Man of Letters on a Mission
Justin Berton, San Francisco Chronicle, 2010

San Francisco muralist turns heads, inspires debate over nature of art - Victor Reyes a man of letters on a Mission

Driving around the Mission District one recent evening, artist Victor Reyes pointed to his handiwork letter by letter.

He’d painted a gorgeous "M" on the side of a liquor store on Folsom near 26th Street. A giant "R" hid in an alley off Valencia Street. "L" was parked - for the moment - on a delivery truck at the corner of 14th and Shotwell streets.

In the past two years, Reyes, 31, has managed to paint all 26 letters of the alphabet in the Mission, a personal exercise in aerosol typography. His style has evolved from that of a youthful graffiti writer whose markings once riled a neighborhood to one that can appeal to the casual observer and sell in fine art galleries.

But on city walls it still provokes the age-old debate: Is it graffiti, or is it art? Viewer’s choice.

Some letters earned him a paycheck (the liquor store job) and won the street's definition of art: No one defaced it. Some letters are illegal throw-ups completed in darkness and less than 20 minutes, and therefore are vulnerable to a competitor’s cross-out or the city’s paint-over.

Everyone's a Critic

As Reyes guided the tour, he pulled up to a Walgreens on Mission at 23rd Street,
where the corporate retailer was paying him to paint a side wall. Reyes’ most inspired work is electric in color and obsessive in detail. Even though he burned through the drugstore’s commission fees on materials long ago, Reyes thought the piece needed more - “more tension, more drama,” he said. “More something.” A man in his late twenties admiring the wall from the sidewalk recognized Reyes and said he’d caught on to the alphabetical endeavor. He couldn’t tell if the wall was another letter in the series, nor was Reyes willing to provide an answer.

“I saw your ‘A’ and ‘V’ on the other side of South Van Ness,” the hipster said. “I’ve been watching you for a long time.”

Reyes’ fan suddenly turned into a critic and argued the Walgreens piece was overly designed. “Keep it street,” he offered.

“Everybody wants to say what art is or isn’t,” Reyes said as he continued on with the drive. “I don’t care if you like it. That’s why I’m the one painting the wall. ... I’ll paint it white if I want to.”

If his tone revealed some edge, Reyes hadn’t slept in two days to meet deadlines for his first solo show at E6 Gallery on Market Street near Franklin, opening July 7. The show will feature his letters as fine artworks in various media - Reyes is one of an increasing number of street artists transitioning into mainstream galleries on a “case-by-case basis,” said gallery owner Robert Berman.

At a group show in Los Angeles two years ago, Reyes gained his first look from serious collectors when he sold a 6-foot-tall “R” for $17,000, Berman said. (Reyes declined to say exactly how much it earned and seemed embarrassed by the sale. “It was a silly amount,” he said.)

“You can talk about Victor’s work as flowery and beautiful,” Berman said, “a quest for pure beauty, much like art nouveau. But it’s also street: art nouveau 110 years later.”

Tagging Roots

At age 15, growing up a middle-class kid in the upper-class hills of Orange County, Reyes may not have considered such labels on his drawings. Always consumed with penmanship and its “natural rhythms,” he soon found peers in a graffiti crew called AWR - Angels Will Rise or Art Work Rebels, depending on their mood.

Reyes’ last name became an icon at Southern California graffiti spots. His swirling imagery and cool colors made his work stand out, giving it a distinctly feminine quality in a genre that favored more aggressive, angular designs. “It’s not dude art,” Reyes said. “That’s one rift with the typical graffiti community.” Reyes, who has no formal art training, moved to San Francisco in 1998 and took a variety of jobs for rent money - he’s a freelance illustrator now - but soon tired of the thematic limitations of graffiti.

“I needed a vacation from writing my last name,” he said.
Yet he was still dedicated to honing a craft. So he did what a lot of San Francisco artists do to mature: He assigned himself a project that he felt was just beyond his ability and somehow within his grasp. He decided to paint an alphabet across San Francisco. Then he'd distribute a map, and he'd call the project "MISSPELLED."

"Everybody knows graffiti artists can't spell," Reyes said.

Shortly after he began, he reeled in the grander ambitions. It was more convenient to paint just in his neighborhood, the Mission. The map idea was rejected after he concluded it was a more sublime experience for people to stumble across the work instead of hunting it down. And what once appeared as a capricious art project developed meaning.

As a graffiti kid, Reyes knew the biggest complaint: People couldn't read it. But if people could read it, would they like it? And if they liked it, is it still graffiti? Graffiti versus art.

Reyes stood next to his "L" on the parked truck at 14th and Shotwell streets and pointed to a group of scrawled names on a garage door across the street. "That's graffiti," Reyes explained.

He noted the taggers' lack of craft and sized them up as angry kids, high on cheap beer and most afraid of going through life unnoticed.

"Every one of those kids, they've got a specific thing they want to emulate, and it's for a specific place. They're full of piss and vinegar and PBR. They only want to produce it in certain ways - and it's only for those people."

The delivery truck painting was an example of how Reyes managed to "hold hands with graffiti and still be non-graffiti." A friend named "Steel" painted the first four letters of his name around the truck, and Reyes added the L to one side. "I'm hoping to open something up with this for graffiti writers," he said. "Don't get me wrong. I love graffiti, and if it wasn't for graffiti I would be in jail, or worse. I could be a CPA."

**Canvas of Concrete**

As Reyes concluded his drive through the neighborhood, he recalled that when he first moved to the city he worked as a valet at the Foreign Cinema restaurant on Mission. As he parked cars, a particular spot above the parking lot caught his graffiti artist's eye: a blank canvas of concrete above a residential garage.

He guided the car toward the same parking lot. "The 'H' is for 'hidden,'" he said. Reyes sees the Mission with a street artist's eyes. He can translate tags on the surface and recall the details of large pieces that exist four layers beneath it.

He estimates he's painted 200 to 300 images in San Francisco, and knows that none is permanent, including his "MISSPELLED" letters. He declines to have his
face photographed, worrying that the graffiti police will seek him out.

To find Reyes' "H," people have to look up and catch a peek through trees. It's difficult to see from a moving car on the street, maybe not even possible.

He stood in the parking lot where he once valeted and looked up at his "H." Some who walked by might just see graffiti; others who can actually read it may wonder why a single letter is floating above the lot; others will know the larger context of the project. Some will never notice.

"I always looked at this spot having fantasy after fantasy of painting it," Reyes said. "It was one of those things where I said to myself, 'You'll get to it one day.'

"And then, I got to it."

**Demonstrate Understanding**
1. Give **five** examples of places the artist has painted his letters.

**Demonstrate Understanding**
2. Summarize the artist's development from early adolescence to present. Give examples of his work during this time.
Develop an Interpretation
3. Explain how a person’s background knowledge would influence their opinion on whether Reyes’ work is graffiti or art.

Develop an Interpretation
4. Based on the information in this selection, do you think the artist will inspire others to do similar things? Provide examples from the text.
Analyze Text
5. What is the author's purpose in writing this article? Support your answer with examples from the text.

Analyze Text
6. How does the writer’s style influence the reader?