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Still Painting Messages on Buildings, but No Longer a Vandal

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By NIKO KOPPEL

A love of graffiti has gained Steve Powers notoriety on the streets, fame in the art world and a long arrest sheet. It has also earned him a Fulbright scholarship.

Although his tag, ESPO, can still be spotted on storefront grates throughout New York City, Mr. Powers, 40, has stopped painting illegally. Working out of his studio in Lower Manhattan, he now shows pieces at a SoHo gallery, has published art books, participated in the Venice Biennale and had his first solo museum exhibition last fall at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

Mr. Powers returned this week to New York after spending nearly six months in Ireland working on his Fulbright. His idea was to create public artwork with the help of teenagers from troubled housing projects in Dublin and Belfast.



Steve Powers perched in the middle of one of the pieces he completed during his time in Ireland. "It's interesting to re-visit my original medium and do it differently," he said. "The only reason I got into graffiti in the first place was I wanted some stories to tell. Photo: Ross McDonnell for The New York Times

At the end of the highly competitive selection process, he was one of about 800 people out of 2,000 applicants awarded Fulbright grants last year. The awards primarily go to scholars and professionals who go abroad to pursue research and teach in academic and specialized fields. Thirty-seven Fulbright winners have also received Nobel Prizes.

“I was shocked,” Mr. Powers said in a phone interview from Ireland. “I didn’t think I would get it but I felt a few feet taller when I did.” Although a Fulbright scholar typically must have a doctorate, Mr. Powers, an art school dropout, was granted an exception because of his achievement in the arts.

“The Fulbright program invests in talented people,” said Thomas A. Farrell, deputy assistant secretary for academic programs at the United States Department of State, which manages the program. “The body of work is what counts.”

After moving to New York from Philadelphia in 1994, Mr. Powers became infamous for painting his signature boxy letters in daylight over the metal grates of shuttered storefronts. His work led to his apartment being raided by the transit police’s vandals squad in 1999, as well as six felony charges in Manhattan and Brooklyn for criminal mischief; he eventually accepted a plea deal in which he did five days of community service.

During an interview in March in his studio, Mr. Powers explained his decision to stop painting illegally: “I wanted to find a way to grow out of it while succeeding at being creative.”

His paintings on aluminum now sell for as much as \$20,000 and he has published several books including a history of graffiti, “The Art of Getting Over.”

“Steve is someone who has reshuffled the deck,” said Jeffrey Deitch, the owner of Deitch Projects, the gallery that represents him. “He’s not the kind of artist who waits to get invited to be in a museum show. He gets out there and he does it himself.”

In Ireland, known for an affinity for words and dark humor, the sides of many derelict cottages and dreary parking lot alleys now display Mr. Powers’s spray-painted images and ironic phrases, which he says describe a kind of love story. In one image, an unlighted cigarette and lighter lay underneath a message outlined in hot pink: “lonely for you only.”

In another, a stylized “anywhere is paradise with you” is written above two pigeons on an abandoned building. A third, titled “Happy Mother’s Day,” stretches about 80 feet across a wall in flowing black and white lettering: “baby is crying, rent all spent, car got towed, lost the remote, no hot water, fridge is empty, but I ordered food, please come home.”

Mr. Powers has painted approximately 20 murals since January, most of them in Dublin.

Moved by the crude political murals of Northern Ireland, Mr. Powers also worked in the lower Shankill area in Belfast, the flashpoint for much of the violence that tore through Northern Ireland, and where walls memorialize fallen fighters and ski-masked gunmen. "I'm taking the form of the murals, which are insanely powerful for all the wrong reasons, and trying to retain some of the power and use it in a really good way," Mr. Powers said in the phone interview.

With the permission of local property owners, Mr. Powers produced large-scale murals with the help of teenagers, some of whom were also graffiti makers hoping to glean techniques from a man considered by some to be a legend. "It's useful for them to have a role model," Mr. Powers said.

Sean Bryan, 21, a graffiti artist in Dublin known as KONK, worked with Mr. Powers on several paintings. "I can't paint illegally anymore," said Mr. Bryan, who is facing charges resulting from his graffiti. "To see high-up people recognizing his stuff as opposed to sneaking out in the dark, it's brilliant."

Mr. Powers was in Dublin on a recent Saturday working on one of his final paintings before returning home. As the hours passed, a steady stream of passers-by watched as paint slowly filled in chalk outlines on the 150-foot-long concrete wall. White, orange and black paint formed the oversize legs of a man and a woman cutting down the center of the mural, surrounded by a sinking Titanic with "don't give up on us baby" written inside a puff of steam, handcuffs, and a crossword puzzle in the shape of a heart.

"I really like it," said Laura Burke, 23, a student studying painting at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. "Graffiti is usually a random name on a wall, but when ESPO does it, there's a philosophy behind it."

As Mr. Powers was preparing to return home, he reflected on the contrast that had emerged in his life: He started his artistic career as essentially an outlaw, and was now painting in Ireland under the auspices of an elite, ivory-tower organization. "It's interesting to revisit my original medium and do it differently," he said. "The only reason I got into graffiti in the first place was I wanted some stories to tell."

Eamon Quinn contributed reporting from Dublin.

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