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CULTURE

How Do You Illustrate the Worst Day of Someone's Life?

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by JOHN ORTVED



Photo: Matthew Kuborn/Courtesy of ESPO's Art World/ICY Signs



“When I wrote graffiti, I just wrote one word. Now that I’m an artist I write all the other words,” says Stephen

VOGUE

When Powers, who is 49, did graffiti, he was less into street art than he was into his tag: “ESPO,” which also stood for “Exterior Surface Painting Outreach.” (His tagging tour ended shortly after he was arrested for vandalism, part of a police action many tied to his role in demonstrations against Mayor Rudolph Giuliani after the latter’s threats to evict the Brooklyn Museum of Art over their exhibition, “Sensation.”) But there’s an economy in that language that Powers still appreciates. “It says my name, advertises an attribute of mine, and it tells a story, all in one economic package,” he says of ESPO. “Just like the animations I did for *Vogue*. There’s a throughline from there to now.”

Post-graffiti, Powers grew into a Brooklyn-based fine artist whose business, Icy Signs, delves into the anachronistic art of sign painting—making hand-painted signage with graphic lettering for businesses and institutions.



Shop Storefront

Photo: Courtesy of ESPO's Art World / ICY Signs



With both his fine and commercial work falling under the umbrella of his ESPO's Art World (which you can visit at 72 4th Avenue in Brooklyn; he also sells prints, objects, and T-shirts), Powers brings originality, history, graphics, and subversion to murals in Brooklyn and other cities, and storefronts and awnings all over New York. He has exhibited at the Venice Biennale, was awarded a Fulbright scholarship in 2007, and has been granted \$260,000 by the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage (to paint 50 murals along Philadelphia's Market Street). Jeffrey Deitch, the dealer, curator, and former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, has called him “one of the innovators.”



Mural in Brooklyn, NY, 2011

Photo: Courtesy of ESPO's Art World / ICY Signs



While Powers's work has dealt with commercialism and social issues surrounding neighborhoods in transition, gun violence was new territory for the artist. In approaching the illustrations Powers focused on the words the survivors used to describe their lost loved ones. "In every story there's a critical lynchpin, these really intense 10 or eight words. I just focused on those and tried to draw them out a little bit using the real graphic economy of designs and ideograms," he says. "I tried to honor those words."

He points to the essay "It's Harder in New Mexico to Get a Driver's License than a Gun," in which Robin Brule relays the February 2016 murder of her elderly mother (thieves shot and killed two elderly women "over credit cards and cash"), who had three children and eight grandchildren. "That's not a complete biography, that's a pretty astounding life," says Powers. "You think about the numbers three and eight. The number three is where the family starts. As soon as you have a third you're not just playing house anymore. And eight is the infinity number—it's the continuity of life itself. The two numbers became the avatars of the rest of the words."



Photo: Courtesy of ESPO's Art World/ICY Signs



Once Powers had found those hooks, the next step was to communicate the message. He looked at the history of placing text inside of numbers, something he brings to his art and signage work (“What they used to call display fonts”) but has not been commonly practiced in half a decade. “There’s thousands of very New York and very American examples of staging text on top of numbers,” he says. “It makes it more legible and illegible at the same time: There’s too much to read but there’s something graphic and beautiful about it. I’m asking the viewer to do a lot more reading than they’re used to, but they’re paying more attention to the words, because it’s in a picture. You don’t even have to have the punctuation right.”

When it came to animating the illustrations, a process with which Powers was unfamiliar with (“I have some very vague idea how it should work, and some younger, more gifted people were able to help me with it”), he saw it as a way to bring more eyes to the underlying message. “My job as an artist is to make something eye-catching, and once it’s animated I’ve now opened up my success rate. It puts people on arrest. These are really hard essays. To read them, it’s work. But it’s important work. So anything I can do to engage readers is really worth the effort.”

Ultimately, Powers came to view these illustrations like an advertising project, like making one of his signs. “It’s begging for some really important real estate and that’s the reader’s mind and attention for 10 minutes,” he says. “Everything I did in these illustrations was to make a really good Help Wanted sign. If it works, people read the ad and maybe rip off the phone number at the bottom.”