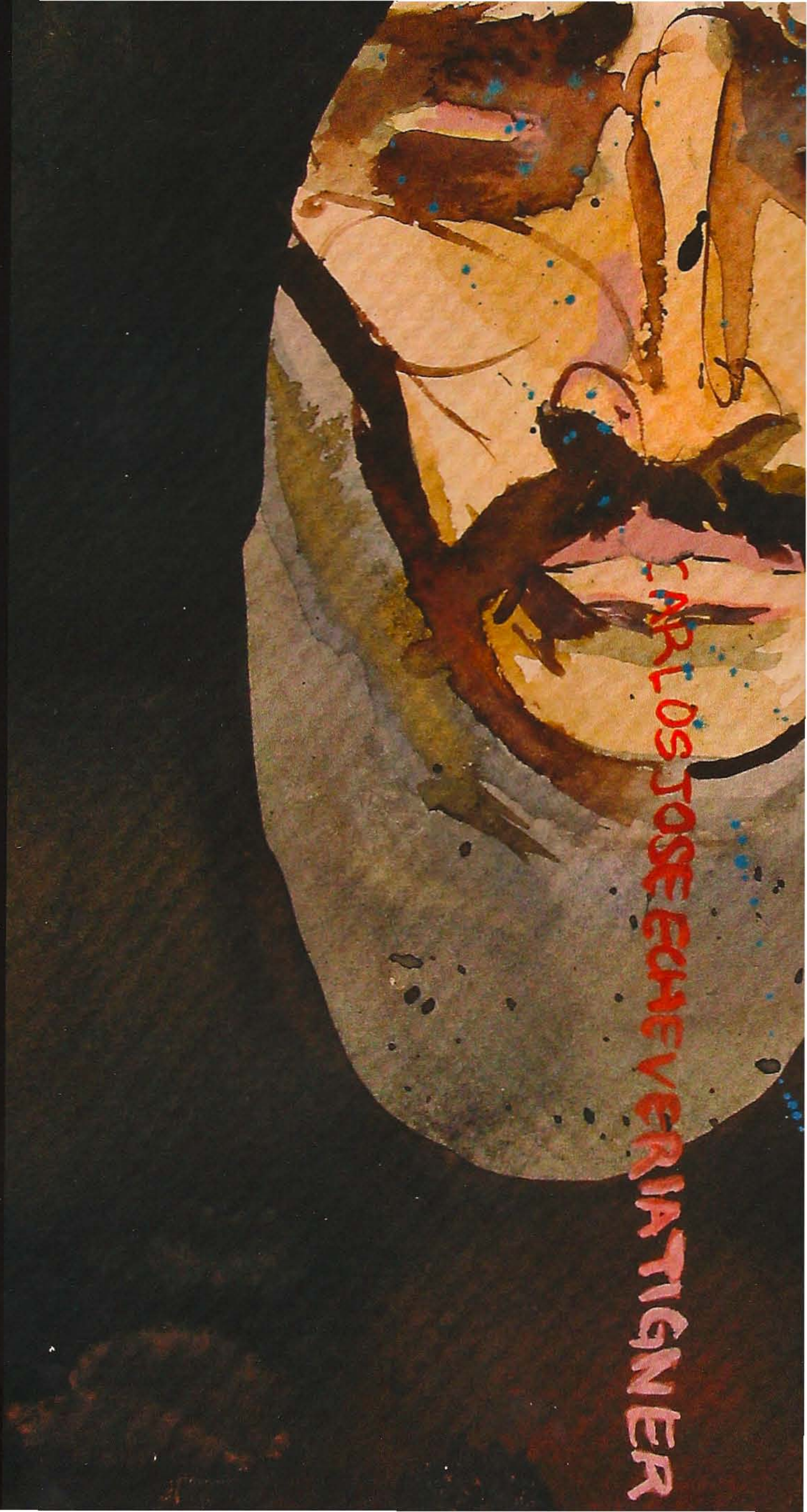


Avant-Guardian

Graffiti takes its place within the gallery art world





What happens to the art world when the illegal nature of graffiti seeps off rough city walls and enters the refined atmosphere of a gallery? One need only step into Guy Bérubé's La Petite Mort to understand the impact that graffiti has had on mainstream art.

Ottawa's most sensual, boundary-pushing gallery has showcased pieces of graffiti amongst its other avant-garde exhibitions to give visitors a less intimidating look at street culture. The graffiti canvases blend in nicely with the engaging displays of visually erotic paintings and post-modern structures that adorn the bare white walls of Bérubé's space.

Graffiti art has been shedding its vandalism title for over 20 years, appearing on more and more canvases around the world. But only now is it gaining precedence, with the help of every impressive auction sale of U.K. graffiti artist, Banksy's work. Sotheby's, arguably the world's largest auction house, has witnessed a substantial increase in sales of graffiti art since it began to auction off the pieces in 1998.

Bérubé, his arms tattooed in a colourful mosaic of images and designs, has 20 years experience as an art curator, having spent 10 in New York City where he saw a lot of graffiti art showcased in galleries. One would assume that the street art's reception into the gallery world might not have been very warm, but Bérubé says it's been popularly shown for years.

"Gallery owners are not stupid people, they know when there's a market for something. I never saw it as a market. I saw it as a way of showing different forms of art."

Bérubé has always been attracted to reactionary works that engage and challenge its viewers. He says that graffiti has impacted the art world by urging people to look at others differently. It brings street culture into a more familiar environment, and "let's people see a crisis and not feel threatened. They can really look at [the graffiti] and develop some sort of sensitivity to it."

Artist Juan Carlos Noria says that graffiti has, "bullied its way into the art world. Its place in that world is like any other movement. It's to be talked about, collected, bought and sold."

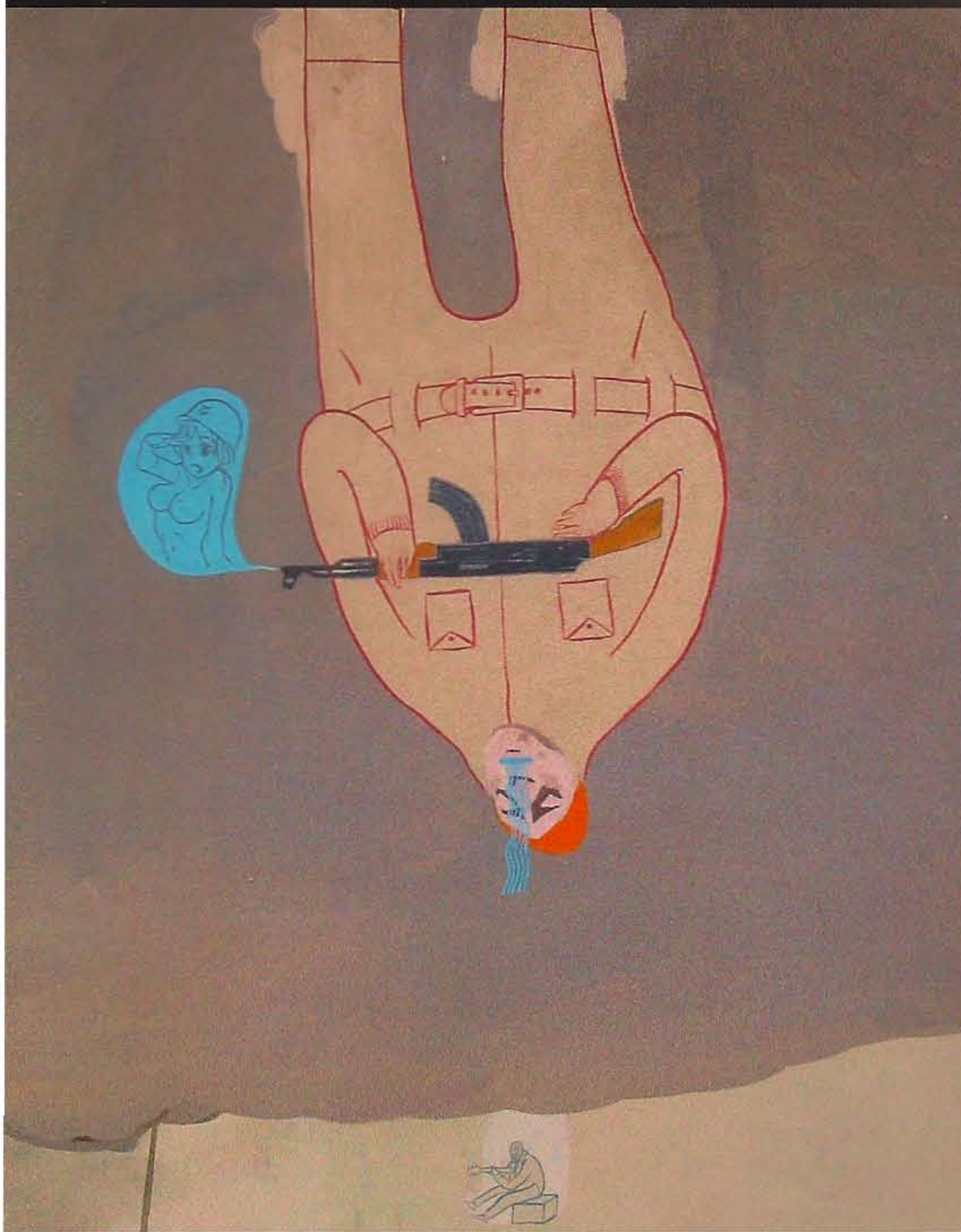
Due to its illegal nature, graffiti has always been the 'bad boy' of creative self-expression. Though its presence in galleries might help convince politicians and police to ease up on laws against tagging, Bérubé says the taboo label is what makes it so unique.

"Why do you want it to be more widely accepted? That's a part of its charm. Who doesn't like being the black sheep?"

Ottawa-based graffiti artist Mike Mesa agrees that graffiti will always be somewhat taboo. His cooperative projects with city police, however, are trying to show people that graffiti is not just vandalism, but art as well.

"I'm doing my best to try and sway some people to appreciate the artistic side of graffiti rather than criticize its vandal aspects," he says. "I've been working with the city on several different projects in which artists strike a deal with the city to paint beautiful murals on frequently vandalized walls and maintain them if they're defaced again. The city saves money by not having to clean up the marks and artists get space to create in public."

Noria explains that more legal walls would allow for higher quality murals. He points to Barcelona, once the cradle of graffiti, where city officials have been cooperative with artists, allowing them public space to paint.



Graham Robinson aka Beaston "Oh My My. Oh Hell Yes"

Bérubé, however, respects graffiti's street roots and is not too concerned about solving the issue of legalization. Today, it appears as though tagging and graffiti art are coexisting quite peacefully, one style influencing and enriching the other. Many graffiti artists who have gained considerable status in the art world, such as Noria, continue to tag on the streets.

"The art I make in the street is free for all to enjoy. The work I do for galleries is commerce," he says.

Commerce or not, Noria says the benefits of showing in galleries are that he gets the opportunity to speak with admirers of his work. And Bérubé applauds Noria's ability to separate business and creativity. Both scoff at the opinion that graffiti artists who join the art world are 'selling out'.

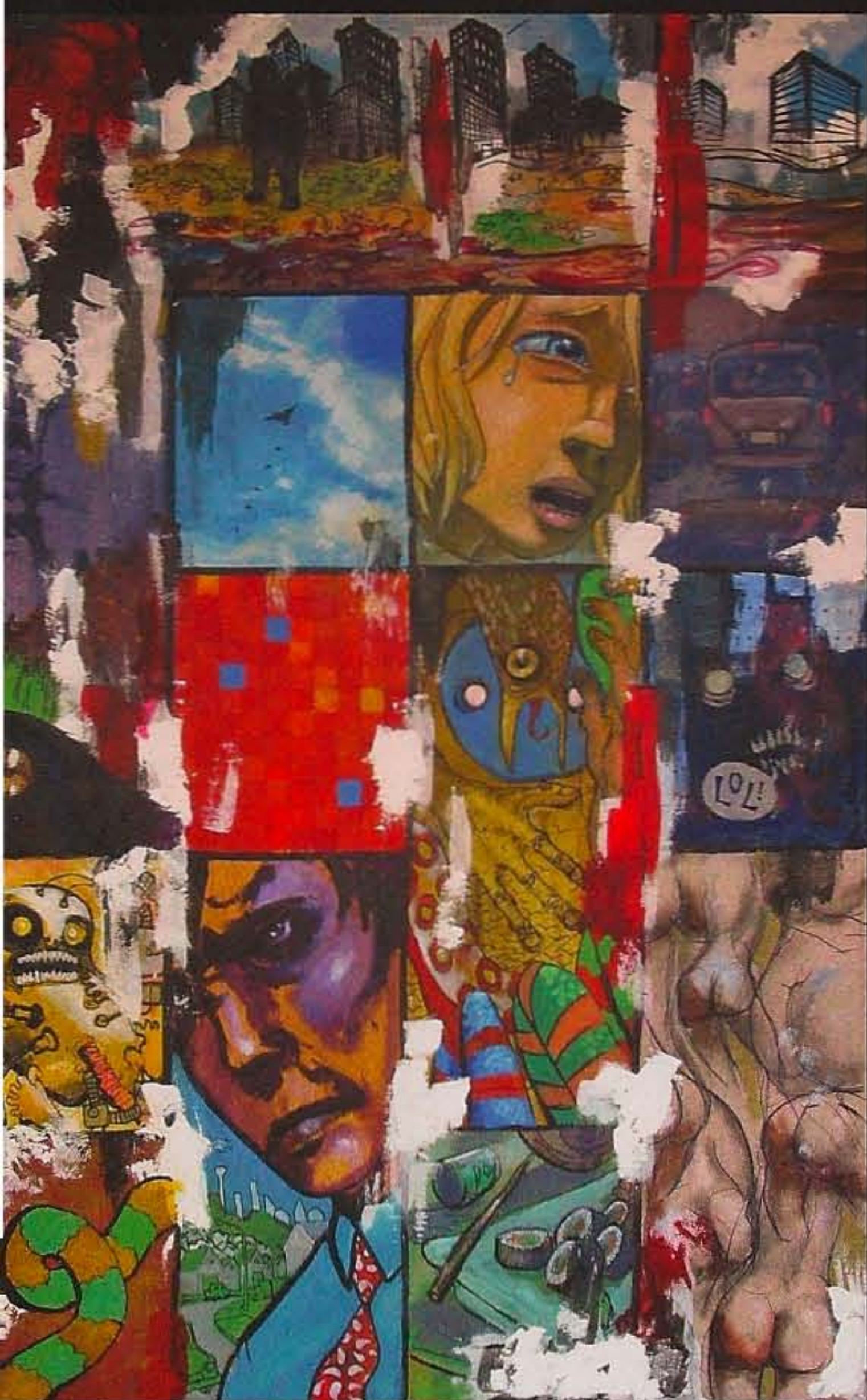
"Making graffiti an art form is no crime, and allowing for art to evolve and inspire isn't either," remarks Noria.

Mesa is following a similar path. Aside from his important work with city police, he has completed commissioned work for Calvin Klein and the Governor General. Many graffiti artists do corporate work, he says, because advertisers realized long ago its appealing youthfulness and energy. The art, whether in the streets or in a gallery, still retains the power to move and challenge.

And for those talented graffiti artists who want to make money off their art, La Petite Mort offers them a welcoming and supportive curator in Bérubé, a well-lit wall to display their creations, and a chance to make a living off of their creative gift. "I let them paint on my windows. I let them put on shows. I'm doing what I can to encourage [the artists], to enrich them."

Graffiti is at once a cry for attention, a mode of rebellious self-expression, and also a fluid form of art, accessible to anyone with an appreciation for creativity and perhaps an attraction to the black sheep of the world.

words: Malorie Bertrand



Juan Carlos Noria "Untitled"