

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Signage and Slang

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts in Art,  
Visual Arts

By

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## DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to my father and mother, Rafael and Norma Ordaz. Thank you for all the tremendous support and endless love. I also want to thank family, friends, and professors who shaped the person I am today. Thank you!

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Abstract

“Signage and Slang”

By

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I create art influenced by the decaying neighborhoods that surround me, from both literal and emotional perspectives. The work begins when I drive or walk around Los Angeles, seeking the details of visual dialogues on decaying walls, the marks on them, and what that means. Historically, walls exhibit the voice of their local population, and my work functions as time capsules of these voices, mixed media documents of memory and research.

In my work I create layers with paper and paint that draw on the raw energy I find in the urban environment. I use graphic symbols and vivid colors that are influenced by signage and slang constantly used in Los Angeles youth culture. Layers of paint, posters, street-writing techniques, and aesthetic elements borrowed from both urban and fine art realms share compositional space in my work. My relationship with these traces, as well as the accumulation of their many layers, remind me of moments in time pulled from my life in Los Angeles.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Growing up in inner city Los Angeles and always in transit, I was always attracted to graffiti. Like many Angelinos, much of my time has been spent in a car; I looked forward to seeing something new on freeways or neighborhood structures. Only recently have I begun to understand the difference between graffiti and street art. Graffiti, "...while probably the most pervasive form of art and communication in our society, generally defines traditional approaches to interpretation. There are a variety of reasons for the failure of art historians and journalists to come to grips with the phenomenon" (Castellòn). Perhaps this failure comes to grips with this phenomenon because many people consider it to be vandalism and are not able, or refuse, to see its beauty. Street art has meaning beyond its surface; it is as pervasive as graffiti but employs humor and politics. Street art interacts with its surroundings, including street signs, fences, and posters. Graffiti and street art are similar because both engage the street and their artists often remain anonymous. However, they differ in their intentions of messaging.

In my work, I blur the lines that separate graffiti, street art, and fine art. "By bringing graffiti and street art indoors, it alters our perception and requires us to think about it more deeply" (Fuentes). I want my work to challenge the audience to consider all of my work equally, whether it is on the street or in a gallery.

The street scene movement has distorted the divide between high and low art. Modernism challenged the notion of what a work of art should be. For example, Andy Warhol's Pop Art Brillo Boxes faithfully emulate those purchased in stores (Image 1), but putting them in a gallery context validated the work as high art (Fuentes). Pop Art explored the "low" art of comics, mass media, and package design, transforming them into high art through painting and sculpture. Street art has had a similar trajectory, and the public's understanding of low art is being

questioned. “Graffiti and street art are no longer simplistic one-liners for the uneducated but instead are being re-examined for their own history, techniques, skills, concepts, and stories” (Fuentes). “Even the most banal everyday object could be ‘transfigured’ by appropriately placing it in the art world. Such works effectively collapse the formalist distinction between art and the everyday. A consequence of the fact that anything can be art is a proliferation of styles, media, movements, and influences—a flood of creative freedom. Historians and critics can no longer craft their ‘master narratives’ that attempt to capture the defining influence of a single master” (Riggle).

The transition of graffiti and street art into the gallery has garnered global acceptance. The pioneering traveling exhibition “Beautiful Losers” paved the way for others, including “Art in the Streets” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, which chronicled the history of the movement and featured artists from the 1960’s to the present day. “Art in the Streets” was the “first graffiti and street art retrospective at a major American art museum. Jeffrey Deitch, MoCA’s director and head curator, and a long time follower of street art, has described Art in the Streets as his dream -- the exhibition he’s wanted to curate for more than a decade” (Kimvall).

## CHAPTER 2: Background

During the day, hand-painted signs populate my neighborhood, and at night, the neon signs from liquor stores, credit unions, warehouses, and motels punctuate the environment. I consider my surroundings and draw on its color schemes. I purchase returned, marked down house paint from Home Depot, and the exaggerated, non-domestic colors work effectively for my approach.

For street work, I search for bland, overlooked locations and use fire extinguishers full of paint to transform them (Image 2). The paint has a dripping, raincloud effect that beautifies these locations with color. I own the drip; “The dripping... well, if it happens, it happens; it does not take anything from the work. The dripping just proves that you were not trying to control the work, but the work was developing by itself and if it drips, it's a natural part in the evolution of the work” (Keith Haring). I fire paint out of the extinguisher and embrace gravity. In order to combine my street and gallery work, I use the extinguisher to apply paint on my large-scale paintings to maintain consistency. “Graffiti and street art are the most significant forms of art making in recent history, which makes this conversation meaningful again. Such a statement challenges institutional education, scholarship, and professional practices. This new set of anti-modern artists run rampant -- ignoring cultural posturing and use their art in any way they see fit. The outsiders have become insiders through this story, challenging the characteristics of high art. While we may say that the lines are blurring between low and high -- it's perhaps more appropriate that the low art distinction has been invited inside and is running amuck in high minded institutions” (Fuentes).

Before painting in my studio, I drive or walk around Los Angeles to discover what people take for granted or dismiss. Historically, walls have always exhibited the voice of the people, and



my work attempts to connect with the authenticity of this voice. “Throughout the history of mankind, equivalents of graffiti have appeared in one form or another, and their value to sociologists and archeologists is indisputable. Present day graffiti plays no less a role as witnesses of our time” (Castellòn). I appropriate symbols and hand styles that I find on walls around Los Angeles. Not only do I document their styles and writings with photographs, but also I document my own street work for reference (Image 3). Observing use of color and text, I document trends and styles in order to recreate that authentic presence in my work. Graffiti and street art in Los Angeles are comprised of various writing styles from all over the world, including those from New York, Philadelphia, Brazil, and eastern and western Europe (Image 4). Considering these different approaches when I work, I use repeating symbols and culturally ubiquitous slang, including “Swag,” “Bling,” “Fresh,” “LOL,” “LMAO,” “SUS,” and “Wavey.” My aliases, “Rooster,” “Roo,” and “00” appear in my work, and I use arrows, stars, and triangles that I see in street culture (Images 5 & 6).

Re-contextualizing names, phrases, and symbols from the street allows me to incorporate the urban environment into my work, creating a visual time capsule of sorts in which moments and memories are preserved for posterity. My paintings function as an account of my experience, saying, “I was here” and allowing me to maintain my teenage dream to stay young, run rampant, and able to paint freely.

### Chapter 3: Thesis Project

My paintings begin with a flat, neutral coat of paint applied to stretched canvas, typically white or off-white. I attach newsprint to simulate wheat paste and create meaningful layers. Once the surface has enough texture, I apply writing and color. I paint fast and spontaneously, using gestures and time to establish engaging surfaces and visual forms. Very little planning goes into the work. Process is a big part of my work and it takes plenty of movement and time to create certain looks and surfaces.

My writing tools consist of squeeze bottles and homemade markers to create my distinct style. For example, old style squeeze bottles, filled with 70% paint and 40% water, foster an exaggerated, drippy appearance while maintaining legibility. I experiment with my tools in the studio before taking them outdoors; this process from studio-to-street establishes a conversation between my canvas work and my street work. Water-based fire extinguishers, sprayers, squirt bottles, and homemade markers help me to maintain consistency and achieve a distinct aesthetic in both my street and canvas work. I use the extinguisher on all of my canvas paintings and spray paint to get clean and crisp, bold and thin lines when writing. I chaotically go back and forth with the materials until I seem to have lost control, and this process helps me achieve a visual sensibility similar to street work, which accumulates multiple layers left by different artists. The conversation of work on the streets layered over each other is very hectic and something about that has always been a draw for me. Street work becomes an inadvertent and improvised collaboration of mixed memory and feelings.

The decayed appearance and layers of color seep through cracks in my paintings and reveal past moments, creating visual history of sorts. My paintings become my walls, and each mark and writing represents a moment in time; in a sense, my works are my time capsules. A

moment and a feeling captured at a certain time. I continuously paint over my work to create problems to “fix,” and this hectic process allows me to work on all my many paintings at once.

My paintings become visual memories of my life in Los Angeles. Hopefully, they will positively affect the otherwise delinquent reputation of graffiti and street art. My work confidently fits in both worlds, on the street and in the gallery, and has enabled me to keep my youthful dreams alive.

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## Appendix

Image 1  
“Brillo Box”  
Andy Warhol



Image 2  
“Cloud”  
10x8 ft  
Ralph Ordaz



Image 3  
“Hand styles”  
4x5  
Ralph Ordaz



Image 4  
“Graf Styles”  
4x5  
Ralph Ordaz



Image 5  
“00”  
5x5 ft  
Ralph Ordaz



Image 6  
“SUS”  
5x5 ft  
Ralph Ordaz

