

HABITATS/Somewhere in New York City

Using Graffiti as a Decorating Tool

By PENELOPE GREEN



Phil Mansfield for The New York Times

ART DÉCOR

Hugo Martinez in the apartment he is occupying temporarily in a 1960's low-income housing project, turning it into a design space for his graffitists.

HUGO MARTINEZ, a 54-year-old graffiti gallerist, has been living his work — and living in his work — since 1972, when as a philosophy major and student activist at City College he discovered Puerto Rican teenagers painting subway cars in railyards and helped organize them into a loose collective called United Graffiti Artists.

Since then, he's been sleeping lightly, gently misted by spray paint, on floors in ad-hoc gallery spaces — in a garage, in a pencil factory and in other unexpected places — from Greenpoint, Brooklyn, to Puerto Rico and from Chelsea in Manhattan to London. "Because you never know," he said, burying his face in his hands, "when someone might appear at 2 a.m. to make a piece and then want to paint until 5. It's not like these guys have regular schedules. I have to be available."

"It's hell on relationships," he continued, counting off two divorces and a recent breakup, and describing three decades of service to his cause and his resulting domestic transience as like "being in the National Guard."

"Sometimes I live for a year in a project," he said. "The good part is you have to find the home within yourself."

This year, at least since late January, he's been living amid graffiti designed to be part of a studio apartment that has been spruced up by two Dutch designers (who call themselves Kaptein Roodnat) and decorated by 13 graffitists. The graffitists range in age from 19 to 48, Mr. Martinez said, "and what links them is the clarity of their vision and the fact that they've all passed the threshold of criminality."

Some, he said, have been arrested as many as 30 times, for everything from vandalism — for their graffiti — to selling crack.

The apartment decoration is part art prank, part reality show — there are plans for a Webcam — and part public service. Mr. Martinez would like to see city housing agencies deploy similar decorative strategies in their buildings — not that he'll be knocking on any doors, mind you.

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Using Graffiti As a Tool For Decorating



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"I just put stuff out there," he said. "I'm not going to call the mayor and beg." The Project is called, "as this dressed-up apartment is called, is the ultimate act of graffiti. By painting and altering the regulation colors of an apartment in a 1960's-era low-income housing project, Mr. Martinez's team has done what graffitiists the world over do — which is to mark up private property. Whether the result is enhancement or defacement is up to the beholder.

Mr. Martinez calls the renovation an "intervention," a way to brighten the dinginess of regulation paint and "just good enough" repairs and janitorial services not only with color but with examples of the folk art of some of the people who live in housing projects (that would be the graffiti).

A friend of Mr. Martinez's is the actual tenant of this \$350 a month studio — Mr. Martinez is shepherding his friend from eviction by not naming him or giving the name and address of his building. The friend is staying with friends during what might be described as an alternate version of "Trading Spaces." Mr. Martinez plans to be in the apartment until September. The apartment is open to the public by appointment; staff@martinezagallery.com. There will be an opening reception at 6 p.m. on May 7 at the storefront for Architecture, 97 Kenmare Street.

On a recent chilly morning, Mr. Martinez was wearing his Bluetooth wireless phone over one ear, and a diamond stud. (Mr. Martinez is ever reachable, with a Dell notebook computer always open and online, a BlackBerry and a cell phone.) He looked happier than he did the week before, as the construction zone of the apartment had morphed into a nearly finished dwelling.

The hottest act, from a housing project standpoint at least, is the cherry red partition be-

tween the living space and the kitchen, windowed by four 14-inch-square cutouts. These connect the two spaces with light and art; plywood cubes painted moodily in black and smoky gray by Moore, a young graffitiist and Levitt's model, were set into the holes the other day. It's a lovely wall, but it was surprisingly difficult to fashion. Instead of a flimsy drywall partition you might slice open with a pen knife, this wall is some sort of evil mix, Mr. Martinez said, of concrete and lath.

Mr. Martinez, who has a secondary career as a real estate broker and developer — that's how I eat," he said — said he's never encountered anything as intractable as that partition. Because his was a stealth project, he and his graffitiists couldn't grind out the holes with an electric saw, or even with a hammer and chisel. "I always try to hire the artists," he said, though they are erratic workers.

They couldn't make any noise at all, so they excavated with chisels and their bare hands, and filled a sizable number of huge garbage bags. "The stuff was so concentrated that once it turned to dust it would stick to you like silicone," said Mr. Martinez, whose constant exposure to particulate matter, as he described his normal environment of spray paint, hit an all-time high.

The other walls are a dove gray, painted that way to draw the eye to the windows.

"Housing projects are all about being 'inside,'" Mr. Martinez said. "There's no sense of what's outside once you get 'in.' It's truly like being incarcerated." Mr. Martinez has been struck, he said, by the emptiness of the playgrounds that dot this project — except after 11 p.m., when the big guys come out and play basketball all night — and the tendency of his new neighbors to look down or look away when he greets them.

Certainly the hallways here do not feature any sort of bouyant boombox, with their sad gray vinyl tiles, glossy with yellow layers of wax, the prison-style yellow brick walls and the reform-school-green trim.

Inside this apartment, grim references become festive. There's police-style tape laid down in a kind of mood plaid on the floor, and yellow utility lights strung from the ceiling — one assumes in an attempt to "quote" from the environment of your basic graffitiist. In other words, here are things you'd find in a subway, or a crime scene. The effect is both colorful and giddy, like the rooms in Poetry Barn's teen catalog.

Instead of shades, rolls of paper hang from dowels over the window and are decorated by a few graffitiists. Others have made plexiglass bo-



es that can be stacked and used as a headboard for the bed, as supports for the bed and desk, and, when covered with a pinkish-orange square of foam, remarkably comfortable seating. One graffitiist, Nairo, filled plexiglass boxes with old spray cans gathered from the subway tracks, like a time capsule of his art — making it seem distant, almost forgotten. You can see the old Rustolium cans — the '70's-era paint of choice. Mr. Martinez said — and American Accent cans, a 90's brand.

Mr. Martinez said he'd awakened that morning worrying that none of this was any good.

"That it was all testosterone and filibustering," he said. "And then I started to see the human in each piece and felt a bit better."

A Peter Max-colored cube is painted with an image of Charlton Heston as Moses, which caused some head scratching by Mr. Martinez. Why, he asked Rase — its painter — do you have the former head of the National Rifle Association on this box?

"Oh, well, that's an allegory of Robert Mugabe," Rase said blithely, referring to the man whose soulless housing project might be credited with seeding the first forms of graffiti.

Mr. Martinez brought few personal touches with him: there's his blender, for his turd green breakfast, the Ultimate Meal. "I don't smoke. I don't drink. I just eat this green gunk," he said. And his electronic gizmos, so he and his curator, Antonio Zayas, who lives in Gerona, outside Barcelona, can plot their next five projects, at all hours (in the future are a clipwise exhibition, a book, a magazine called A2 and more). And his boogymat attitude.

Mr. Martinez, a romantic guy who wears his heart on his sleeve, will quote the playwright Bertolt Brecht if you ask about the personal toll of so much moving about. "Brecht talked of constant movement," he said, "as a way to achieve things that are most important. What makes me feel comfortable living this way is thinking of the good I'm doing. It's sort of a happy thing."

Mr. Martinez worries about his graffitiists and their problems even as he delights in what they make — and its impish impudence. As a visitor left his latest home the other day, the metal elevator walls were slick with what smelled like linseed oil. Later Mr. Martinez identified it as G-Pro, a coating to repel graffiti.



Photographs by Phil Marshall for The New York Times

OCASIONERS' TOUCHES
Hugo Martinez has taken over a housing-project apartment and let his graffitiists redesign it. Their work includes plexiglass cubes with old spray cans, top middle, and decorated rolls of paper as shades, bottom right.



ON THE WEB

An audio interview with Hugo Martinez and more photos:
nytimes.com/freestate



Art in Review

other. People manipulating puppets is (yawn) another motif.

White swanlike birds are much in evidence, too. In one shot, "White Bird No. 2," one is actually mimicked by Ms. Michener herself, making a hazy appearance in bird plumage. In another scene, her body (head cropped out) appears outdoors in the altogether, attended by a blur of a dog.

In fact there is so much tweaking and milking of subjects here that a viewer can be grateful for a simple diptych titled "Boras," taken at night. In it a woman in a shimmering gown approaches the bank of a silvery pond; the scene is paired with a Stygian view of the moon reflected in the water. No prizewinner, it still has more moody substance than the other contrivances here.

GRACE GLUECK

'The Project in the Projects'

160 Madison Street, Apt. 11G
Lower East Side
Saturdays and Sundays noon to 6 p.m. through August.

The New York art dealer Hugo Martinez represents a number of well-known graffiti artists, some veterans of the classical era of the 1970's and 80's and others new on the scene. A few years ago, Mr. Martinez exhibited them in a Chelsea gallery, then in a space in Brooklyn. Recently he has begun to incorporate their work into utopian public projects.

The first of these, which made its debut late last year, was a pediatrics clinic on West 207th Street in upper Manhattan. Sponsored by a medical group, the clinic was designed by a two-person Dutch firm called Kaptein Roodnat, and its interior was entirely decorated, with enchanting results, by artists whose work has traditionally, and often illegally, been produced on the street.

Now Mr. Martinez has enlisted the same design team in a second collaborative work, or "intervention," this one involving the redecoration of a studio apartment in a low-income housing project on the Lower East

Side. Kaptein-Roodnat have made subtle and reversible structural changes to increase the flow of light and air in a small space. Some 15 artists, including Kez 5, Ghost, NATO and VFR, contribute painted sculptures that double as ornaments and modular furniture.

The design is intended as a malleable prototype, a sampler of decorative possibilities — including the choice of individual artists — available to a project resident wanting a customized makeover. Naturally, the appeal of any or all of the options will be a matter of individual taste, too much for some people, too little for others.

But then, the "Project in the Projects" is as much about philosophy as it is about practicality. It is, in a sense, a 21st-century update on the kind of aesthetic domestic environment, at once harmonious and stimulating, envisioned by Mondrian. And this concept seems particularly germane to the present, when housing costs are steep and the mainstream art world is working hard to squeeze art back into the confines of marketable objects.

No doubt all of these issues, in which art, design and politics meet, will generate some bracing heat during a symposium that Mr. Martinez and his artists will present tomorrow night at Bluestockings Bookstore, 172 Allen Street, Lower East Side, from 6 to 8 p.m. Information: (212) 619-2149.

HOLLAND COTTER

Benjamin Butler

'Forest's Edge'

Team
527 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through June 18

In another context, you could mistake Benjamin Butler's abstracted landscapes for banal decorative paintings made for furniture showrooms or dentists' offices. In a Chelsea gallery, they bloom like hot house flowers. Made with a brusquely sensuous touch, each depicts a few slender, mostly leafless trees with the spaces between filled in with hyp-