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# THE ICY SIGNS OF THE TIMES

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When we think of indigenous American art forms, of how entire musical genres, from jazz, soul, hip hop or the blues, to rock and country spawned from the from the collective aspirations and dysfunctions of the United States, we recognize the cultural processes by which populist idiom becomes art. This is, however, a far trickier map to follow when it comes to visual culture. Fine art as a Western tradition is, rather, more of a continuum, and a very long one at that, defined primarily according to medium, with distinctions of style and content. No matter how radical a departure they may seem at the time, they're always reducible to epochal generalities.

We all have a pretty good idea about what Surrealism or minimalism look like, but as different as they may be, we also know that they belong together to that twentieth-century project called modernism.



Even the authority of genre that modernism allowed, where we could put specific dates on art movements, was forever eroded with postmodernism so that once rigid definitions carry on now as a matter of style in contemporary art with multifarious intentions and effects. Graffiti felt very much like a break within this tradition, a form unto itself, and among its smartest practitioners, like Stephen Powers, it continues to reify its otherness to fine art by at once rejecting the certainty of art history while embracing its own past. This matters a lot.



*IT'S A REGULAR WORKMAN'S DAY. IF I GET A SIGN PAINTED BEFORE LUNCH AND THEN ONE MORE BEFORE I GO HOME IN THE EVENING, THAT'S A GOOD DAY.*



To have mentioned already how certain forms, whether the blues or graffiti art, are purely American modes is to invoke the everyday character of what and where these expressions mean and come from. We are speaking, of course, about vernacular art, and this is the potent continuity that connects the graffiti of ESPO with Stephen Powers the sign painter. "For me, it's more satisfying than being an artist in the studio," he tells us, "it's a regular workman's day. If I get a sign painted before lunch and then one more before I go home in the evening, that's a good day." Outside the struggles of so many contemporaries wrestling with their own doubts and demons to fashion something a bunch of rich and clueless cunts might take to be the zeitgeist, Stephen's prosaic program of production seems refreshingly direct and a whole hell of a lot more honest. It's as if, unburdened by the vagaries of contemporary art discourse, ESPO is remarkably truly able to talk about what he wants to talk about in his art.

Always one of the most literate of graffiti writers, ESPO is, above all else, a language-based artist with maybe even more in common with artists like Jenny Holzer, Joseph Kosuth and Barbara Kruger than with the legions of urban-inflected artists he's more commonly associated with. "It was always about words and letters for me," he explains, "Signs are just a perfect way for me to combine the two." It is working within the semiotics of signs that Powers shines with a simply stunning wit these days. And it is in this medium that he can deliver the love and generosity of his message, his peculiarly misanthropically tinged humanism, with a kindness of spirit and openness to the full spirited expression of the vox populi.

As a vernacular art form, a mode of representation and communication that, no matter the heights of its accomplishments along the way, has always been something of a folk art, it takes something of the geeky scholar in Powers to bring it to the present, not like another pop-inflected appropriation, but as a surviving strain of weirdo roots Americana. It's just not retro in that pathetic and pathological way that we put everything into some postmodernist blender. Stephen's signs come with all the history attached; they just speak with his acerbic fresh-ass tone that makes them of-the-moment, despite their old neighborhood charms. More literary than literal, "The texts of these works, when you read them, are really about contemporary problems" ESPO points out, "All that layering and accumulation of signs we create are about the messy feelings and memories we all experience." Powers comes to sign painting relatively early and now finds himself at a lucky moment of surprising renaissance, when kids all over the country have taken to its highly styled linguistics as both a financially self-sustaining creative guild and an expansive medium for more personal work.

He began exploring the possibilities of this aesthetic agency in the '90s, along with Barry McGee, his collaborator and compatriot in those years. Then, "Around 1996, at the instigation of [artist] Phil Frost, I started putting up signs around the Lower East Side. They were for fake businesses, but made to be local, like for bodegas and liquor stores." When the late, great Margaret Kilgallen, McGee's wife before her untimely death, forged her unique style of sign painting in their hometown of San Francisco, it was at once inspiring and tempering. "Margaret brought the medium to fine art painting," he credits, "there was no way for me to repeat that, so I began to explore the possibility of bringing my art directly into sign painting."

Remembering back to the days when he was working in tandem with McGee and Kilgallen to recover this fast disappearing and already nearly lost tradition of sign painting, ESPO admits, "We got into it because no one else was doing it. It was a safe harbor for us as no one was at all interested in it. I feel like I wandered down an old rutty and overgrown dirt road and now I find myself on an eight lane highway." And surely what was, not so long ago, an obscure and esoteric undertaking for the weirdest of artists to pursue is now far more like a viable industry and an entire cultural movement. There truly are some amazingly skilled and talented people being drawn into this milieu, and for fans like us, this is really exciting. We have yet to see how it will all develop, but at this point we can only hope some small fraction of those being attracted to sign painting understand, as Stephen Powers truly does, its gorgeous place along the cusp of our vanishing past and the chasm of our endlessly mediated future. "Signs are a way of grabbing attention and directing the gaze and have always meant to help sell things," he opines, "We're selling emotions, we're selling life, we're just selling those things that you cannot buy."

Stephen Powers, or ESPO as he's most familiarly known, has the kind of old school tenure in a reviled and illegal art form, and a brilliant legacy of innovation within a medium that makes him both an impeccable spokesman for, and paradigm of, graffiti art. He's also, to be quite frank, a pretty cranky cuss. ESPO's uncanny combination of personal intensity and uncompromising ideology has sometimes given him the unfair reputation of being "difficult." Where his art and his persona converge is upon those very terms of cultural currency we all are somewhat suspect in compromising. Simply put, he is more confrontational and caring in regards to what he thinks art can and should be than most others are entirely comfortable with. I'll admit that, at times, he's scared the fuck out of me, but let me also confess that every time he's disagreed enough with my opinions to berate me in his inimitably gruff manner, my longstanding respect for his work has made me listen closely to the wisdom and ferocity of his perspective, and even (albeit silently) ultimately agree with him. To put a finer point on it, ESPO's actual engagement in the art world proper—showing with the fabled Deitch Projects (whose similar iconoclastic tendencies Powers confers made Jeffrey "a one of a kind dealer")—was so relatively brief in the scheme of his career, his art demands a reading somewhere outside the conventional ratifications of the market.

It's not entirely uncommon for prominent, even great artists to have moments in their career where they work without representation or affiliation, but beyond all those circumstances and situations, there is the unmistakable sense that, with ESPO, this disconnect is deliberate. What makes Stephen's art so compelling and challenging, in fact, is that his entire sense of what it means to be an artist is contrary to the prevailing models of production and distribution. Much as we've been fortunate to have many of the very best artists who worked on trains and the street develop a studio practice in which their art attains commensurate force as painting on canvas, the philosophy and ethos guiding ESPO's vision has kept him at some critical distance from this lineage of comfortable commodities.

He believes in public art as something more than simply a designated common space for self-expression because he actually believes in that ineffable and vague thing we call the public. In many ways, it is that basic determination everyone who has something to say develops along the way to identifying their "audience." Somewhere along the line, Stephen seems to have figured out, beyond the need to address a rarified and rich class of connoisseurs, that it constitutes another kind of utility altogether and that this empty and blurry construct of the "public" is largely responsible for some of the crappiest municipal art, and might be better understood and engaged if we recognize them as the body politic of a community, rather than imagined them as some amorphous collection of people.

While it may seem to many that Stephen Powers stepping out of that highly contested battle we call the contemporary art world would make him considerably less important to the course of civilization, his general absence from the gallery world—a Duchampian silence as it were—has focused this artist's work and intentions on something far more relevant. For the many fans who have ventured out to the Brooklyn Museum, and continue to do so, they are not going there to see the latest ESPO paintings but something else entirely. Stephen Powers is now a sign painter. You wouldn't go over to his studio to look for the right painting to hang over that lovely new Newson couch; he's the kind of cat you bring over to your bodega and say, "Make me something that will bring people to my store. Oh, and make sure it mentions that we sell beer and cigarettes." There is, of course, a political side to this, not that murky one of Pop Art's penchant for the most quotidian appropriations (though it does bear a curious kinship with James Rosenquist, who will, if you ask him, proudly bring out his tattered old membership card from the sign painters union), but a fanciful aesthetic of utility that is decidedly proletariat without ever being prosaic. The form is not the signifier; it is most trenchantly the visual language by which a most extraordinary writer has chosen to communicate with us.

Beholding ESPO's grand installation at the Brooklyn Museum, much like his last art world foray a couple years back at Joshua Liner Gallery, one is immediately struck by the non-hierarchical democracy of his sign-painting project. While artists of the same stature as Powers get busy by hiring a ton of assistants to do their work for them, ESPO works with collaborators who are allowed their own creative autonomy. "Yeah, the museum asked me to do this show, so I turned it into a group exhibition," he jokes, gesturing across the room towards the towering forest of signs mushrooming like the rising shrill of a chorus of carny barkers shilling all at once, "That work over there is mine, all the rest are by friends of mine who also paint signs." Somewhere between a socialist business model and a true artist collective, Icy Signs is ESPO's DIY entrepreneurial take on how the working shop of a craft-based industry recognizes the individuality of artists within the rubric of a single branded entity. Perhaps it's a subversive thing, in the tradition of collaborative artist projects, but just as likely, it's pragmatic about something we don't often think about in the rewards program of art world fairness. It is the mix of participants, younger artists drawn to the medium, veterans of the industry when it was still a profitable business before photographic and digital technologies made hand-painted labors seem obsolete, and pioneers in the poetics of public art like Mimi Gross, that gives Icy Signs its renegade character. For ESPO, sign painting is all these things, and in that unruly conglomerate of near-obsolete form and function, he knows that it is, in all, something so much more