Street View

Dan Bergeron's paste-up works, billboard makeovers and photo installations combine wit and social commentary in a style that hearkens back to the U.K.'s Banksy. As street art gains traction as both a cultural scene and a forum for public debate, we look at a Carleton graduate at the forefront of a movement that takes on perennial issues like art versus commerce and who gets to decide on representation in public space

By Fateema Sayani

Call him an artist of high-minded ideals, or call him a petty criminal—whatever you do, just watch for a second to look at his art. That's all Dan Bergeron, BA'02, asks. Bergeron, working under the handle Faurelel, displays his work in public spaces: on city streets, billboards, abandoned storefronts and the sides of buildings. You have to look. In that way, Bergeron, 35, is brash and confrontational. He is also a bit brazen. In 2006, when he remade a billboard at Dundas and Bloor streets in Toronto that featured photos of rapper Kanye West and former U.S. president George W. Bush and the words "Ian't Kanye an A-Rab name?" he did it in broad daylight, following the thief's mantra that if you act as though you're supposed to be there, most people won't question you.

Your interpretation of the artist-nuisance question will depend on your leanings. Bergeron's work has a devoted following on sites that track street art, such as The Wooster Collective. He was the subject of profiles in the Globe and Mail, in Toronto Life and on the CBC and is represented by Stove and Tell Gallery in Toronto—all validating milestones in an artist's career. To date, he hasn't been arrested for vandalism (a fact he mentions with surprise and relief). Perhaps it's because there is increasing tolerance for work like Bergeron's. Even since the divisive artist-phenomenon known as Banksy brought his visually arresting, subversive yet witty works to the streets of London—two Bobbies kissing or the Queen portrayed as a chimpanzee—

the new countercultural movement has become a public talking point. The recent film Exit Through the Gift Shop offered some insight into the technique behind his "hit-and-run vandalism." Banksy's philosophy is that those who truly define neighbourhoods are advertisers. "They…shout their message from every available surface, but you're never allowed to answer back," Banksy wrote in his book Wall and Piece. To him, the best action is to take back public space with art—and do it the way Bergeron does. "Asking for permission is like asking to keep a rock someone just threw at your head." It's a compelling argument, but not one Bergeron swallows whole. "I think the notion a great deal of the public holds is that street artists should all fall under the same political leftist umbrella," he says. Bergeron is not trying to latch onto any kind of pre-existing culture jamming scene; rather, he's using art, photo-editing software and a sense of injustice to start discussions on the role of branding, our sense of perception and the use of public space.

Going under the handle Faurelel, Bergeron uses art to play with perception and explore questions about the ownership of public space in installations such as this one, The false building break was part of the summer show Empire of Dreams: Phenomenology of the Built Environment at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art in Toronto.

Organizers of the Luminato Festival in Toronto commissioned Bergeron to magnify the personalities of Regent Park, the city's oldest public housing project. (Photos by Dan Bergeron)

The Regent Park Project is emblematic of all those concerns. In June 2008, Bergeron began installing 20-foot-high portraits on exterior walls of Toronto's oldest subsidized-housing project as part of a commission from the cultural ideas festival Luminato. Bergeron approached 11 people who lived there and asked to take their photograph. "I didn't want them to stand there and smile," he says. "I wanted them to pretend that they just woke up and were looking in the mirror. That should be when you're most comfortable with yourself, when no one's around." The honest portraits were the antithesis of the common aesthetic of advertising, which presents white, conventionally pretty people who look unconcerned. Taking stigmatized people and allowing them to be represented in their own communities gives them an anchor in society, Bergeron says. A similar motivation was behind his Unaddressed series, commissioned by the Royal Ontario Museum. In that series, Bergeron photographed homeless people holding cardboard signs. Rather than appealing for spare change, the signs said such things as For Me This Was Not a Choice and Everybody Deserves Respect. "I was careful with this series, because I didn't want it to look like homeless whore-ism," Bergeron says. "I wanted the people to write messages that actually expressed how they felt about being homeless." With that series, Bergeron got a lesson in the other side of working in public art. Everyone was on his wavelength with The Unaddressed. The pieces were torn down or scrawled over. A message that read I'd Rather Beg Than Steal was transformed to I'd Rather Work, with the help of a Sharpie.

"Although it got me down at first, I realized the work provoked a reaction," Bergeron says. "Putting up work in a public space is like a public living room. It should be something that people can think about and talk about." Bergeron often returns to an installation to see how a piece weathered or to see how heads turn once passersby unplug long enough to see an image that's not supposed to be there, audaciously enlivening the concrete jungle. Another recent Faurelel project made for a few double takes. A billboard jam advertised condos—for babies. With those words displayed in stacking block letters and with an image of a toddler staring skyward, the simple design became an incisive comment on the goals of yuppies, their status consciousness suddenly downloaded to their offspring. A billboard makeover doesn't stay up for long. Often it's photographed by residents or visitors who post it on the internet. Then it's not long before the cleanup crew arrives. Bergeron documents his work and archives it at Faurelel.ca. It's his only record.

Dan Bergeron grew up near the High Park area of Toronto, playing street hockey with the neighbourhood kids. His father, Don, is a lawyer; his late mother, Lilia, was an artist. Bergeron came to Carleton in 1996 to study film. The courses were focused on theory, and he preferred a hands-on approach. So, for his independent study course, Bergeron made a short film to illustrate the contrasting styles of classic and contemporary gangster cinema, unpacking the tropes behind Public Enemy, Menace II Society and New Jack City.

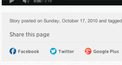
He didn't like Ottawa much and spent his winter off days snowboarding at Mont Tremblant. His first year of university was touch and go: he failed three classes. Eventually he found a community and a way to contribute to it. He helped build ramps at the McNabb skate park in Centretown, an experience he says taught him to evaluate public space. Along the way his grades improved too. He finished his degree in film and stuck around another year to complete a Sonic Design Diploma at Carleton.

After university, Bergeron returned to Toronto and picked up freelance jobs shooting portraits of Diplo, The Roots and Kardinal Offishall for hip-hop magazines. When that was slow, he held down odd jobs in construction. During a spell as a video editor at an ad agency, he had access to a cold-press machine that could apply adhesive to any paper medium. He started to turn darkroom prints into 20-by-24-inch stickers to post around the city, and that began his street-art career. He styled himself Faurelel—a play on the saying "Are you for real?" with the cinematic bent.

Bergeron's Face of the City series of large-scale figurative portraits, cut to shape, display both a brick pattern and a personality—two elements that are cohesive to city life. (Photo by Dan Bergeron)

Bergeron's images are iconic in their style and large-format size. A viewer could argue Bergeron is brand unto himself, since viewers get multiple impressions but are never in doubt that they are by the same artist. As any good marketer knows, the reputation of a brand needs to be maintained. The Faurelel "brand" took a hit in 2008 when Bergeron accepted a commission from the marketing agency Dentsu Canada. He pasted up portraits of people with scooter mirrors in place of heads. It was a promotion for the launch of a vintage line of Vespa, the thinking being that Vespa buyers think of their machines as a fashion statement.

The installations caused a reaction. Some people thought that since Bergeron makes public work outdoors, he shouldn't use the same kind of space for paid advertising. "I can see that point for sure," he says. "I guess I try to do it in such a way that's questioning the fine line between street art and advertising," he explains, but it wasn't entirely convincing. Someone who felt Bergeron had traded his ideals for an admittedly well-paying gig tagged a Scotierthead piece with the words Sold Out for Real!



Bergeron's work for Vespa brought skin the age-old debate of selling out. These agency-commissioned pieces were splattered across Toronto to reinforce the branding strategy that portrays scooter buyers as highly fashion conscious. (Photo by Dan Bergeron)

The brouhaha wasn't totally surprising. The Bergeron "sellout" had been prefigured way back in 1999 when No Logo author Naomi Klein wrote, "Street style and youth culture are infinitely marketable commodities." Meanwhile, in 2004, Rebel Sell authors Andrew Potter and Joseph Heath argued that countercultural critiques of mass society—such as the ones found in street art—are actually one of the most powerful forces driving consumerism. Would Bergeron take another commission from an agency? Probably not, he says, because as an artist, he has already done that kind of work. Though if an agency assignment allowed him to play with people's perception, he would consider it.

The Scotiertheads project was fascinating for that very reason, he says. When the series first debuted, people liked the works and approached Bergeron wondering what they were—there was no branding on them. Once they found out it was a Vespa project, they changed their minds. Bergeron points out that nothing changed save for people's perception of the work once it had a label. Bergeron has to be living proof that the line between art and advertising isn't so distinct, and so-called vandalism can be both a commercial force and a comment on the social conventions and rules that frame it.

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