

Artistic Extensions of a Community: The Street Art of Ernest “Zach” Zacharevic

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Have you ever been enroute to a destination, and then were suddenly surprised by graffiti that appeared more than just visual noise? Did the imagery catch your eye or seem meaningful? Among all other art styles, street art can capture the attention of the unconcerned public. It is the art genre which can find an audience in anyone and is not sought after exclusively by intended viewers who stroll through and critique within art galleries. It is art created for the public and the unsuspecting viewer, to be stumbled upon if not hunted down. Street art is also the creator of incidental experiences. It brings joy and sadness; it provokes and inspires. Its liberal and spontaneous style unites and belongs to the local community.

The artists of such public artworks fully intended for communal responses and extended ownership. One such artist is Lithuanian-born street artist Ernest “Zach” Zacharevic, whose urban-centered murals bring everyday life to the forefront and entice visitors and community members to stop and reflect on his transformative works (Figure 1). Zach did not begin his artistic path as a street artist. He would describe himself as a traditional painter who found the urban jungle as his canvas. Born in 1986, Zach found his early artistic education uninspiring. He moved to London where he gravitated towards challenging conceptual art that became a foundation for his atypical methods (Colors, 2019). Thus, his works became a merging of detailed brushwork of fine art portraiture and spray-painted gestures of street art. Though his works captured attention of local inner-city dwellers and critics, it was not until the creation of

his 2012 6-piece series at Penang's George Town festival in Malaysia that he became internationally recognized, being tagged as "The Malaysian Banksy."

Figure 1

Style Wars



Note: E. Zacharevic. Mural, 2013. Singapore.

<https://www.ernestzacharevic.com/outdoor#/singapore-2013>

Much like other street art, Zach's dynamic murals are influenced by the political, cultural, and social climate of their communities. However, the carefully planned characteristics of his murals not only shine out as cultural and economic beacons for the cities of which they were created, but also for the global community. "I try and use composition and character to explore universal concepts rather than focus a singular narrative," explains Zach in an interview with Street Art News. "We all share an understanding of what these are, but we all experience them in unique ways" (Street Art News, 2016, para. 2).

Zach's captivating public murals have made global impact by displaying visually stunning commonality with the human experience. They illuminate the most internal desires of the human psyche to connect with our present and past selves and the community, and raise awareness of social and cultural issues that challenge viewers to reexamine neglected human and systemic concerns. In this instructional resource, I will expound these concepts by examining several of Zach's street art murals in the hope to not only garner new advocates of street art that appreciate its essential significance and distinction in the art world, but to bring an understanding of how street art reflects our inner selves through relatable content, exposes current issues, and unites local and global communities.

A Salve for the Human Psyche

Zach's public murals often portray children as the focal subject. They can be seen in playful and whimsical poses or, less commonly, as the signifier of a more mature and communal issue. Zach regularly paints children in a context of unaffected simplicity or joyfulness, which can trigger a feeling of nostalgia in the viewer. Nostalgia is generally connected with childhood, which, when considered a happy one, may illicit feelings of regret or loss of a better, less complicated time. Despite the negativity we may associate with these feelings, studies have surmised that nostalgia may play an important factor in our human psyche.

In 2008, a series of studies was conducted on the possible benefits of nostalgia on the human psyche. Results indicated that when experiencing stress or worry in difficult times, most participants expressed feelings of nostalgia as their thoughts "form(ed) a constructive narrative of meaningful events from the past" (Cohut, 2021, para. 24), which essentially helped them cope with their current difficulties. Routledge et al. (2008), who led the studies, concluded that

nostalgia generates positive affectivity, increases positive self-regard, and strengthens social bonds. They declared it a “social emotion” (Routledge et al., 2008, pg. 306). This is an important note that further supports other research stating that nostalgia can “help increase a person’s willingness to help others, thanks to the fact that it strengthens the sense of social connectedness” (Feng et al., 2011, as cited in Cohut, 2021, para. 27). We can safely assume then that it would be appropriate to conjure up such feelings of nostalgia through art that is intending to strengthen individuals and unify communities.

One of the most popular of Zach’s murals to photograph is *Children on a Bicycle* (Figure 2), which is an excellent example of visual nostalgia. Zach is no stranger to upcycling found objects into his works; in fact, this is a primary differentiator from other street artists. He incorporates overlooked and nameless utility fixtures secured on city walls, as well as found objects, which complete his mixed-media paintings as public installations. With *Children on a Bicycle*, the artist heightens the realism and tangibility of the cheerful scene by installing a bicycle beneath the painted children. Their joyful faces as they ride the bike reveal a sense that “life was good,” and still must be.

Figure 2

Children on a Bicycle



Note: E. Zacharevic. 1 in a 6-piece series for Penang’s annual George Town Festival, 2012. George Town, Penang, Malaysia. A reflection of the joy and daily life of town. One of the most photographed artworks in Penang. <http://www.ernestzacharevic.com/>

Children have become a signature of Zach’s work, eliciting a poignant sadness or joyfulness in his murals, urging us to cherish our inner child (Norval, 2018). He refers to his portrayal of children as a way to simplify a viewer’s perception of a whole conceptual work, saying “when I paint these children, people don’t have these questions of what these children are, and what’s their job” (TodayOnline, 2015, :13). A viewer can better connect when confronted by a relatable past. Promoting Zach’s current solo exhibition at B.east Gallery in Florence, Italy, *Juxtapoz Art & Culture* online magazine (2023) expounds on this notion of childhood innocence and Zach’s reclaiming of found objects by stating viewers would be “exploring the innocence of childhood against the complexities of our changing urban landscapes. The Dadaists were the first to suggest the importance of play as a fundamental expression of human nature, challenging conventional notions of creation by elevating reclaimed objects to the realm of ‘serious’ art”

(para. 1). This relatability of nostalgia and childhood innocence supports Zach's aim for his art to resonate beyond their locales.

Reflections of Social and Economic Concerns

Not all of Zach's works reflect a desire for the joy and simplicity of bygone days. Zach's art does not lack in controversy. A permanent resident of Malaysia, Zach's murals were not foreign to the wider surrounding area. In 2013, Zach spray painted a mural in the Malaysian city of Johor Bahru depicting two personages, both Lego characters as a reference to the city's Legoland branch. One Lego character was a wealthy woman carrying a Chanel handbag, the other a knife-wielding Lego man painted hidden around the corner from her. The fanciful aspect of the mural is a cultural reflection of the city's Legoland attraction, while the underlying concept is the notorious crime found in the area (Figure 3). Local authorities did not find the mural accurately representative of their city, and less than a week later had it painted over. Nevertheless, between the creation of the mural and its coverup, the illustration resonated and interacted with the community. Zach's juxtaposition of whimsy and a serious economic and societal concern is one of the most powerful forms of peaceful protest, publicizing corroding issues that affect the community.

Figure 3

Legoland, Johor Bahru 2013



Note. E. Zacharevic. Mural, 2013. Johor Bahru, Malaysia. “Of the 3 unauthorized pieces I threw up in the area, this was the only to be removed. In doing so, I think the authorities actually generated more attention for the statement I was trying to make” Zach remarks (2013, para. 2). (<https://www.ernestzacharevic.com/outdoor#/johorbahru>)

Lucy Proctor of BBC reported, “the whitewashing of the walls happened despite an attempt by two local artists to make it more acceptable by adding a policeman about to handcuff the mugger to the mural” (Proctor, 2013, para. 7). Fortunately, this whitewashing of the truth did not go unnoticed. To the credit of locals, the mural had quickly gone viral, causing quite a stir on social media. Among thousands of “likes,” Proctor notes one Facebook comment, “pictures speak a thousand words of truth,” and many embittered victims of the local crime, who found the mural to illustrate their own harrowing experiences, shared their own stories. In an interview with Proctor, Zach justifies that “my paintings are always a response to whatever social environment I get exposed to” (Proctor, 2013, para. 5). This reaction is welcomed and expected of exposing art to the public. Zach further clarifies that “street art is the biggest movement in the history of art in terms of public exposure and social engagement” (TodayOnline, 2015, :41).

Extensions of the Community: Cultural and Social Beacons

Though his art may create controversy, it finds purpose in expressing the values shared by the community it serves. Zach understands it belongs to the public and is their communal story. The canvas, in this case the public wall, does not belong to him. When art interacts with the urban landscape, it becomes a part of the community and invites the public to respond. Zach depends on spontaneity in his murals, finding inspiration for his works through his social and cultural interactions, gleaning from his own private photograph collection he creates during these “real-world” connections (Colors, 2019).

He finds deeper meaning through storytelling, allowing others to expand it – almost a domino effect beginning with art revealing the present environment, and its viewers connecting with the art. Zach discloses, “I find it important to create work that does not change the environment but rather compliments what already is there...[keeping] my work site specific and relevant” (IPIC, 2019, :06). His canvas – the walls of the city – is essential to this connection. Norval (2018) explains that Zach emphasizes how people’s interactions with both the art and the walls it adorns are shaped by their unique life stories and perspectives.

When a local artist “doodled” a dinosaur chasing his Penang *Kid on a Motorbike* street installation (Figure 4), journalists called for his opinion on the “vandalizing” of his work. He responded, “I didn’t see it as vandalism of all things...I paint some wall and someone else paints that wall...it’s not my wall, it’s not anyone’s wall, really” (TodayOnline, 2015, 2:17). Proving his sincerity, he painted another boy, taking hold of the leashed dinosaur (Figure 5). He retains the same thoughts with the Johor Bahru mural. When local artists painted a policeman alongside the knife-wielding Lego criminal prior to the mural’s erasure, it was a continuance of their story.

Figure 4

Kid on a Motorbike



Note. By E. Zacharevic, 2012, mural, George Town, Penang, Malaysia.
<https://www.toptravelsights.com/street-art-of-george-town/>

Figure 5

Little Boy with Pet Dinosaur



Note. By E. Zacharevic, 2012, mural, George Town, Penang, Malaysia. Zach's addition of a child restraining another local artist's drawn dinosaur. <https://www.toptravelsights.com/street-art-of-george-town/>

Exploration

The public art featured in this instructional resource highlights for students the possibilities an artist has in reaching out to local and global communities, uniting members through relational experiences, and initiating extensions of their narratives by illustrating their cultural values and societal and economic concerns. Students may realize through Zach's works that one community's concerns and stories may not differ much from their own and thus gain a deeper understanding that individuals who look different, speak other languages, and celebrate unfamiliar cultural practices still share a global commonality within the human psyche.

As students practice their own art, urge them to explore creating new artistic approaches that extend past the conventional boundaries of artistic making. How may they convert or utilize ordinary, overlooked, unspectacular items or places in conjunction with their artistic methods,

converting them into visual and meaningful elements of the community? Is there a location within their community or city which can benefit from positive visual messages? Discuss the changes they can create together to make this space a focal point for unity. Encourage them to investigate ways to connect with their viewers on a higher, more relatable level, as Zach has done with his art. Invite them to consider how they may broaden the benefits of their art outside of their familiar sphere to immortalize larger community stories and foster strong communal bonds with the hope that it may extend through a more global network of acceptance and humanity.

Curricular Applications:

National Core Arts Standards Artistic Processes and Anchor Standards			
Artistic Processes			
Creating	Presenting/Producing	Responding	Connecting
Anchor Standards			
<p>NCAS Anchor Standard 2: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work</p> <p><i>Students will:</i></p> <p>Investigate: Evaluate figures 2 and 4 of Zach's works and discuss together how these works differ from those of other street artists such as Banksy. What value and dimension do found objects add to these murals? What messages does Zach hope to relay to his audience? How do Zach's artistic skills allow him more flexibility and success in realizing his ideas?</p> <p>Create: Bring in found objects from home or other public areas which inspire meaning. Explore how these can be incorporated into a smaller scale artwork and how it can help elaborate a communal message. What kind of message would you like to share with the community? Would it resonate with them, and why? How might one of your found objects contribute to your overall message? Consider what</p>	<p>NCAS Anchor Standard 5: Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.</p> <p><i>Students will:</i></p> <p>Investigate: Evaluate figures 3 and 4 and discuss possible reasons why the artist chose those specific walls as his canvas. Do the walls reflect the surrounding community in any way? How might the existing permanent fixtures affect Zach's artistic decisions? Does a prominent feature such as a door enhance or detract from the artwork?</p> <p>Create: Consider where in your community there are spaces which would allow for visual enhancement or communication. Discuss why these surfaces would work with an artistic concept you have. Conceptualize how your message may be best</p>	<p>NCAS Anchor Standard 8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.</p> <p><i>Students will:</i></p> <p>Investigate: Considering the figures in this instructional resource, how would you interpret their meanings? Do your own experiences influence your interpretations? What may have been the artist's intent to share the messages? How well do the works communicate the messages, and why?</p> <p>Reflect: How do your own artistic interests and knowledge add to your work? Does your found object enhance the overall</p>	<p>NCAS Anchor Standard 11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.</p> <p><i>Students will:</i></p> <p>Investigate: Discuss how Zach's works have an impact on their surrounding community. Do they remind their viewers of shared cultural values or urge them to take action on current issues? How might the concepts communicate globally? How could this bring about a sense of humanistic relatability?</p> <p>Create: Think of how you might transfer your artwork to a</p>

other media such as paint, charcoal, or other expressive medium, can be added.	presented to the public. Does scale matter, or already existing features? Take a picture of one of these spaces and recreate it on a smaller canvas.	message, or detract? How may potentially working on a public canvas such as a wall affect your artistic placement and choices?	public place. What changes would you make for greater impact and connection with your community?
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