



VOX HUMANA is heard at the 2010 Los Angeles Art Show

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by tommy tung



Street artists Mear One, El Mac, Retna, and Kofie perform live at the 2010 Los Angeles Art Show. New fans are enlisted. New critics are born. Provocation succeeds.

Some sit and some stand, but all are in quiet reverence of Kofie who paints an abstract playground for the eyes. Seldom does he acknowledge these attendees of the Los Angeles Art Show. Inches away from the 12 x 12 foot canvas, he lives and works, spiritually tethered to a geometric pool of tides and axes.

When he does get distance, he does it to get supplies from a cart.

Kofie is one of four artists creating VOX HUMANA, a live exhibition of street art at the Los Angeles Convention Center. Next to him is Mear One with a canvas identical in size, while El Mac and Retna collaborate on a 12 x 24 foot canvas. Their performance runs the course of the Los Angeles Art Show (January 20 – 24, 2010), presented by the Fine Art Dealers Association (FADA).

Every day, they demonstrate their craft.

Every year, the fair has never showcased street art -- until now.

“This is a groundbreaking show to have this here,” says Bryson Strauss, curator of VOX HUMANA. “The Fine Art Dealers Association, if you’re not familiar, was founded by 19th and 20th century art dealers. It’s evolved from 100 percent historic traditional painting to 25 percent of that and 75 percent contemporary.”

According to Strauss who also directs L.A. Art Machine, VOX HUMANA is a progressive move by the largest art fair on the West coast, since Mear One, Retna, El Mac, and Kofie are not certified celebrities: “Shepard Fairey and Banksy show at art fairs like Art Basel, but they’ve already been validated and vindicated and selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars. It’s easy to hang [their work] on your wall and say, ‘Now, I’m cool and I’m hip.’”

Producer of the Los Angeles Art Show, Kim Martindale describes the fair as “encyclopedic,” and believes that VOX HUMANA balances the spectrum and absolves street art of infamy.

“Graffiti art is part of that latest movement,” says Martindale. “It’s kind of gone through a transition from where people had pushed it aside and said, ‘Let’s not even look at it. That’s an evil thing for our society.’”

The sensitivity of the issue reflects in Strauss’ nomenclature: “I use ‘street art’ over ‘graffiti,’ because ‘graffiti’ has connotations, whereas these guys -- if you look at any of this -- you wouldn’t say, ‘graffiti.’ You would just say, ‘fine art.’”

Marta Avellaneda, 56, represents Galeria del Paseo in Montevideo, Uruguay, and opines that VOX HUMANA is neither graffiti nor fine art: “The way I see it, more than graffiti, is that it’s mural work. They’re muralists, but muralists on canvas. To me, maybe because I grew up in the 60s and 70s, the fact that someone is a street performer and becomes part of an art collection -- it loses its feeling.”

VOX HUMANA (Latin for “the human voice”) is titled after a chapter in *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking* by David Bayles and Ted Orland.

Avellaneda concedes that the title is apt: “You have a feeling of each [artist].

They have many voices. You have a geometric voice, a figurative voice, an abstract voice. It's a human voice."

The voice attracts many attendees unfamiliar with El Mac, Retna, Kofie, and Mear One.

Some study techniques on display. Some are generations divided from the culture of street art and graffiti. Some are both like Moon-Il Kang, 73, from Riverside County.

"I like to see how the artist does his brushstrokes. We are amateur artists," says Kang laughing with his wife. "We do painting."

"It's almost like you're participating in it," says George Wright, a 53-year-old photographer from Solvang, CA.

Laura Ross-Paul, a 60-year-old painter, states that her hometown, Portland, OR, does not offer street art like VOX HUMANA. Her fascination is conceptual, regarding Mear One's piece: "One of my favorite things as a child was watching my father's photographs develop in the tray and we'd play this little game before everything came into focus like 'It could be this or it could be that.' And last night, 'that could be this or that could be that,' but it compelled you -- in that whatever it was -- it was based on something you knew. I'll probably keep coming back until [Mear One] resolves it."

The mural by El Mac and Retna inspires something else for Ross-Paul -- a meditation on biography:

"You can't quite place the culture of the woman. She could be slightly Asian. She could be slightly African American. She could just be an older Caucasian. We can't place her. I think [the letters] are incredibly beautiful forms and they go with the way [El Mac] has constructed her face, a sort of etching quality that describes dimension. And if you look at the forms, they have a symbolic quality, so you don't know what that's saying, but you can go with it -- make a little story about her."

The proprietary script belongs to Retna who dresses in a sweatshirt and jeans

and uses a disposable plate as a palette. His brush moves in steady glides. He knows this language. It is unspoken. The forms operate subconsciously.

“The human voice is the human condition, so the image we’re trying to represent is the voice of a woman -- of a mother -- which we all have. The storyline behind it is kind of the pains and struggles that we’ve put our mothers through,” says Retna.

For Strauss, the semantics mirror the encyclopedic art fair: “If you look at Retna, you can see where he’s coming from. He’s not in a vacuum. He’s making quotations from Latin. He’s talking about ancient European history. He’s talking about murals and folk art and everything else.”

“We’re paintings murals of people that don’t necessarily have a voice, so we like to glorify them,” Retna explains.

Kofie’s aim, on the other hand, is oblique like his style of “vintage futurism.” The artist avows, “Bottom line: I always like to fuck with people’s heads. There’s no real grand scheme with what I’m trying to do here. I’m really just doing what I do.”

Although we are fifty feet from his painting, his eyes stay fastened to it -- unable to disentangle from the chocolate boundaries, snowy shards, and structural collisions. He is candid about the headphones, worn perpetually during the fair.

“I’m listening to psych, prog rock, and Gary Numan. Yeah, I’m in the zone. Half of the time, that shit’s off. I’m just trying to block out the [surrounding] conversation,” says Kofie.

He does appreciate the new audience, however, and rewards their enthusiasm: “Some people that are conscious and really care about this work, they’ll actually come up and talk to me. It’s been a nice handful who are asking the right questions, are really inquisitive, aren’t really obnoxious. Those are the people I’ve given time to talk to.”

El Mac speaks to fans as well, but cannot perform much for them; he relies on spray paint; the convention center prohibits its usage. Consequently, the majority of Mac’s work -- the middle-aged woman -- has been completed beforehand.

Still, the hindrance has not disheartened him, for discussion is one reason he enjoys graffiti-style art.

“Whoever they are, whether it’s old ladies or rich Italian people [laughing] or whoever or kids on the street, I don’t care. I want people to see the work -- whoever might like it,” El Mac says.

Of the four artists, Mear One is the most precise in verbalizing intent, though he has not slept in over 45 hours and his words float in reverie:

“Basically, it’s ‘human in the city’ like ‘What is it to be a human in the city and do you ever stop to take notice of what’s going on around you?’

“Down here in L.A., for instance I’ve been watching these jets stripe up our sky and develop it into something completely chemical in the evening. I just wonder how many people take notice of this.

“When I was a little boy, I never saw this before -- fake palm trees with cell towers sticking out of them, seeing all these dead birds constantly, and bees just dropping out of the air dead. I used to see butterflies all the time. I just never see that stuff anymore in L.A.”

Despite the earnest goal of VOX HUMANA, some do not hear its rhyme or reason.

Avellaneda who sees Kofie, Retna, El Mac, and Mear One as street performers also sees them as gallery-represented and therefore, financially stable: “If [the fair] had had [struggling] artists for an audience of this size to validate their work, then it would be fantastic. This, I think, is only a good idea.”

Kate Gilbert, 35, representing Rehs Galleries, Inc. in New York, also views VOX HUMANA as performance art -- and not the most enticing example of it: “I became more interested in someone working here who was on the ground arranging wine glasses. To me, that had more resonance as a performance piece.”

The very nature of performance, Gilbert contends, undermines the mystique: “Part of the thing I like about painting is the sense of time that can be implied just by looking at it. When there’s somebody in front of the canvas painting it, it doesn’t make me want to enter it.”

On the issue of setting, Gilbert recognizes the Los Angeles Convention Center as attenuating to the street art experience: “Certainly, the positives may be that you reach a different audience in this context. I feel street art is such a powerful form anyway that it doesn’t need it.”

Working for Galeria del Paseo, Cecilia Stein, 23, supports the evolution from street to structured environment. The collection of art by El Mac, Retna, Kofie, and Mear One means their maturation: “Somebody can recognize that they’re good. Instead of going to jail now, they go to somebody’s house.”

But Mear One seeks more than the sale of his artwork to attendees: “I’d like to gain their interest and their support of me. I’d like them to believe in my ideas. It’s been rough. A lot of art has been ‘hang over your couch’ or crap like that.”

While the four artists are individual in their styles, their competition is negligible, according to soft-spoken El Mac. His tentative pauses only seem to testify his humility.

“I respect everybody here,” says El Mac. “Mear [One] has been doing amazing work for years. Kofie’s a good friend of mine. I’ve always respected his stuff. Retna’s the one I collaborate with the most. We’ve done a lot of pieces together, so we have a really good working relationship. I honestly don’t think anybody has any negative will towards anybody. If Mear [One] somehow comes out of this a millionaire, I’m happy for him.”

During another conversation, El Mac is interrupted by a Catholic high school teacher -- she wishes to share his art with her students -- fulfilling the vision of Kim Martindale.

“It’s really about uniting all those nonprofit, for-profit institutions, large and small, so that more people talk about art and create an excitement about art. Because without that, my soul’s lost,” says Martindale with anxious laughter.

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VOX HUMANAthe 15th annual Los Angeles Art ShowJanuary 20 - 24,
2010.<http://www.laartmachine.com/voxhumana/>

art by Mear One, Kofie, Retna, and El Mac

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