cover story

FROM STREET ARTIST TO FINE ARTIST

TYSON ANDREE HAS GONE FROM GRAFFITI MURALS TO WORKS ON A BOSTON GALLERY'S WALLS

PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Graffiti artist Tyson Andree with one of his fine artworks on display in a group show at Adelson Galleries.

BY AARON DENTEL-POST | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

IT WAS IN A BROOKLINE elementary school art class in 1986 that young Tyson Andree was introduced to graffiti as an art form. His art teacher, whom they called Mr. P, showed the class pictures of graffiti, and Andree soon began to dabble. • "At the time, the graffiti art movement in NYC on subway trains was in full effect," Andree says in an e-mail message. "In art class, my friends and I were very interested in this artistic phenomenon and copied the pieces verbatim."

Graffiti gained popularity as art on New York City subway trains in the 1970s. Andree says he's been told that it was artists named Gene, short for Genius, and Seniz who brought it to Boston around 1980. He says his history of the Boston graffiti scene comes from an artist named Click, one of the originators of Boston's graffiti scene.

By 1983, Boston had a full-blown graffiti culture. The elevated Orange Line route that ran through Roxbury was a particular hot spot, with graffiti works lining roofs and high walls within view of passing trains.

More than two decades later, balanced on a girder over the iron-gray water of the Charles River, Andree, now 33, is going by the name Caype, and he must be one of the most prolific and longest active graffiti writers in Boston's history. It's also a chapter in his life he's trying to move past.

He is the first graffiti artist to be represented by the Adelson Galleries Boston, which deals primarily in artwork by contemporary and modern masters like Jim Dine, Andrew Wyeth, Alex Katz, and others. Andree is included in a group show titled "Ten Artists," which runs through June 30.

Some of his works on paper have also been included in Barry McGee's exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art.

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TYSON ANDREE

A mural by Ryze, one of the groundbreaking graffiti artists who inspired Tyson Andree.

▶GRAFFITI

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Andree's eyes are distorted by thick lenses and his torso adorned by a handmade T-shirt. He explains the art that has been the passion and plague of his life since he was 6 years old.

"All those things above there, see they say Zone, Curse — all those little tags — Daze, Alert, are done by Ryze," says Andree enthusiastically, looking toward the graffiti-covered girder. "There used to be a Ryze piece way up there underneath millions and millions of . . . oh, that's a fresh Case tag!"

The rusting metal railroad spans near Boston University where Andree is perched are called "The Trestles" by graffiti artists and are covered in the fading paint of old masters, but Andree did what he considers his first good piece in 1994 on "The Incinerator" — an abandoned factory in Roxbury that was torn down a year later.

We met an artist from his crew earlier that day. At a mural they'd painted in Allston, Andree posed for pictures. In his bright blue, striped, and polka-dotted T-shirt, Andree blended poetically with the similarly hued and spastically shaped, brilliantly vibrant 10-foot letters.

I had been following Andree's tracks for three months. He was difficult to get ahold of at the best of times, but he'd been missing in action for over a month. Finally, I received a strange e-mail from him:

"I've had a life changing last three weeks," the e-mail began. "I've come to realizations about myself and my flawed view of graffiti in relation to the law and morality I never knew before that have enabled me to break a vicious cycle of self destruction and misery I've been suffering from for years."

Andree had been arrested in Newburyport a month previously, and had spent several weeks in Worcester State Mental Hospital to wean him off substances. On the way to court, he'd been shackled to a religious devotee who had given him a Bible. Andree was no stranger to religion or jail, but now he was conflicted on the morality of an addiction that had consumed his life for almost 20 years.

"I picked up the Bible and I opened it to a random page and it's talking about the law of man," said Andree. "And it says . . . the law of man . . . not only equals morality, that in any given point in time, the law of man describes, is the definition of morality."

To the artists who do it, graffiti art is an aesthetic of obsession, and Andree has since become convinced it's an addiction — the rush of illegality and sense of pride that accompany the art recall his compulsions toward drugs and alcohol.

But the way graffiti artists tell it, Andree is behind the times with this realization. With his legal entanglements mostly resolved, Andree attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and he is vowing to never write graffiti again.

"Graffiti has a definitive aesthetic influence created by its own culture," says Christian Acker, author of "Flip the Script," a book of graffiti hand style that features Andree's hand style, among many others.

Recently, galleries have been more interested in graffiti and street art, Acker says. Street art is created somewhere else and put on the street, whereas traditional graffiti are painted on the spot.

"[Street Art] was something that made it a lot more accessible," says Acker of the graffiti and street art world. "It's not as difficult or as risk-assuming as traditional graffiti."

But it was the culture and the influence of graffiti that attracted Adam Adelson, director of Adelson Galleries Boston, to Andree's work.

"I saw something in Tyson's work that relates to his history as a graffiti artist," he says. "When he finally broke free of that graffiti mentality, he could break out of the limitations of the letters and really start to explore his own psyche and his own passion for art."

It's the graffiti aesthetic that makes Andree's art seem free and alive, Adelson says.

"It's like A.D.D., it's all over the place, and it's so fun and just like his personality," says Adelson. "It's not just a white canvas, it's Tyson's story."

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