

L.A. Streetwalkers: Female Artists Telling Stories on the Streets

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Since the beginning of the 20th century, artists have treated the streets as their canvas and political platform. For instance, in 1917 during the Russian Revolution, members of the Russian avant-garde relied on cutting edge posters to inspire, gather and activate the new, working citizen. Since the next few decades were riddled with war, the popularity and necessity of poster art grew with equal fervor. In the 1960s there was a passionate initiative by artists to push beyond the barriers of the enclosed, myopic gallery/museum world to the streets and to nature. Earth artists such as Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer began to utilize natural elements like dirt and rocks as their artistic materials and the outdoors as their exhibition space. At the same time, alternative performance artists like Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage and Allan Kaprow began enacting happenings on the streets as if they were a stage. Street art as we know it today came into focus in the 1980s in New York City. As communities were plagued by rampant drug use and AIDS-related illness and death, artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat took to public spaces and the streets to forge a platform for themselves where they could voice their anger and their warnings. Since the 80s, street art has continued to build momentum, diversify its voices and become an integral part of understanding the international urban landscape.

In 2010 anonymous and infamous street artist Banksy released his documentary *Exit Through the Gift Shop*, launching a continuous flurry of street art activity in the form of exhibitions, scholarship and awareness. And in the years following, through blogs, social media, mainstream publications, museum exhibitions and even courses taught in university classrooms, street art has taken over the artworld. Scratch that, street art has taken over the world, art or otherwise. Part of the reason street art is resonating with, and in fact forging, the *zeitgeist* is because of its accessibility and immediacy. Regardless of whether we self-identify as art enthusiasts, city-dwellers tend to notice scrawls they pass on their way to work, want to snap that selfie with an outdoor mural and feel compelled to spout their opinion on Banksy. We don't have to carve out an entire day to see quality art anymore—for instance at the Getty, swerving down a narrow parking ramp only to wait for a tram to take us to that gleaming, pinkish, travertine palace. Today we can discover equally transformative art on our neighborhood sidewalks, on a freeway ramp and on a wall we pass a hundred times a week walking to that artisan coffee shop. Street art allows the world of aesthetics to integrate with the world of everyday life and people are connecting.

But there's a major problem. Despite its counterculture reputation, an unfortunate system that street art and the mainstream artworld share is their lack of adequate attention placed on work that's made by women. The large majority—if not the total sum—of well-regarded street artists are male, which is especially disappointing considering the outward progressiveness of the movement. What great irony it is that although the personification of Justice is a woman, many women navigating many disparate circumstances and careers do not receive their just share. The world of contemporary street art in the United States is no exception. This presentation will examine the work and critical positioning of three female street artists—a common name, Kristy Sandoval and Colette Miller—each of whom lives in Los Angeles, enlivening its streets with the narratives they tell that emerge from their sensibilities as women artists. Each woman's practice varies from the others in material, intention and degree of visibility; however, they share a strong ideological commitment to correcting that silly fantasy that only male artists can hack it on the streets. It is the purpose of this presentation to correct the fantasy that only disenfranchised male gang members put renegade work up on the streets and to add three corrective footnotes to the cast of significant contemporary street art characters.

Furthermore, it is the intention of this presentation to not only prove that there are notable female street voices but also to illustrate that the work they make is just as relevant, just as irreverent, as the work produced by their male colleagues.

One of the most sophisticated voices on the street scene today is graphic designer-cum-street artist, Paige Smith. Smith, who also goes by a common name as a self-mocking nod to the ordinariness of her birth name, is best known for her “Urban Geodes:” mini-sculptures placed on the streets and exhibited in the gallery. It takes a rare versatility to operate in both spaces and Smith navigates these worlds with ease; her installations are just as satisfying in the hypermodern lobby of the Standard Hotel as they are in a derelict phonebooth in East L.A.

“Urban Geodes” are sculptures that resemble their nature-made namesake, while themselves being formed synthetically, early on in her career made out of hand cut and folded die-cut paper and more recently fashioned using individually cast resin. Since geodes are formations made and found in nature, the fact that Smith fabricates this process out of manmade materials and places them in ultra-urban settings presents viewers with an engaging duality between nature and industry: on the one hand, Smith calls attention to the growing disappearance of a nature that’s untamed by man, yet on the other hand, she celebrates the aesthetic beauty of technology and signals the power of the urban space.



Tethering Smith’s practice to the practice of canonic 20th century figures whose work is more widely recognized, I find myself captivated by her modern interpretation of surrealist pairings and Duchampian strategies. During the early nineteen-teens, Marcel Duchamp forced viewers to question the authenticity of what makes an object art when he found pre-fabricated objects on the street, altered them slightly then placed them in a conservative gallery or museum context. This work—comprised of a bicycle wheel and kitchen stool—is the first of Duchamp’s readymades and a perfect example of the non-functional machines he patched together using pre-made, discarded parts.

Flipped upside down, the wheel can no longer transport anything from A to B and the stool, permanently impaled by the wheel, can no longer provide a respite from standing. Both functional objects are rendered functionless and viewers are asked to see utilitarian items as possessing conceptual value. The way Duchamp undermines established notions of the artist's craft and the viewer's aesthetic experience, Smith subverts the formula of contemporary street art. Using operative urban materials, such as: bricks and drain pipes, as her version of found objects, Smith alters them with her geodes, rendering them useless and asking us to re-imagine their power.

We tend to think of street art as being mural-sized and brightly colored to aggressively grab our attention. Smith's work denies these expectations and takes thoughtful, keen sleuthing to discover. Rather than install these geodes in places where their visibility would be maximized, Smith seeks out overlooked, modest, forgotten spaces instead, such as the cracks in between bricks where the mortar has chipped away or the inside of a broken drainpipe. Then, like a mastermind cracking the code of a puzzle, she clusters the individual pieces into groups and slips them into these spaces so perfectly it is as if the geodes formed there on their own. Her subtle, elegant contributions to the streets are the pot of gold at the edge of the rainbow, the pearl tucked inside the oyster. They invite us to notice where we are and actually look. More than look, Smith encourages that we be playful and discover, turning the streets into our own, private map and the geodes into our rightful treasures to hunt.

Massively scaled, filled with figures and text, legally commissioned, and painted during the light of day, the work of Kristy Sandoval departs from Smith's urban geodes in several significant ways. However varied their aesthetics may be, both women share a dedication to the Los Angeles community and both breathe fresh life into past art historical movements. Sandoval grew up in the low-income Pacoima area of the Los Angeles valley, where she focuses her practice today. Her public art additionally functions as local public service, counteracting the paucity of art programs offered to the community and focusing attention on the neglect that has befallen it. Largely to credit for the recent attention Pacoima has received as an L.A. area of interest, Sandoval's walls are colorful, crowded and engaging, all the while illustrating relevant themes that pertain to social justice, current events and women's empowerment. Most importantly, Sandoval is a passionate arts advocate, facilitating mural and public art workshops for enthusiasts of all ages. Dismantling the modern stereotype that artists have to be isolated from society and work alone in order to achieve success, Sandoval includes the public in her process and invites community members to participate in the design and execution of her murals. For instance, she's recently worked in collaboration with students, faculty, staff and parents associated with local Lincoln High School to enrich the campus and encourage funding to reinstall the arts education program that was recently cut. Not only did Sandoval let the community help with the actual painting but also with the content—all of the book titles were chosen and created by students and teachers.

Her choice to engage the public in an offering of community outreach connects her approach to the formidable mural work of Los Tres Grandes—Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros—but also introduces her own postmodern commitment to viewer participation. More than any form of outdoor art, murals illustrate stories that are visually legible and itching to be understood. Since murals are typically large and filled with figures and environments that we can recognize, their messages are accessible to art aficionados and novices alike. A mural's voice is loud, its reach wide and its impact great. That's why, in the wake of the Mexican Revolution,

Rivera et al worked in the outdoor mural format in order to impart their political messages and communist agendas to the largest amount of people. The resulting walls are intrinsically and explicitly intertwined with politics and intended as visual efforts to raise awareness and unite the country. All three men were commissioned to paint murals in Los Angeles during the 1930s to boost American morale and assert the strength of governmental programs amidst the depression. With its explosive imagery, aggressive message and eventual whitewashing, one of these murals—Tropical America by Siqueiros, became an illustrative case study of governmental censorship.

In line with the traditions and social awareness of Los Tres Grandes, Sandoval sees her murals as pedagogical tools. However, moving a step beyond her predecessors, as we have seen, Sandoval openly encourages the communities she's targeting to actively work on the murals rather than only receive their message after completion.

Since the narratives Sandoval tells in her work are both historically rooted and currently relevant, it's worth taking some time to unpack the iconography of one of them in more luxurious detail. This mural, entitled *Decolonized*, articulates an important theme of self re-discovery. We read the central woman as the colonized figure and her act of releasing the caged birds from their confinement signifies her stifling past and self-empowered future. The blue feathers in her dreadlocked hair and tattoo of the Aztec moon goddess both reflect the woman's indigenous culture that occupied the land before colonization. As she releases the birds, she also frees herself from colonial narratives so that she can rediscover her culture and recommit to its traditions. In addition to the poetry of the imagery, Sandoval's incorporation of the building into her design—her transformation of the window into a cage and awning into a skirt—is both elegant and respectful to the local landscape.



Returning to a quieter, more intimate street aesthetic, Colette Miller's now iconic angel wings function as a tender surprise amidst its frenetic, urban surroundings. Whereas the majority of street art is typically loud, large and positioned well above eye-level, Miller's work is soft, delicate, human-scaled and positioned only a foot or so off the ground. Miller began her life as a street artist in the 1980s painting on billboards in Richmond, Virginia and in the '90s she transitioned to painting on the sides of moving trucks in New York City and on outdoor walls in South Africa. Appropriately, she launched her Global Angel Wings project—for which she has since received international renown—in Los Angeles, the city of Angels. One day while stuck in infamous L.A. freeway traffic, Miller started to notice the buildings along the freeway more thoughtfully than she had before. Started recognizing how flat they were, utterly devoid of personality with vacant facades. She began to see the potential of these buildings as inspirationally blank canvases and hosts of a vision, a global initiative, that could symbolize collective goodness and radiate nourishing energy to any city-dweller who needs it. Meditating on these buildings, Miller kept thinking how much more alive they would be if there were angel wings on them. How much more alive the city would be.

Since her practice is firmly planted in a desire to spread positivity, Miller picks her locations purposefully and often installs wings in neighborhoods that need the most reinvigorating. For example, there are several pairs in Juarez, which is a base for Mexican drug cartels and also in the slums of Kenya that continues to bear witness to constant crimes. Miller's wings are guardian angels for all of us—they silently witness, guide, support and enliven. They remind us of a higher power—the power of spirituality, religion, beauty, art and love—and in an age when so many communities are fractured by negativity, hers is a simple and effective symbol of cohesion.

The wings themselves are nostalgically reminiscent of the panels painted by Fra Angelico in the early 1400s during the Italian Renaissance. They possess an aura, a glow, a presence that is both otherworldly and universal. They are also incomplete. Although Miller's wings allude to benevolent angels, where we expect to see the body of that being we are met with a void and a challenge instead. To me, the aspect of the wings that makes the most impact and is the most relevant to our digital age is their invitation to us to interact. Miller strategically installs the wings on human level and without body in the middle, encouraging us to stand in that void and activate the work with our earthly bodies. The wings beckon us to step in the middle, put them on and become an angel who walks on the earth. This pact, this opportunity, not only inspires us to be our best most loving selves, but also serves as a powerful reminder of the underlying good we should expect in others in turn.

Although today the, when Miller first started putting them up in 2012, they were illegal. In order to work speedily enough to release her message before the cops could spot her, Miller began working with the widespread street art process called wheatpasting. A wheatpaste is the most common form of self-sanctioned street art since artists design and print the work in the safety of their studio then are able to quickly put it up on the outdoor surface of their choosing. To affix a wheatpaste, an artist covers an area with a paste, then unfurls the poster, drawing, painting, or photo made off site. After smoothing out the paper's wrinkles and bubbles, another smear of wheatpaste goes on top. The base coat supports the work and the top coat ensures it's difficult to remove. Her wings have since taken off, garnered an international cultish following, and organizations and building owners now approach Miller to commission pairs for their space. To

be faithful to the project, she still wheatpastes and has recently begun to expand the materials she uses to include stained glass. These wings on Traction were among her very first and the earliest pair to remain extant. Although technically these wings are unsanctioned, they've earned such a high level of respect and admiration from the community that no official has taken them down and no fellow street artist has tagged over them. The way the wings seamlessly curve and fold over the corrugated material adds a depth and texture that wouldn't be possible if they were on a smoother surface, like a traditional easel canvas.



Although the content of Smith's, Sandoval's and Miller's work isn't overtly feminist, the fact that they assert their voices with confidence in a space that historically is less than amenable to their sex and the fact that those voices derive from their particular gendered experiences as women is in and of itself an act of empowerment, an assertion of justice.

Theories of justice are centrally concerned with whether, how and why people should be treated differently from one another. Using the practices of these three women as illustrative case studies of female artists seeing and using and transforming the streets into their canvas, my belief is that they should absolutely be treated differently—as every artist working from his or her unique place of authenticity should—however, should be regarded with equal respect and discussed with equal scholarly gravitas as any male contemporary. There might not be an equal transference of justice within the street artworld yet; but, in the meantime, I, at least, am comforted knowing more people will continue to have access to the stories women like Smith, Sandoval and Miller are telling and perhaps more people—more women—will be moved to start telling their own.

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