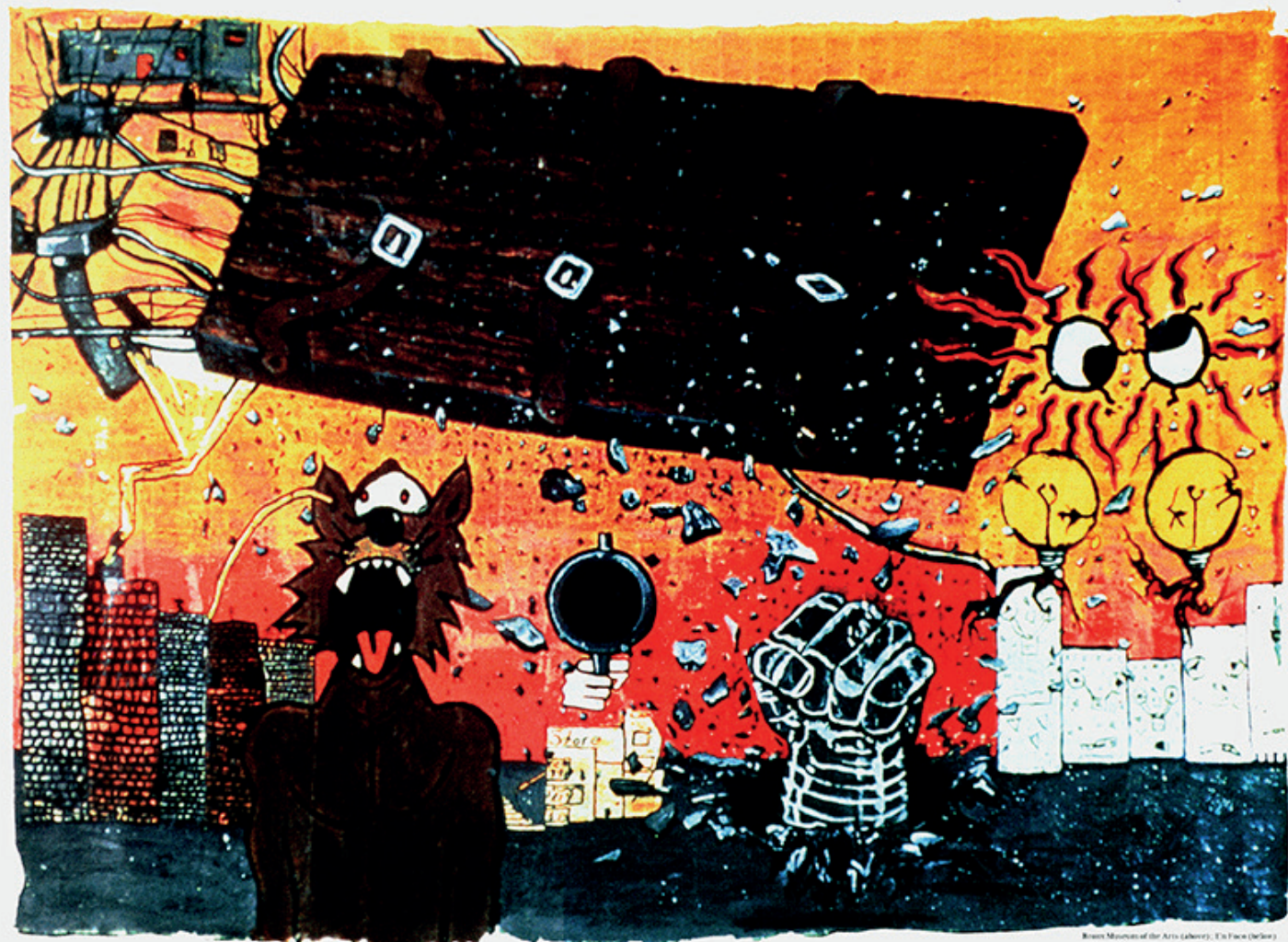


The New York Times

## ART REVIEW



Bronx Museum of the Arts (above); Eric Face (below)

## Way Up in the Bronx A Hardy Spirit Blooms

By HOLLAND COTTER

Art in the Bronx, like the sprawling borough itself, is a resilient, clamorous, multifaceted thing, cosmopolitan in outlook but imbued with a spirit of place.

It embraces forms from video installations to virtuosic aerosol-spray murals. And it turns up in unexpected places: in school hallways, hospital lobbies, courtrooms, subway stations, living rooms and — officially, unofficially and often heart-liftingly — on building facades.

Exhibition spaces designed on the white-cube Manhattan model are relatively few and far between. But they are determinedly there, and so are artists, lots of them, some well known, others up and coming, living and working throughout the borough.

Their creative presence is tonic to a part of the city that has suffered more than its share of political and economic sabotage over the years and still battles stereotypes promoted by Hollywood films like the 1981 "Fort Apache, the Bronx" and books like Tom Wolfe's 1987 "Bonfire of the Vanities."

There is no question that the borough remains a vulnerable organism, but amazing things are in progress. The South Bronx is being resurrected. (And the Grand Concourse remains pretty grand.) Grass-roots community ventures of all kinds are flourishing.

### What's up, page 33.

And so is art, particularly in a handful of tenacious institutions, large and small, that have settled in to stay. A few of them are considered below.

The social and cultural histories of the borough come across with stirring immediacy in the show "Urban Mythologies: The Bronx Represented Since the 1960's," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Organized by Lydia Yee, a curator at the museum, and a guest curator, Betti-Sue Hertz, the show, which comes with an excellent catalogue, is arranged chronologically and opens with pictures from the early 1960's by Max Levine, a local photographer.

Mr. Levine captured some newsworthy local events, like the campaign visit of John F. Kennedy in 1960. But mostly he recorded daily life in a borough that was still



"Frankenstein," above, by Tim Rollins and K.O.S., is at the Bronx Museum, and Sulaiman Ellison's photograph "Priest Carrying a Processional Cross and Icon" at Lehman College.

largely middle- and working-class white. A Veterans Day parade marches on Tremont Avenue. John Wayne's "Hellfighter" plays at the Earl Theater. A restaurant fire is just a fire, not yet a dire symbol.

The photographs of the Puerto Rico-born Carlos Ortiz from a decade later come as a shock. By the time they were taken, urban renewal had splintered the borough. Poor populations, mostly black and Latino, displaced from elsewhere, were pushed in. "White flight" followed, with landlords torching buildings to collect insurance. Basic services and amenities dried up. In Mr. Ortiz's pictures, crowded sidewalks and houses are replaced by fog-covered empty lots; in place of stores and vegetable stands there are trash heaps. A visit by President Jimmy Carter in 1977 is greeted by angry, out-of-work protesters standing in front of burned-out tenements.

A few Manhattan artists ventured into the borough. In 1970 Richard Serra created a temporary site-specific piece in the Fordham section. But it was Gordon Matta-

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# Way Up in the Bronx, a Resilient Spirit Is Blooming

Continued From Weekend Page 29

Clark, his political sensibilities fine-tuned, who responded to the stressed, lived-in texture of the area, as suggested by his cousin's chunk of linoleum-covered floor from an abandoned apartment, both a relic and a monument.

Such images, verifying a specific human presence, come throughout the exhibition, in the photographs of Mel Rosenblat, Ricky Flores and Walter Rosenblat, and the pastel descent, life-size portraits by Sophie Rivera. And just as the borough's media profile was darkening, a new art emerged, known by an old name, graffiti.

Graffiti (or writing, as its practitioners prefer to call it) is by now a textbook style; no survey of American art is complete without it. And it appears in various forms in this show. Its kinetic vitality is hinted in photos by Henry Chalfant and Martha Cooper depicting painted subway cars. Its inventive elegance is caught in 1970's drawings by artist like Rama, Blade, Case 2, Ruff 170 and Tracy 168. (A selection of old and new work by the last three is also on view at the Martinez Gallery in Chelsea, reviewed on page 34.)

This art form is very much alive, although the Manhattan art world seems to have been unaware of it until Barry McGee's recent show at Deitch Projects in SoHo. The three-man "graf" team Tats Cru, whose urban, punchy work shows up on walls all over the South Bronx, has created a mural for the show.

As graffiti made its way to Manhattan in the 1970's, Manhattan artists traveled to the Bronx. Many of them — Jenny Holzer, Lisa Kahane, Rebecca Howland, Justen Ladda, Christy Rupp, Kiki Smith and others — exhibited at the storefront gallery Fashion Moda, established by the Austrian-born artist Stefan Eins in the South Bronx. A few chose to settle in the area.

Among them was John Ahearn, who, with Rigoberto Torres, created hundreds of life-size painted plaster casts of neighborhood residents. Tim Rollins, a public school teacher, collaborated with a group of his students (their collective name was Kids of Survival, or K.O.S.) on paintings based on literary themes. The fantastic mix of cartoon and sci-fi images in the early piece titled "Frankenstein" (1984) is painted directly on pages from that Mary Shelley novel, itself a story of alienation and empowerment.

Mr. Rollins is now back in residence in the South Bronx after a time away. (Mr. Ahearn and Mr. Torres have a workshop in East Harlem.) But Pepón Osorio has lived, worked and exhibited in the area all along. And his extraordinary, room-filling installation "Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)," a version of which appeared in the 1983 Whitney Biennial, is a highlight of the exhibition.

It is a full-scale tableau of an apartment thrown into disarray. The ornate furniture is slashed, ceramic religious statues and vases are shattered; a sheet-covered woman's corpse lies on the floor; yellow police tape keeps the viewer out. The piece carries a charge of violence that much of the rest of the work in the exhibition, apart from clips from sensationalist movies, avoids. (Another exception is the grave, tender 1996 painting by Whitfield Lovell recording the death of a sandwich artist at the hands of a mugger.)

Yet Mr. Osorio has couched his drama in terms of intimate material beauty. It's a treat, for example, associated not with high art but with objects one might actually find in a home, things of sentimental value, decorative items and status symbols that make life seem richer, fuller and more secure.

One sees such material more benignly presented in the wonderful photographs of South Bronx domestic interiors and house-proud owners taken by Camilla José Vergara. And through Mr. Vergara's pictures and Mr. Osorio's disturbing installation a kind of art usually excluded from museums finds its way into the exhibition, and another facet of Bronx cultural life, seen only by its inhabitants, is revealed.

The Bronx Museum has always acknowledged this indigenous, multi-

ethnic culture while keeping itself in sync with the wider art world. And no doubt some sense of that delicate balance will be evident in a two-day symposium that begins today at the museum. Titled "Urban Transformations: Style, Representation and Social Change," it will bring together sociologists, artists, hip-hop performers and scholars of urban planning in the kind of mix this museum is famous for.

Although the Bronx Museum is the borough's flagship visual arts showcase, it shares the limelight with a handful of others. These include En Foco, the Lehman College Art Gallery, Longwood Arts Gallery, Bronx River Art Center and Gallery, and the Hostos Center for the Arts and Culture, which has a show of paintings by the Bronx artist Moses Ros on view through tomorrow.

En Foco was created 25 years ago to provide funds, materials and exhibition opportunities for artists of African, Asian, Latino or American Indian descent. Under the direction of Charles Biasny-Rivera and Miriam Román it maintains a photographic archive and publishes a quarterly magazine, *Nueva Luz*. It has no gallery of its own but places the work of the artists it sponsors in public locations. Some years ago, for example, it arranged an installation of Sophie Rivera's portraits in the 161st Street subway station.

The four artists in the En Foco show at Lehman are a diverse lot and come through with fine work. André Cypriano, born in Brazil, documents life in a prison used to hold political radicals near Rio de Janeiro. Suzanne K. Saylor, a Japanese-American, concentrates on cemeteries in Hawaii, with their surreal accumulations of tropical flowers and plastic toys.

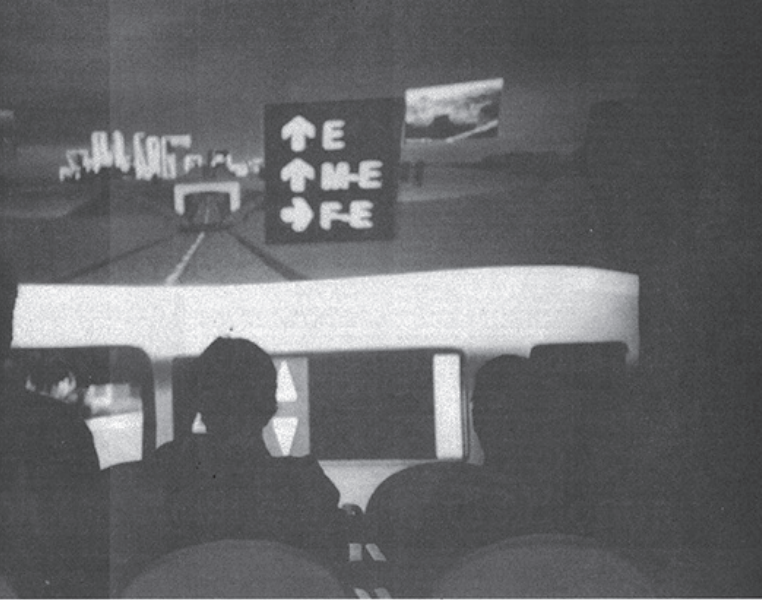
Sullivan Ellison, Bronx born, offers a series of pictures taken over 15 years or so and centered on the Orthodox Christian church in Ethiopia, with respectfully robbed church and revoiced pilgrimage sites like the

rock-out churches at Lalibela, to which Mr. Ellison made arduous repeated trips. Finally, Terry Boddie, born on the island of Nevis in the Caribbean, stretches the photographic medium by combining vintage pictures of family members with monoprint forms of pictographs and tropical plants.

**Peter d'Agostino at Lehman**  
The Lehman Gallery, established in 1984, programs consistently stimulating, technology-savvy shows under the direction of Susan Hovitz. It is at work on a two-year project catalogue on the Internet all public art in the Bronx, from the 19th century to the present.

Lehman is offering a one-man survey, organized by Robert Atkins, of the Bronx-born conceptual and video artist Peter d'Agostino. It begins with his early work with television and moves on to ambitious installations, including an interactive virtual environment in video form. The piece feels a little like a large-scale digital war game and is implicitly critical of the hollering, distancing effects of the technology it uses.

More recent is a split-screen projected on-line work, "su.Vi.us," (www.temple.edu/newtechlab/Vesu\_Vi.us), which pairs scenes of the Arthur Avenue section of the Bronx, where Mr. d'Agostino grew up, with shots of Pompeii and Mount Vesuvius near Naples, where his parents were born. The contrast between



clips of Bronx street life and the ruined avenues of Pompeii is a quiet study in transience and the preservation of cultural memory.

**Longwood Arts Gallery**  
Longwood Arts Project, an arm of the Bronx Council on the Arts, has operated for 18 years on one floor of a former public school in the South Bronx. Its director, Eddie Torres, organized the current show of five artists, four of whom worked on Longwood studio fellowships this year.

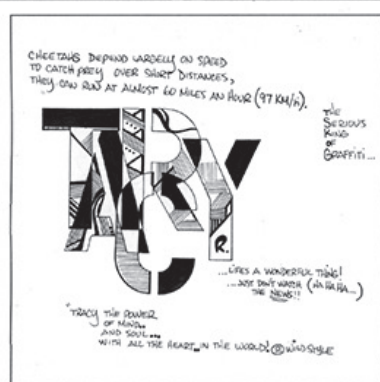
Antonio Serna's spare, linear paintings are based on figures inspired by Japanese prints. Jehanne-Marie Gavarni's sculptures use industrial tubing and sheer fabrics to convey a sense of constrained sexuality. Esperanza Cortes's labor-intensive sculptures are based on chains stitched from tiny glass beads. One piece, suspended from the ceiling and hung with handmade amulets and charms, has a dense but attenuated presence.

Andrew Sepon, a graduate student at the Rhode Island School of Design, ambitiously juggles several projects at once. He has two short, effective videos about racial identity in the show and another about the history of his own Philadelphia neighborhood in the works.

Also on view are brushy paintings by Nicholas A. Enright, which incorporate hand-drawn colloquial phrases — "come rain or come shine," "here's a piece of my mind" — that are meant to form an extended poem. Mr. Enright and his business partner, Nik Folk Anderson (they call themselves the Big Hands Mural Company), have also created the snake-like rubber-stamped mural that spirals across a hallway wall.

Longwood will be downsizing after this year. Fellows will work primarily in cyberspace (although the computers are not yet in place). And much of the existing studio will be given back to the city for different uses.

**Bronx River Art Center**  
The show titled "Directors' Choices," organized by Amir Bey at the Bronx River Art Center, includes work selected by the six artists who have been in charge of the center since it opened in a converted factory building in Tregpoint in 1980. All but



There's no art gallery on the premises, but the Point has overseen the installation of a small sculpture garden in a shopping district a few blocks away; it plans to establish another one on the riverfront. A nearby factory building has been fitted out as a studio space for artists, and within the complex itself Tats Cru, the graffiti group, has its cramped headquarters, a tiny museum in itself with a display of works by old-school "graf" masters. In short, the Point is doing a lot, and it seems to be doing it right. It may add up to a model for other ventures in the borough to follow.

**Public Art**

Tats Cru's work can be seen throughout the Hunts Point and Longwood neighborhoods in the form of memorial murals and commissioned advertisements for local businesses. The Bronx is rich in public art of all kinds. Here's a sampling.

Subway riders will start to be on the alert for Jose Ortega's sparkling ceramic mosaic murals, "One Race, One World, One Universe" (1996), an M.T.A. Arts for Transit commission at the Third Avenue and 148th Street station of the No. 2 and 5 lines.

Among recently finished projects under auspices of the city's Percent for Art Program, two are in the Rafael Viñoly-designed Bronx Housing Court on the Grand Concourse a few blocks above the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Two stony, funny Statue of Liberty paintings by Komar and Melamid are in the lobby. (Don't miss Renee Cox's fabulous made version of the same figure in the museum's show.) And archeological murals titled "Memories of the Bronx" by Jory Tucla are in an upstairs courtroom.

The Manhattan art world seems to disparage public art as an irrelevant, sentimental genre, but a reality-check tour of the Bronx suggests otherwise. And one might start with a look at two low-key pieces by John Fekner and Janet Zweig now in place at Walton High School, near the Lehman College campus. (Information on accessibility here is available by calling the Percent for Art offices.)

Mr. Fekner's etched metal plaques carry portraits of historical figures — Emily Dickinson, José Martí, Walt Disney, Diego Rivera, Jim Thorpe, the educator Mary McLeod Bethune — whom the students and teachers in this troubled school selected as their cultural heroes and whose faces they will pass every day.

Ms. Zweig's work takes the form of two banks of cast bronze mailboxes in the school's lobby. Each box has a letter slot and is etched with a single word: Secrets, Fears, Dreams and so on. Students are invited to drop notes in them. The principal, Nichola Jenko, said the response had been strong, and the results would eventually be published as a book, the *Annals of Walton High*.

It should be an amazing document: the collective, first-person history, told at the end of one century and the beginning of another, of a new generation of New Yorkers. They will, after all, be determining the future of many things, including that of the Bronx itself, a borough in which secrets, fears and sky-high dreams mingle.

Peter d'Agostino, (below left) Martinez Gallery Above, a scene from a video by Peter d'Agostino, at Lehman College. Below left, a graffiti by Tracy 168, at the Bronx Museum.

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## What's Up, Uptown: Finding Art in Unexpected Places

Here is information about sites mentioned in the review of Bronx art shows. Admission is free unless otherwise noted. In addition, Bronx Community College in University Heights has an art gallery (718-289-5142), as does the Krassdale Food Corporation in Hunts Point (718-378-1100). There are art activities at the City Island Arts Organization (718-885-9116). In Riverdale, Wave Hill (718-949-3200) will resume its outdoor sculpture program this summer.

**BRONX HOUSING COURT**, 1119 Grand Concourse, near 146th Street, Morrisania (designed by Rafael Vinoly Architect). Jorge Tucla's "Memories of the Bronx" (1996), murals in a courtroom. Komar and Melamid's "Statues" and "Legends of Justice" (1996), murals in the lobby. City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs, Percent for Art Program, (718) 467-7778.

**BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS**, 1460 Grand Concourse, at 163rd Street, Morrisania. (718) 91-6000. "Urban Sculptures: The

Bronx Revisited Since the 1960's" and "Context": Words, Texts and Meaning in the Permanent Collection." Through Sept. 5. Hours: Wednesdays, 3 to 6 P.M.; Thursdays and Fridays, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M.; Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 5 P.M. Admission: \$2 for students and the elderly. A symposium in two parts: Today from 10:30 P.M. and tomorrow, 10:30 A.M. to 10:30 P.M. Admission to both sessions is \$15.

**BRONX RIVER ART CENTER AND GALLERY**, 1847 West Tremont Avenue, Tremont. (718) 399-8113. "Directors' Choices," through June 19. Hours: Tuesdays through Thursdays, 3 to 6 P.M.; Saturdays through 7 P.M.

**HOSTOS CENTER FOR THE ARTS AND CULTURE**, Eugenio María de Hostos Community College of the City University of New York, 500 Grand Concourse, at 160th Street, South Bronx. (718) 314-4535. "Moses Ros: Assembled Works," through tomorrow. Hours: Mondays through Fridays, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M.

**LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY**, Ford Park Boulevard West, at Goldens Avenue, Kingsbridge. (718) 962-8271. Web site: math248.lehman.cuny.edu/art/

gallery.html. "Peter d'Agostino: Interactivity and Intervention, 1978-1999" and "New Works: An Exhibition of the 1998 Photography Award Winners." Through May 15. Hours: Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 A.M. to 5 P.M. Information: En Foco. (718) 384-7718 or at the site www.enfoco.com.

**LONGWOOD ARTS GALLERY**, 455 Longwood Avenue, at Beck Street, South Bronx. (718) 442-6060. "Longwood Studio Fellowship Labors." Through June 25. Hours: Thursdays and Fridays, noon to 5 P.M.; Saturdays, noon to 4 P.M.

**THE POINT**, 540 Garrison Avenue, Hunts Point. (718) 542-4233. Hours: Mondays through Saturdays; call for times, which vary.

**WALTON HIGH SCHOOL**, 2706 Reservoir Avenue, at 190th Street, West Bronx. John Fekner's "Fears," plaques and glass mural. Janet Zweig's "Your Voices" (1998), sculpture. City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs, Percent for Art Program, (718) 467-7778.

**M.T.A. ARTS FOR TRANSIT**, (212) 875-4747 or write to a brochure to M.T.A. Arts, N.Y. Transit, 311 Madison Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. Web site: www.mta.org/arts

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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VOL. CCXXXV NO. 6 EE/PR \*\*\*

FRIDAY, JANUARY 7, 2000

INTERNET ADDRESS: <http://wsj.com>

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL FRIDAY, JANUARY 7, 2000

## ART & MONEY

By KEN BENSINGER

### Graffiti's 'Artistic' Renaissance

**GRAFFITI IS GETTING** taken seriously as art.

The art form/criminal activity, long snubbed by the art world, is earning museum recognition. The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York recently held a panel discussion featuring some of the major graffiti artists from the 1980s. The packed event followed a Bronx Museum of the Arts retrospective of graffiti last summer and a similar panel at the Museum of the City of New York. Commercial-gallery shows of graffiti art are being held in New York, Los Angeles, Cincinnati, Rome and San Francisco, where contemporary pieces by artists of the 1970s movement are selling for several thousand dollars.



Martinez Gallery

**King of Style** by CASE2 is at a New York gallery; graffiti art has sold for up to \$10,000.

Graffiti art was born on the streets of New York in the 1970s as teenagers began to spray-paint their names, or "tags," in huge letters

on New York subway cars. The designs soon became more elaborate, and by the early 1980s, graffiti was briefly embraced by art-world stars such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, featured at galleries—then forgotten. A decade ago, New York implemented a policy that removes defaced subway cars from service.

Now, one reason for the movement's renaissance is that it was controversial in its time. Demand for such works is rising in the wake of the "Sensation" scandal at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Still, the Whitney has no graffiti art in its collection. SEEN, one of the graffiti artists on the panel, says, "I see this as a giant step, but... when are they going to put our art on the walls?"