

MODERN-DAY MYTH MAKERS

Mear One Justin Bua and Overton Loyd

Celebrated painters like Leonardo da Vinci, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali are often revered as visionaries with special insight into the nature of humanity. Now, as the Downtown art community continues to grow, local painters are providing their own artistic insights, highlighted by Mear One, Justin Bua and Overton Loyd.

MEAR ONE

Silver Lake-based painter Mear One is an artist with vision. He knows L.A.'s hiking trails and back streets and can spot hawks flying over the city. "Knowledge and beauty are my sources of inspiration," he says.

Mear One turned down a scholarship to Pasadena's Art Center, opting to learn about art on the streets. He also studied favorite artists like Hieronymous Bosch and M.C. Escher. By age 19, he was painting film sets and designing graffiti merch for CONART. Mear One's big break came when he designed the logo for Guns N' Roses' influential "Appetite for Destruction" tour in 1989, which appeared on drummer Steven Adler's bass drum. The T-shirt bearing that logo remains the band's bestseller. He's gone on to create art for prestigious clients like Coca-Cola, Disney and the New York Jets.

Mear One's life began amidst struggle. He was born Kalen Ockerman in 1971 in Santa Cruz, and was living in East Hollywood with his single mother by 1974. She introduced him to drawing early, and by age 9 he was winning composition contests at the Barnsdall Art Park after-school arts program. He endured frequent beat-downs, but his graffiti skills earned him street cred.

By the time he attended Fairfax High, Mear One was a member of the celebrated graffiti crew CBS and a disciple of the late Skate One (Sk8). "MEAR" stands for Manifest Energy And Radiate, an acronym he first painted on walls in 1987. He's become so synonymous with graffiti that hip-hop producer Longevity says, "Mear sweats ink."

Mear One constantly read books, watched films, and listened to music, even as a teenage graffiti king. His determination to expand his mind radicalized his art. "I had painted illegal murals from L.A. to the Bay," says Mear One. "Somewhere in the mid-'90s, tagging my name and crew was losing my interest. I got very political."

Mear One's current work juxtaposes spiritual and political themes in paintings, prints, stickers and silk-screens. Recent murals have depicted the Dalai Lama in a Melrose alley, just east of Fairfax High, and Gandhi on 3rd Street, just west of Crescent Heights. His Bush poster, "Lets Play Armageddon," was wheat-pasted on walls coast-to-coast.

These days he paints with oils and acrylics while showing work in major galleries like LACMA and The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Every year he thrills the crowd at the Sunset Junction Street Fair by painting live. Filmmaker Rick "Motion" Estrada is even producing a documentary about Mear One's roller-coaster journey.

In 1996, Zero One Gallery (then on Melrose) featured Mear One in his first major gallery show. Now Zero One is downtown and once again featuring Mear One. This showing means even more to him due to his mother's recent passing. He's dedicating the exhibition to the woman who gave him everything, even when she didn't have it.



JUSTIN BUA

Justin Bua is one of hip-hop's primary historians. His paintings capture hip-hop like photographer Walker Evans captured the Depression. At his downtown Arts District studio loft, Bua paints hip-hop period pieces, in a style he calls "distorted urban realism." He uses distortion to celebrate his subjects: stylized cityscapes, jazz players, card sharks, B-Ballers and Harlem pool halls. Bua seems able to distill the spirit of a generation into a single image. His best-known painting, entitled "The DJ," has become one of North America's best-selling prints.

Bua was born in 1968, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, and still draws on his childhood in 1970s Gotham. He was a professional b-boy for 14 years, break-dancing across Europe and competing in b-boy battles through much of the '80s and '90s. Many of his friends were graffiti writers, so he got hooked. "I was a bad graffiti writer," says Bua, "but I did great characters." Moving to L.A. in 1992, he promptly earned his B.F.A. in Illustration at Pasadena's Art Center.

For the past eight years, Bua has taught "Character Design for Animation & Videogames" at USC. The class was originally called "Classical Figure Drawing," but he adapted the curriculum to respond to the booming popularity of the animation industry.

In 2007, Harper Collins released Bua's first book, "The Beat of Urban Art," combining biography, catalog and history. Paintings and sketches dominate the layout, the first half showcasing sketches of iconic New York images like Spanish Harlem, the Projects, vagrants, Brooklyn stick-up kids, punks and b-boys. "New York City has been called a melting pot," Bua says. "In my era, during the birth of hip-hop, it had already melted."

The second half of the book spotlights Bua's paintings, offering a window into his personal evolution. "My art makes icons of the men I grew up around," he writes. One such man: "The DJ." Bua explains: "[The DJ] is ethnically ambiguous because he encompasses all the cultures responsible for both creating turntable-ism and bringing it to new levels."

Multicultural themes are central to his work. "People ask me what I am. Puerto Rican? Italian? Jewish? African-American? Like my characters, I can't define myself by any one race, I am part of an urban race united by the city," says Bua. "We can't subscribe to just one ethnicity. Obama is a great example. We are the new generation." Appropriately enough Bua has just released a line of T-shirts featuring his Obama painting.

Bua considers his art "a way of paying tribute to the unsung heroes who I feel give the city its true flavor." Along that line, NBA Hall of Famer (and fellow Harlem native) Kareem Abdul-Jabbar recently hired Bua as the creative director for a documentary about the forgotten black basketball team known as the Harlem Rens.

OVERTON LOYD

Overton Loyd is a Detroit native best known for creating innovative album covers for funk band Parliament (a.k.a. P-Funk). The downtown denizen's signature style worked symbiotically with P-Funk's music to deliver a powerful multimedia experience. For four decades, Loyd has applied his "funk aesthetic" to cartoons, comics, sketches, paintings and digital illustrations.

The "funk aesthetic" is the visual equivalent of the music of P-Funk. Loyd captures the same swagger and flavor in his drawings, but was too busy to realize just how groundbreaking his work was. "Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine that we were actually at the genesis of initiating contemporary urban branding," says Loyd. "I'm only now waking up to that wild idea."

In 1977, Loyd created the highly praised cover for the P-Funk album, "Motor Booty Affair." Soon thereafter, P-Funk founder George Clinton quickly dubbed Loyd his band's go-to art director. Loyd designed the band's costumes and illustrated P-Funk comic books; Billboard Magazine awarded his animated video for P-Funk's "Atomic Dog" the Best Use of Computer Graphics in 1982. "I've considered it my job to act as 'behind the scene reporter,'" says Loyd, "documenting the Glory-hallastopid environment of the P-Funk realm."

By the 1980s, West Coast artists were heavily influenced by Loyd's Funk aesthetic. Only a few other artists like painter Ernie Barnes (known for his Earth, Wind & Fire album covers) were pushing these urban art frontiers.

Three decades later, Loyd is animating P-Funk's latest DVD and just finished the album cover for Clinton's latest release, "Gangsters of Love," featuring Carlos Santana and Sly Stone. Loyd has also been the featured caricaturist on "Win Lose or Draw" and was guest art director for the Cartoon Network's animated program, "Class of 3000." This February, Culver City's renowned Angstrom Gallery is giving Loyd his first West Coast solo show. An inspired Loyd says, "Artists from Mear to Murakami are impacting my creative sensibilities."

Speculating on the future, he says, "Cyberspace allows us to connect directly with our fans, and distinguish ourselves however we want by virally marketing our Thing by any memes necessary...Art can generate a breakthrough in communication that might allow us to shift our consciousness and embrace our humanity."