

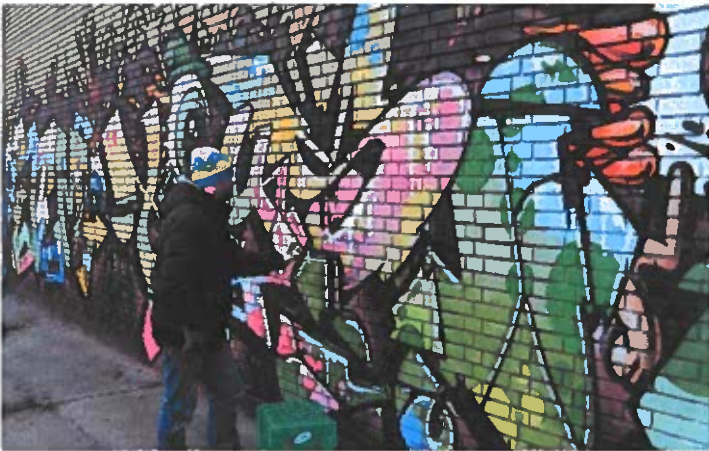
GRAFFITI:

BLIGHT OR EXPRESSION

by David Amadio

In the fall of 1993 I was a freshman at Temple University. Since I didn't own a car and I still lived at home with my parents, I commuted to school on the Market-Frankford El, boarding at 69th St. and getting off at 15th for the Broad St. transfer. This was the pre-smartphone era, before the deluxe infinity of podcasts and playlists, before the Cloud. SEPTA riders were confined to more terrestrial diversions back then: a novel, a Walkman, or in my case, the city itself.

My interest lay not in the buildings, stately and storied as they were, but in the volumes of graffiti written on their walls and rooftops. From the mobile vista of my rocky window seat, I bore daily witness to the work of kings, all-city legends whose pieces hijacked the eye and held it captive long after the train had left them behind. The eastbound El dives underground on its way to 40th St., and peering into the yellowish light of bald tunnel lamps I marveled at the subterranean gallery of black-and-silver throw-ups, the names pulsing by like faces in a dream: OZ, MOE, KAIR, NOPE. When Temple placed me on academic probation in the middle of my second semester, those names became more relevant to me than the names of my classes, for in them I had discovered an entirely new object of study, one as mesmerizing as it was mysterious, as enthralling as it was elusive.



took office in 1984, Philadelphia had become known as Graffiti City—and a lot of residents were sick of looking at it.

Forty years after CORNBREAD spray painted his name on the side of an elephant, Philadelphians react to graffiti with either cool indifference or mild amusement. One sign of the city's increasing tolerance of graffiti (and graffiti-inspired art) is the *Love Letter* mural project helmed by Steve Powers, the artist more commonly known as ESPO. Completed in 2010 with support from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the murals—painted on city-commissioned walls between 63rd and 45th Streets in West Philly—are a series of bold, colorful, highly visible messages intended to assure even the most despondent El riders that they too are loved by someone. Powers, the project's man-about-town, is an ex-graffiti writer who once cost taxpayers thousands of dollars in buffing fees. By trading in his outlaw status for a higher civic responsibility, Powers has earned graffiti wider public approval, but in so doing he has forfeited some of its natural mystique, much of which resides in the consummate anonymity of the practitioner.

Ten years ago I observed a flesh-and-blood graffiti writer leaving his mark on the city. It was shortly

The history of Philadelphia graffiti dates back to the early 70s, when writers like COOL EARL, CHEWY, and CORNBREAD ruled the day. For many of the pioneers, “getting up” provided an alternative to joining a gang, the dominant means by which young black and Hispanic men sought to create identities for themselves. In the Robert Moran documentary *Sly Artistic City*, aerosol veteran SATCH credits graffiti with fulfilling his “sense of belonging,” introducing him to an underground community of imaginative and intrepid artists dedicated to “catching fame” in the slickest way possible. So active was this community, and so prolific its members, that by the time Wilson Goode

before midnight, and I was standing outside the Trocadero in Chinatown, not expecting to see anything out of the ordinary. Then, like Sasquatch emerging from the trees, a lone figure walked up to a shuttered storefront across the street and tagged his name in black spray paint, a tall, sweeping autograph inscribed with flair and grace in just under five seconds. When he was finished, he stepped back to briefly inspect his work and then melted into the flux of people coursing down Arch St.

For several moments afterward I stared at the tag as if under a spell. I couldn't determine whether the tag had produced the writer or the writer had produced the tag, and I started thinking that perhaps I had hallucinated the whole thing. In our casual investigations of the mythic, it is not uncommon to find traces of the phenomenal, but it is far rarer to glimpse the phenomenon itself, as it is happening, in real time. I had witnessed a true "hit," but because of the aura in which I had always enveloped graffiti, I struggled to verify its authenticity. I couldn't reconcile the magical emanation with the human hand responsible for its being. It wasn't until I watched Tony Silver's *Style Wars* that I learned to acknowledge the person behind the piece, and to view graffiti as the first word in a silent, spontaneous dialogue between writer and reader.

I'm 38-years-old and I'm still reading the city, perusing, these days, from the cockpit of my car. Instead of rooftops and subway tunnels, I prefer water towers and viaducts, the "heaven spots" along 95 North, the underpasses in Chester. There is no shortage of signatures to admire: AQUA, TOBER, DRAMA, BAD. And certain ones still have the power to captivate, they still command the

sudden authority to take me out of myself. Graffiti, well-placed and well-executed, animates the brick and mortar cityscape in the same way that a deer enlivens the mute backdrop of nature. Both thrill us in their salience, their vitality, their assertiveness. I felt this excitement driving south out of Nice in the spring of 2007, as what seemed like

an endless ribbon of back-to-back pieces unfurled by my window, invigorating the slab of staid French highway with names, names, names, each one a detonation of color, a loud pronouncement of artistic identity. Graffiti's energy is so strong that even when the stringent try to power-wash it away, the letters remain visible through the blast marks, "ghosts" clinging to the surface.

As long as there is graffiti, there will always be a curious kid from the 'burbs to wonder at its provenance, and, if that kid is daring enough, to go out into the night and "get up" with the best of them. I never took it that far, content to perfect my hand in private. The only people I've ever been comfortable sharing my graffiti with are my children

(gangsta', I know). Whenever they're drawing at the kitchen table, I seize a marker, tear out a sheet of construction paper, and fill it top-to-bottom with several iterations of my tag. My son and daughter pore over the page, trying to make out the individual letters, and in their faces I see the same inquisitiveness that drew me to graffiti back in the early 90s. After squinting and scrunching, they eventually interpret the name, and this brings everyone a measure of joy. Because when we successfully read a piece of graffiti, whether it's a scrawled tag on the hump of a mailbox or a majestic burner on the flank of a train car, we fulfill not only the writer's sense of belonging, but ours as well.

