhere, it's your spot. If someone hits your territory, it's disrespectful unless they paint something more elaborate. "If other people like it, it stays," says Range. From there it's a challenge to come up with better artwork; each piece ideally remains untouched unless trumped by better art.

If you think all graffiti is vandalism, I must ask, have you really looked at any? The works are vibrant, epic emblems of individual identities, expressing their capacity to defiantly create beauty from destitution. Range says, "Most of the time the opposition doesn't even live in the neighborhood. There are stories and expressions behind graffiti that aren't seen. We speak for people who can't. We do a lot of memorials and we do advertising" for local businesses. "In my neighborhood, people look forward to this," he says. "They don't want to pass by the same broken-down buildings and depressing eyesores."

Melo also teaches airbrushing to kids and runs a shop on Brown Street called The ArtFirm, which takes commissions for all kinds of art requests. "People may not realize," says Oz, "but it takes a lot to make the light and shadow effects, to make it come off the wall like that." Each artist developed not only artistic skills, but the important community aspect. Sno says they help one another with individual projects and commissions. "If one of us is pressed on a deadline, we call in the crew," he says.

Each FUA member possesses a distinct style, and in this show each artist's sharp piece - created directly on the gallery walls - appears as if it's busting through holes in crumbling brick along a painted black and orange construction boundary. Zone's sharp tower of abstract script is set off by the painted glow from behind. Ozone created two stylized construction workers studying a clipboard of plans and working a jackhammer. Range's angular lettering with pipes connecting the lines contrasts with Sno's winding curves and dripping angles, the organic counterpart to the more industrial work by the others. Both Zone and Sno are also tattoo artists, and it's not hard to envision the tribal elements in their tags as inkwork. Melo's shiny metal lettering and spheres are all high structure, where Sno's design meanders elegantly.

FUA's collaborative and individual pieces can be seen in throughout Rochester and New York State. The B-Boy BBQ is an annual collective performance event and exhibition on a wall on Clinton Avenue, where those who are invited to paint "have put in time and effort and are known for their work," says Range.

The graffiti artists also discussed varying opinions about the now-kaput Legal Wall behind Village Gate. Range says, "You cannot base your whole career on an open invitation - graffiti is work, it takes thought, meaning. Painting in a designated spot won't get you the same respect as someone painting to give a poverty-stricken neighborhood life." But Melo says it's "sad that kids can't go there anymore and practice," since disrespectful artists went outside the set barriers and the permission to tag there was revoked last year. He recalls his youth without a legal spot: "We took risks going to abandoned places to express ourselves without getting in trouble with the law." Range has tried to keep his son from illegal tagging by creating spaces for him to practice. "Clinton was neglected back in the crew's early days," he says, but is now under surveillance.

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Horowitz says she spends a lot of time on railroad tracks to get into the abandoned sites she photographs, and takes comfort in seeing the tags, knowing "that someone else was out there doing something creative." She sees a link between FUA's work and her own: their common art arises in "places where people have sacrificed... those places, now fading to dereliction are our canvas, our paintbox."

*On Sunday, September 13, Rochester Contemporary will screen "Style Wars," Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant's PBS documentary that tracks the rise and fall of subway graffiti in New York in the late 1970's and early 1980's.

"State of the City"

By Lesley Horowitz, FUA Krew

Through September 20

Rochester Contemporary, 137 East Ave.

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