Off the Wall

Is it art? Vandalism? Advertising? Brandalism? For the buzz-generating graffiti stuntman Dan Bergeron—a.k.a. Fauxreel—the distinctions don't matter. He's just glad he made you look By Carl Wilson

THE ARTIST-CRIMINAL is high in mid-air, strapped into a harness in the bucket of a Genie mini-crane lift. He's mounting a 20-foot-tall photographic portrait of a girl named Joan Brideau onto a red brick wall of the Regent Park housing complex. In the heat-lamp swelter of the afternoon, he glues snaky strips of black-and-white printed paper side by side, slowly piecing together a super-sized jigsaw puzzle of a teenaged giantess.

Down in the grass nearby, rolls of cut-out paper labelled "pink stripe right leg" and "pink stripe left 21.5 x 202" lie waiting their turn. It comes as a revelation to see the secret techniques of one of Toronto's leading magicians of the streets, Dan Bergeron, also known by the apt illusionist's pseudonym, Fauxreel.

Joan is one of 11 Regent Park residents Bergeron has photographed and given the Mount Rushmore treatment as part of a commission for the Luminato culture festival. The portraits literally humanize the city's oldest subsidized-housing project, shouting a loud "we are here" from Regent Parkers to a city that will soon raze their community, supposedly in order to save it.

Such civic spirit and industry isn't what you might expect from a guy who made his name illegally plastering images on public and private property, a pursuit usually associated with delinquent teenagers or riled anarchists. But the 32-year-old Bergeron has spent several years making photographic apparitions pop up inexplicably in places you might otherwise pass without a second look. Fauxreel's work has appeared not only in Toronto, but in London, New York, Vancouver and Montreal, not to mention on the many Web sites frequented by connoisseurs of the burgeoning global street art movement, in which he's among a handful of Canadian up-and-comers. Street art is the next evolutionary step after graffiti in creative vandalism, perceived by

We are here: Bergeron gives Regent Park resident Inez Canuto the Mount Rushmore treatment, as part of a commission for the Luminato festival

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF **DAN BERGERON**

area business improvement associations as a nuisance, by anti-market activists as protest, and by art dealers and trend-spotters as a hot new commodity. Bergeron likes to straddle those categories, even though many of his fans—and there are more than you might imagine—want to know which side he's on.

One of his more audacious stunts, in August 2006, was to stick his photo of rapper and George W. Bush critic Kanye West onto a billboard at Dundas and Bloor that happened to feature the U.S. president, adding the words "Isn't Kanye an A-Rab name?" A year later, he hijacked a billboard near the Queen Street mental health centre, offering a phone number to call for a "quick lobotomy." More often, though, a Fauxreel piece will take a figure Bergeron has shot with his Hasselblad camera and situate it, life-sized, in a witty trompe l'oeil: a worker on a ladder appears to be measuring the very wall he's stuck to; a woman sits on a ledge, her feet dangling over the sidewalk. His latest, most conspicuous stealth mission has peopled the streetscape with shabby-chic youth whose heads have been replaced with scooter headlights and handlebars—automotive-age chimeras mixing Greek myth and *La Dolce Vita*, hanging out at intersections like street gangs.

Like many of his early role models, who now sell prints for big dollars to cool-hunting celebrities, Bergeron is learning that success can be murder on your street cred. Those scooter-faced creatures weren't just more feral children of Fauxreel's whimsy: they were part of a guerrilla promotional blitz for the launch of the retro Vespa S, conceived by the marketing agency Dentsu Canada. Vespa also sent Bergeron on the road to plaster Squareheads (or Antlerheads, Scooterheads or Vespaheads, as they're variously known) across the hoardings, boarded-up windows, alleyways and underpasses of Montreal, Calgary and Vancouver. "The backdrops were spectacular," enthuses Dentsu creative director Glen Hunt. "In one case, in Montreal, he put one on a discarded mattress on a sidewalk."

Truth will out, though, and when it did, people who initially admired the design and even interpreted the work as anti-consumerist satire were pissed. Some Fauxreel fans felt he'd tainted his whole body of work. The Toronto Public Space Committee and Rami Tabello of the blog

The maker in the middle, meanwhile, resisted the temptation to speak up for himself—until now.

He carries out most of his "hits" in broad daylight, acting as though it's totally legit

Larger than life: above, Bergeron pasted his own photo of rapper Kanye West onto a billboard at Dundas and Bloor; left, a Regent Park resident turned celebrity

AS THUNDER CRACKS OUTSIDE the windows of his spacious, handsomely renovated studio on Queen West near Roncesvalles, Dan Bergeron—in jeans, a black T-shirt and one pair out of the large collection of sneakers on display around the room—sits down to explain himself. He has the long Norman nose and close-cropped squared skull of his mixed French-Lithuanian heritage. What might be an intimidating face is softened by liquid blue, basset hound eyes and a rambling, sporadically earnest manner that makes him seem every bit the erstwhile skater rat. Skateboarding and hip hop, Bergeron's fixations growing up around Jane and Bloor in the late '80s and early '90s, were what first inspired him to look at the world as raw material to illegalsigns.ca (a watchdog for outdoor ads that violate city regulations) decried the campaign as another case of underhanded corporate colonization of the public consciousness. Some unidentified purist even emblazoned their own judgment in blue spray paint overtop of a non-Vespa Fauxreel piece under the railway bridge at Queen and Dufferin: "$—SOLD OUT FOR REAL."

The affair stimulated the sort of debate about art's meanings and boundaries that many established artists would envy. People argued over whether advertising can be manipulated to become an artistic medium, and whether sponsorship might be a contemporary kind of patronage. Some called Bergeron a whore while others vehemently defended his right to use his talents to pay the rent.

The affair also left Bergeron with a lot of explaining to do to his parents, who had supported his artistic ambitions since he was a child. "They're very open-minded people, but they're also very practical," he says. "They're like, 'Why are you doing this? Why are you getting in trouble?' I'm like, 'Mom, Dad, I'm not getting in trouble. I'm getting paid.'"

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PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP COURTESY OF **DAN BERGERON**; BOTTOM BY **FINN O'HARA**

be repurposed for his own designs. "OK, that building over there is an office tower, where people go to work from nine to five," he says, "but after that I'm going to go and skate that ledge, because I find it interesting, though it's not what it's meant for."

Where there are skaters and hip hop there will also be graffiti, and the teenaged Bergeron spent hours watching friends practise tagging but didn't have much skill with a spray can himself (or, for that matter, with a pencil or paintbrush). Still, he appreciated the bravado and the adrenaline rush: "It's always more fun doing something you're not supposed to do."

It was only when he returned to Toronto after his film studies degree at Carleton University that Bergeron got heavily into photography, the first thing he'd found since skateboarding that completely captured his attention. When he shot a series of people dressed up in funny outfits holding Pelican briefcases with the caption "PEDESTRIAN," observers pointed out that the work looked almost commercial, which gave him the notion to blitz the outdoors like an ad campaign. (Pedestrian crossing signs were an ideal target.) And if I do billboards, too, he thought, people will really get confused.

This diversion blossomed into a vocation after a 2002 trip to London, where Bergeron discovered an explosive mass of artists bombing the city with stencils, paintings, sculptures, wheat-pasted posters and slogans. It was a quantum leap from the graffiti culture he knew in Toronto. "There, it was logos and images. I thought, Some of these guys are making fun of corporations, some of them are trying to be their own corporations, and with some it's kind of ironic, all tapping into the whole thing that a logo is more powerful than a name." In that vein, American artist Shepard Fairey spread far and wide his posters of wrestler Andre the Giant's face, juxtaposed with the injunction "Obey." Fairey became known by the underground brand Obey Giant.

Bergeron's approach is closer to Fairey's bursts of deliberate nonsense than to the sharp anti-consumerist statements that self-styled leftist "culture jammers" made with their illicit "billboard liberations" in the '90s. New York painter Ron English, for instance, altered Camel billboards so that Joe Camel was seen saying "Hook any new kids today?" In Toronto, skinny models on bus shelter posters were Magic Markered into ghastly zombies with blacked-out mouths and eyes. While Bergeron's work does, as he puts it, "comment" on its physical and social contexts, he is a grey-area guy, less an activist than a dealer in absurdism and the double-take. His figures seem super-realistic, thanks to careful lighting and contrast, even as they are hung in impossible locations. "I enjoy that aspect of art," he says. "If you can capture someone's attention where they're not believing exactly what's going on, I think you're doing something right."

Among the local artists with whom he feels some camaraderie is Posterchild, who mounted three-dimensional versions of objects like question-marked cubes from the Super Mario video game on telephone poles and other public locales. After posting his methodology on the Internet, he found his cubes copied around the world. Bergeron also admires the work of Specter, an émigré from Montreal's Kops graffiti crew, who drops stylized cardboard gates and other installations around Toronto.

Yet Bergeron almost always works alone, without even a friend on lookout. Having

Poster child: the British artist Banksy's work (above) now sells for hundreds of thousands of dollars; Fauxreel's controversial Vespahead

put in his share of night shifts, he now carries out most of his "hits" in broad daylight, simply dressing and acting as though what he's doing is totally legit. He's never been arrested or even hassled by police, though he knocks wood when he says so.

It's Bergeron's use of photography that stands out from the crowd, says Marc Schiller, who with his wife, Sara, runs one of the world's most popular street art Web sites, the New York–based Wooster Collective. Aside from an artist named JR who mounts enormous photo murals in Paris, Bergeron's almost alone in basing his work in photography. Until recently the technology would have been prohibitively expensive. (Bergeron prepares the designs digitally and has them run out in segments at regular print shops.) Schiller adds that Bergeron is "a consummate street artist in the sense that he thinks about the dynamic between things in the city and his images. Whether it's a billboard or a building, it's how his work interacts with it."

Bergeron's personal favourites include that man on the ladder—actually his father, Don, a lawyer but also a passionate handyman whose self-sufficient ways rubbed off on his son—and the woman on the ledge, who is his mother, Lilia, an artistic soul who suffered from bipolar disorder. After she died in March 2007, Bergeron decided that it was time to take his career "to the next level." He contacted Dentsu with his portfolio in January at the suggestion of friends at the Ossington Avenue design boutique Ministry of the Interior. The timing was uncanny: Glen Hunt intended to pitch the Scooterhead concept (based on the idea that a Vespa is mostly a fashion the buyer wants to "wear") that very week, and he had everything ready but the artist. Bergeron hesitated but decided that if Vespa was going to rip off Fauxreel's style, he might as well benefit. He fine-tuned the prototype design, staged the photographs and pasted them up, working eight-to-ten-hour shifts with Vespa's lawyer's phone number in his pocket. He won't say how much he was paid, but allows that it was a significant raise after years of juggling freelance photography for magazines with odd jobs in construction.

Though Marc Schiller remains a fan, he believes Vespa took advantage of Bergeron—less in appropriating his style than by making him party to a deception that was guaranteed to irk the very people it was trying to reach. Schiller maintains that the line between art and advertising should be firm, and criticizes Vespa for putting ads "in places where ads don't go, like in the alley by the skateboard park."

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOP BY **STEVE COTTON/ARTOFTHESTATE.CO.UK**; BOTTOM BY **CHRISTINE McAVOY**

GRAFFITI DATES BACK TO THE CAVE paintings at Lascaux and is found on the preserved walls of ancient Pompeii. But street art's recent surge in popularity has thrown the field into an identity crisis. Thanks to the Internet, masterpieces that once would have been glimpsed by only a fortunate few before they were washed away or dismantled by authorities are hunted down by fans, like birdwatchers tracking a rare Arctic gull. They're put on permanent digital display, creating a new breed of art star. This spring in London, the Tate Modern held an international street art exhibition sponsored by Nissan that featured huge pieces painted and pasted on its exterior walls. In Europe and the U.S., specialized galleries that sell street artists' non-street wares are doing brisk business: Paris auction house Artcurial sold nearly $700,000 worth at an auction in February. In Montreal, the graffiti-based L'Autre Gallery put that city's art establishment on notice by shifting from sideshow to main attraction at the prestigious Yves Laroche space.

The biggest name in the scene, and a prominent influence on Bergeron, is the British artist Banksy, known for his iconic stencils of two policemen kissing or the Queen as a chimpanzee, as well as for stealing unnoticed into such places as the British Museum and the MoMA and mounting his own pieces on the walls. He now sells work for hundreds of thousands of dollars to the likes of Brad Pitt and has been the object of countless articles, including what must be the only full-length profile of an anonymous individual ever to run in *The New Yorker*.

The Vespa campaign is far from the first time a corporation has tried to hitch its fortunes to street art. The Bronx graffiti collective Tats Cru, whose murals once blanketed New York subway cars, started taking contracts from Coca-Cola and Reebok in the '90s. In 2006, the Red Bull energy drink company secretly sent a horde of sprayers and stencilers wilding in the streets of Wuppertal, Germany, not to advertise anything but simply to boost its own cool quotient. In recent years, graffiti-based campaigns for the Sony PSP and Axe body spray have attracted retaliatory vandalism (in Axe's case, a complete paint blackout) for their attempts at under-the-radar marketing—or, as business writer Rob Walker calls it, "murketing." Banksy himself organized a massive street artist festival this year in an abandoned train station tunnel with the support of Eurostar.

While these corporate incursions get most of the flack, being embraced by art institutions is arguably just as much a compromise of the street art spirit: it takes the art out of the public realm, sequesters it in elite sanctuaries and domesticates it with art-historical and sociological rhetoric. It's questionable, too, whether street styles really translate well when you deprive them of their spectacular context and raw ephemerality and expect them to communicate and unfold in a gallery or private collection's much slower time scale. Do they work as art, or are they more like souvenirs of street art? In a sense, advertising is a better match: while street art is often positioned as resisting the dominion of marketing in public space, it does so with marketing's own devices, its bold iconography and snappy slogans.

Sometimes street art can go too far in that direction, almost becoming an ad for the artist's own reputation. Shepard Fairey long ago licensed Obey Giant T-shirts and belt buckles, and now runs his own marketing firm in Los Angeles while also doing gallery shows. The street art generation brings to that flirtation a media-saturated sensibility and can stumble into the gap with a (Nike) swoosh. "People don't realize that a lot of these artists have managers," Bergeron says. "They're represented by a gallery in the U.S., in the U.K., maybe in China. You don't see the stuff behind the scenes, but don't be naive. With Banksy, if you can't see there were ulterior motives to what he was doing, you've got to be blind. You don't just all of a sudden start selling paintings for a million pounds by luck."

In the end, you can't expect artists to go on dodging patrol cars well into middle age merely to satisfy armchair romantic fantasies of artistic independence. Several times in our conversation, Bergeron cites such models as filmmakers Michel Gondry and Spike Jonze, who create everything from commercials to Hollywood films to music videos and art projects, each side feeding off the others. He considers this multifacetedness the new paradigm, in keeping with the ways that people now have multiple careers over a lifetime, and personal computers permit us each, if we choose, to become our own mini-media empires. After all, he's not a ghetto kid with a spray can, but a university graduate with Photoshop and a Hasselblad. While it gained cachet as a voice for the voiceless, street art now acts much like an alternative training system, in keeping with 21st-century tendencies toward entrepreneurialism and audience interactivity. Bergeron feels his own Vespa venture simply adds another dimension to the faux-versus-real theme in his art: now he can keep people guessing as to whether future pieces are commercial or not.

It's one thing, though, for corporations to borrow subcultural styles as they've done since the dawn of mass media, and for artists to play along for their own reasons; ideas are leaky and can't be penned in for long, even by their originators. It's another for the suits to indulge in outlawry, boosting youth rebellion into big-budget "brandalism." It's almost as if jeans companies in the '70s hadn't just dressed their ad campaigns up in rock jams and psychedelic swirls but hired dealers to loiter near the Levi's store and sell tabs of acid. There's such a thing as too much authenticity.

On a larger level than law and order, as Dentsu's Glen Hunt acknowledges, companies turn to these tactics because the public has become inured to standard TV and print ads. They have to catch us off guard. But as they infiltrate non-traditional territories, we risk becoming wary there, too. If street art at its best is about reawakening us to our environment, then mixing it up with guerrilla marketing risks short-circuiting that process and adding more filters instead.

Bergeron won't say he regrets doing the Vespa job, but you sense he may have gone in a bit more naively than he lets on. He wouldn't do a Scooterhead-style campaign again, he says, though he'd love to get other marketing work. And he hopes that the social conscience he's demonstrating in Regent Park will make his detractors reconsider. "Dan, like a lot of artists, has been using the streets to find his voice," says Schiller. "When you look at what he did in 2004, what he does now and will do in the future, I think you'll find a huge arc."

This weekend, that arc intersected with the path of a basketball jersey–clad kid named Cody, immortalized (temporarily) on another Regent Park wall. An acquaintance comes by and shouts up to the mini-crane that according to a teacher at the local elementary school, Cody, who's always had trouble fitting in socially, has had his whole life turned around since his portrait went up. Other kids treat him with more respect. He's gained confidence. "He's a superstar."

Bergeron grins at the story, then flips a few switches and the crane lurches away from the wall and into a new position so he can start gluing his next superstar's right arm in place. His old skateboarding buddy Josh Randell, a droll Seth Rogen type who's come out to help, chuckles. "He's developing major skills on that thing. If he doesn't make it as an artist, he can always get work as a window washer." **END**