

CULTURE DESK

STREET ART AND SUBVERSION FROM STEPHEN (ESPO)
POWERS

By Mattathias Schwartz November 24, 2015

The art of Stephen (Espo) Powers often features 1-Shot enamel, block letters, and bold messages.

At half past eight on a recent Monday morning, Stephen (Espo) Powers arrived at his painting studio, near Broadway and Franklin. The morning's mission was to carry some of Powers's art work across the Manhattan Bridge to the Brooklyn Museum, where he was a late addition to the exhibition "Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland."

Powers is forty-seven years old, and the Coney Island installation is the second museum show of his career—the first in New York—but whatever stress he might have been feeling was concealed by his idiosyncratic professionalism. Six feet tall, with a curly, silver-black fade, Powers was dressed like a country-club jester, in a turquoise polo shirt buttoned to the neck, mismatched socks, and penny loafers. From his mouth came a steady patter: promotion, self-deprecation, deadpan rhyming verse. Powers's conversation, like his art, is a mass of dense references floating above an even larger iceberg of unspoken footnotes. When he first came to New York from Philadelphia, in 1994, he had been a graffiti writer and the publisher of *On the Go*, a hip-hop magazine. "Art is language," he said. "At that point in my career, I knew enough to order a beer."

Around the turn of the millennium, the graffiti scene gave birth to street art. It took on more explicitly political content while shedding authentic transgression. Some street

artists, like Banksy, made oversized editorial cartoons. Others, like Shepard Fairey, became brands unto themselves. Powers, meanwhile, turned himself into a Main Street small businessman. He founded a studio on Coney Island, hung out a shingle, and began offering his services to neighboring businesses, sprucing up the El Dorado arcade and the Cyclone roller coaster. Over the next few years, he developed a new style of bright colors, noxious 1-Shot enamel paint, and sharp, blocky letterforms.

He began painting giant outdoor murals. “Love Letter to Brooklyn,” which wraps around a Fulton Mall parking garage beside Macy’s, is a freeform poem consisted of tweet-like snippets than run for two hundred and fifty words. A series of Powers-painted rooftops along the elevated tracks in Philadelphia tells the story of a tempest-tossed commuter coming home to his true love. To pull off such large projects, Powers deployed a rotating band of collaborators and subcontractors. He used his paint shops—the most recent one is ICY Signs, at Fourth Avenue and Bergen Street, in Boerum Hill—as community centers and clubhouses. He had initially been drawn to graffiti as a means of communication. Sign-painting brought him a larger audience and a means of stylistic camouflage. “I just crossed the street,” he told me. “Graffiti is a signal from the periphery of the community to the center.” Signage ran the other way.

Outside, on Broadway, Dan and Mike, two of Powers’s friends, were loading one of his paintings into a rental truck. On a metal square, with bright 1-Shot, Powers had painted a month of overlapping calendar days, each one marked “TODAY.” “Don’t call me Stephen,” Powers said, “call me Maxon Zaxxon.” He was riffing off the truck’s Maxon-branded liftgate. Dan rolled his eyes. Zaxxon, Powers reminded him, was an early-nineteen-eighties video game set in outer space.

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Similar to the work of Dash Snow, who was among his downtown contemporaries, part of Powers's art is weaving a myth around himself and his friends. It would have been easy to mistake Superfeen, a potbellied superhero from Powers's book of illustrated stories, as one of his many alter egos. Powered by a mix of pills and alcohol, Superfeen performs small miracles and sleeps on park benches. "My family was really worried," Powers said. "But Superfeen wasn't me. It was a certain group of people at a certain time in my life. People who were really going for it. I knew three people like that. Two of them are dead."

Stephen Powers paints a sign at ICY signs, the artist's paint shop in Brooklyn.

At the Brooklyn Museum, Powers had installed collages of Coney Island signs, from his shop and others, up the sides of four columns that stood at the corners of a fifth-floor rotunda. "You're being pressed back," he said, describing his desired effect. "Like you're in front of a judge." The installation was a kind of valediction, he said. He was thinking about making another big move, from sign-painting to canvas. "I have work left to do with 1-Shot. But I'm starting to transition away from it. Once you paint on canvas, you're in the league with Matisse and Picasso and the rest of the bunch who wrestled with the canvas. There is a lineage to it. A hierarchy." He sounded eager for the next rung.

At the base of the columns were eight sign benches, where Powers and others planned to create new work during the show. At the room's center, a binocular viewer stood on a cast-iron pedestal. Powers had priced its observation-deck-style closeups at twenty-five cents for two minutes of view.

"It should be free," chided Mimi Gross, the artist, who had come to drop off a painting for the show. "What are you going to do with all those quarters?"

“Play video games,” Powers replied.

Mattathias Schwartz, a staff writer, lives in New York.

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