

The New York Times

Outlaws at the Art Museum (and Not for a Heist) LOOK MA, NO WHEAT PASTE



It started as street art, but on Monday Shepard Fairey's portrait of Barack Obama went up in the National Portrait Gallery, its new permanent home.

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Published: January 24, 2009

In 2005, the British artist Banksy — then on the verge of becoming probably the world's most famous street artist — walked into the Museum of Modern Art and three other New York museums done up in a beige raincoat and fake beard, looking more like a subway flasher than a “quality vandal,” as he called himself. Once inside he furtively mounted his own work among the masterpieces, relying on speed and two-sided tape rather than curatorial consent as his way into the collections, at least until guards noticed.

“These galleries are just trophy cabinets for a handful of millionaires,” he wrote later in an e-mail message to a reporter, explaining his dim view of museums and his desire to see his work inside one purely to poke fun at the whole idea. “The public never has any real say in what art they see.”

But as it turns out, there is more than one way into a museum for street art, the catchall term now used to describe a global explosion of public imagery that began with graffiti in the 1970s and has morphed into dozens of wildly different forms, generally united only by their illegal exhibition on public and private property. On Tuesday, as Barack Obama was being sworn into office, his portrait by the street artist Shepard Fairey — reproduced endlessly during the campaign until it became the defining image of the future president (it towered over a stage at one of the inaugural balls) — was on view at the National Portrait Gallery. A collaged poster of

it had just entered the collection along with portraits by artists like Gilbert Stuart (George Washington), Norman Rockwell (Richard Nixon) and Elaine de Kooning (John Kennedy).

It is not Mr. Fairey's maiden voyage into the museum world; a survey of his work opens next month at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, and he is in a few other collections. But the portrait gallery's decision is arguably the establishment's most public embrace of a quintessentially anti-establishment brand of art. So it has been hailed by street-art fans as a significant moment, the fine-art world beginning to find a way to recognize a movement that has been growing apace for more than a decade, propelled by a generation of artists who grew up with graffiti and now make work on the streets with materials as varied (and sometimes as ephemeral) as paper, plastic, tape, snow, rubber bands and knitted wool.

And there's some evidence the recognition is happening. The Tate Modern in London devoted a big show to street art last year, letting artists plaster its facade with the kind of work usually plastered illicitly all around its Southwark neighborhood. Other big street names are also starting to pop up in museum collections, like Swoon, whose ghostly, papery work has been bought by the Museum of Modern Art.

But the Shepard Fairey moment may be less significant for what it says about how museums view street artists than for how those artists have come to view museums — how for many younger artists, street and otherwise, museum enshrinement no longer represents the kind of end zone it did for many who came before, even those like Keith Haring who began with street art and deep misgivings about the establishment.

In interviews, Mr. Fairey, 38, has stressed how honored he is to be in the National Portrait Gallery, part of the Smithsonian Institution and about as American as a museum can be. He has also stressed that he doesn't see it as a place in a hierarchy but instead on a kind of continuum, right alongside the work he creates with the police on his trail or album covers for bands or work commissioned by huge companies like Dewar's or Saks Fifth Avenue (in the latter case, recently, militaristic Rodchenko-esque shopping bags that scream "Want It!").

His view has a parallel these days in the world of digital and video art, where distinctions between museums and galleries and Web vehicles like YouTube are blurring for younger artists — why not try to have it in both places if you can and why does it matter so much which comes first?

One thing they're doing is simply adhering to an old graffiti work ethic: get your work up anywhere, everywhere, any way you can, as long as you don't get caught. There's nothing wrong with getting it into a museum, as some street artists like Banksy might contend, but a museum is also just one among many good places to get your work seen, in Mr. Fairey's estimation.

"It's not the audience and the forum that they crave in the way that somebody in an earlier generation might have," said Carlo McCormick, the New York art critic, of museumgoers and museums. "Shepard has a very predatory gaze," said Mr. McCormick, who has followed his work and contributed an essay to a 2006 book about it. "If he comes to a town he's looking at it like a criminal. He's casing the place and figuring out where he can get his stuff up. And who he really cares about reaching and the ways he cares about reaching them have remained remarkably consistent."

Carolyn Carr, the portrait gallery's chief curator, said that the poster acquired by the museum — a 60-by-40-inch mixed-media collage that Mr. Fairey created after making the initial image — was a beautiful work of art. But she added that "one of the reasons the gallery acquired it is that

the image — as opposed to the object — is ubiquitous and it became the image of the campaign.”

“There’s no question that it has lasting resonance,” she said.

For a street artist — who, like many, exults in the essential slipperiness of outlaw work — it’s undoubtedly all the more gratifying when you finally make it into a big museum to do so by such epically serpentine means: an oft-arrested political street artist who’s also a highly paid commercial artist offers on his own initiative to make a vaguely Soviet-looking poster for the campaign of an anti-establishment politician (who, interestingly, can’t officially claim the poster because of rights concerns about the news photograph it was based on, snagged by the artist from the Web) and then the politician, surprisingly, sweeps into the establishment with vows to shake it up, taking the outlaw’s non-outlaw poster into the establishment with him.

It’s more than most street artists can hope for, but one of them will probably find a way to top it.

“I’m a populist,” Mr. Fairey said in an interview with a portrait gallery curator. “I’m trying to reach as many people as possible.”

“I love the concept in fine art of making a masterpiece, something that will endure,” he said, adding that he understood, too, how unlikely that is for anyone. “But I also understand how short the attention span of most consumers is and that you really need to work with the metabolism of consumer culture a lot of the time to make something relevant within the zeitgeist.”

Or as he put it more simply, stealing a metaphor from the medium: “It’s not necessary to paint yourself into a corner with categories.”