

Pam Rosenblatt  
**What is graffiti?**

What is graffiti? Perhaps an easier question to begin with is "What is art?" Can it be simply a line on a blank piece of paper? Can it be a doodle on a diner napkin? Or does it have to be created on a canvas covered with watercolors, acrylics, and/or oils? Perhaps.

And what is the purpose of art? Is it to create visual impact, have a religious or political message, or simply to beautify a private or public space?

All of these questions seem to lead to other rhetorical inquiries: Does it take a Michelangelo to paint religious images on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or an Andy Warhol to create Campbell Soup grids for a piece to be considered a real artwork? Or can it just be words and images written or painted on a public or private space like graffiti is?

Most people would agree that Michelangelo's works and Warhol's grids are visual artworks. But graffiti is a different story. Graffiti had its major entrance in the United States in the 1960s in New York City. While graffiti artists and fans support the idea that graffiti beautifies neighborhoods, especially those

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**Abby Andrews (AKA Abby TC5):  
Graffiti as "an art form"**

*Freelance artist/entrepreneur Abby Andrews, AKA Abby TC5, is known as one of the first women graffiti artists in New York City, even though the craft of graffiti probably began during the cave-man era. Modern graffiti was born in the 1960s by people like Top Cat, Cornbread and Taki183. Abby TC5 began creating graffiti in high school during the 1980s.*

*Defined as "writing on walls, or more specifically as drawings or words that are scratched, painted, or sprayed on walls or other surfaces in public",<sup>1</sup> graffiti is not a drawing or a few words on walls but it is "an art form" to Abby TC5.*

*Abby TC5's colorful, imaginative, highly technical graffiti and paintings catch her audience's attention through their boldness, playfulness, and creativeness. Her recent graffiti art can be viewed on her website [www.abbygraff.com](http://www.abbygraff.com).*

*On September 20, 2013, Wilderness House Literary Review's arts editor Pam Rosenblatt began a month's long interview process with Abby TC5 by way of email. The official interview was sent to Rosenblatt on October 18,*

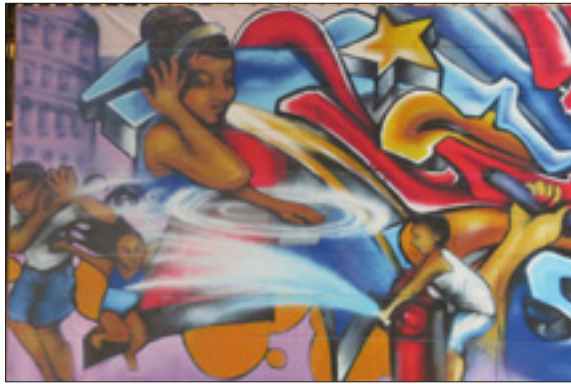
<sup>1</sup> Encarta Dictionary (online), "graffiti", 10.20.2013.

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places that are run down, people have disputed its validity as an art, usually in non-commissioned areas and often in zero tolerance cities.

Artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Salvador Dali, Diego Rivera, and Pablo Picasso have stimulated the growth of graffiti art. Look at the graffiti stir that the British Banksy has generated.

Graffiti seems to give young, beginning artists a creative outlet, a start in the artistic world – if they so choose. There’s the thrill of doing something illegal, something that gives them an identity in a world that seems so corporate, and something that brings them fame.



The graffiti artist is a dedicated soul who has a mission: to get his or her painted images and/or words viewed by a public that normally wouldn’t see them. Does this mean graffiti should not be allowed in a city because it’s forced on individuals? And because it may or may not enhance the value of property? Since certain cities like New York have a zero tolerance graffiti policy, does this mean that graffiti isn’t art – since it’s not accepted by the majority?

I once walked into a Cambridge, Massachusetts art gallery that sold artworks from approximately five dollars and up through

2013. Here is the outcome of their written exchanges:

WHLR: Please let us know how you would like your name to be published in the WHLR arts article, your educational background, and your current occupation.

AA: Abby Andrews (AKA AbbyTC5), current occupation is freelance artist and entrepreneur.

WHLR: We’ve been in touch with Tufts University Art Gallery staff and learned from them about how you are affiliated with Tufts University Art Gallery and how you were selected to do the site-specific mural, “Summer in New York”, on the grand “art wall” contiguous to Talbot Avenue’s Mayer Campus Center. And how you were asked to do some of the scenic design for the 2007 play “Welcome to Arroyo’s” by Obie Award-winner and Pulitzer Prize-finalist Kristoffer Diaz, directed by Tufts Assistant Professor Noe Montez in October 2013. How did all of this come about?

AA: I was introduced to Assistant Professor Noe Montez and Amy Schlegel, Director of Galleries and Collections at Aidekman Arts Center for Tufts University by Jessica Pabón, a curator, and Post-Doctoral Fellow in Art & Humanities for NYU. Jessica had just curated a show of my work in New York and submitted my name for the mural project at Tufts. Noe and Amy viewed some of my work online and felt that as a female graffiti artist, I could best represent the mural which references some subject matter in the Kristoffer Diaz play “Welcome To Arroyos” currently in production on the Tufts campus.

WHLR: We have read online that you began creating graffiti in New York in the 1980s.

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the thousands of dollars. Some of the pieces were excellent; some were tolerable.

I purchased a multi-colored, multi-layered painting of a fish for fifteen dollars. I had bartered the piece down from twenty dollars. I looked at the painting and could not decide if I liked it or not, if it would be considered "real" art one day. But I thought to myself that simpler was better and that the fish certainly had a bit of charm to it. So I purchased it.

Is it art? Yes, I would say it's art. But the question is: Is it good art? To some, not. To others, like me, yes. That's probably how we should judge graffiti: Is it good graffiti? To some, once again, not. To others, yes. After all, fine art just may be in the eye of the beholder. And, perhaps, graffiti should be as well.



When did you first become interested in the field of art? And how and why did you develop your interest in creating graffiti? Do you still create graffiti or have you moved on to a more "traditional" form of art, like scenic designs for plays and the abstract portraits you emailed us a day or so ago?

AA: I began my graffiti exploits in my native neighborhood, Jamaica Queens New York. My father was a professional sign painter for an outfit in Long Island for 30 years. He had his own studio set up in our basement where he did freelance work on the weekends. My dad kept gold leaf, spray paint, any and all sorts of drafting, painting or sign materials on hand. My father painted as a fine artist as well and was able to introduce me to techniques and let me experiment with different materials.

I was accepted to the H.S. of Art and Design in Manhattan. During my daily commute I was introduced to the art on the streets and most notably on the subways. The graffiti art movement was really hitting its stride in New York in 1981-1982. Many of the students at school were already accomplished artists and most of them infamous. Being submerged into that culture by day, and then influenced by the sights and smells of spray paint and turpentine wafting upstairs from the basement, I think a connection was made. I began to form my identity around what I experienced in my environment.

All through high school, I practiced graffiti illegally on the subways, streets, buses, on clothing and in Black Books which are blank hard bound books within which graffiti artists trade artwork. As a teenager, I painted and sold graffiti work to my parents' friends and neighbors. I was also hired to paint night club

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interiors. I was included into Henry Chalfant's book *Spraycan Art* which raised my profile considerably during the 80s. I was thrown out of High School due to truancy. Most days I cut school to bomb trains in layups and to steal spray paint. Naturally I was thrown out and had to get my GED.

After high school I quit illegal graffiti. I was shockingly accepted Parsons School of Design with a good portfolio and my little GED. I attended Parsons from 1985-1987. I transferred and graduated to Temple University's Tyler School of Art. After college I worked freelance in Manhattan primarily in the music industry. In the decades since graduating from college, I worked almost exclusively as an art director designer in the package design and branding. So as I am only recently enjoying work from as a fine artist painting. There is nothing more satisfying than painting these days.

WHLR: What's the history of graffiti art, especially as it applies to your situation? Please name some of the graffiti artists/ traditional artists who have had an impact on your artwork?

AA: Tagging was the first form of graffiti. Tagging is characterized by drawing one's name with a marker. Among my peers, the consensus is that tagging originated in Philadelphia by artists such as Top Cat and Cornbread. Then in New York, marker tags of Taki183 were reportedly seen in the mid 1960's. Pieces as we know them today developed from embellished tags. People would write their name, then add dots inside, then draw a halo around it and so on, until Phase2 did the first bubble style transparent letter piece. Kase2 later created mechanical letters, meaning the pieces of each letter fit together, and where shapes are drawn off of the letters to signify mechanized action, such as pumps, arrows etc. From there and along with contributions of many more pioneers letters, concepts and backgrounds developed into elaborate works we see today.

My peers in high school such as Web One, Seen TC5 and Mare 139 are probably the 3 that most directly influenced my style. They adopted me, protected me, informed me about the streets, watched my style develop and corrected me every step of the way, and each of them respected me as a lady and always behaved as gentlemen with me. I followed and listened to everything they said, and I'm a much better graffiti artists as a result.

WHLR: Do you have any "fun" or "funny" experiences re: the graffiti excursions that you encountered that you would like to share? And did you ever find yourself in trouble for your artistic creations/work?

AA: I'm not sure how it's possible, but I have never been arrested for doing graffiti. I had a female partner named 2Cute with whom I would steal paint with. We both wore these oversized full length vintage coats that we got from the thrift shop that we embellished with





brooches and buttons (the style of the day). We created openings in the lining and we would go into hardware stores and load cans of paint in our coats and calmly leave. Another trick we had was to dress up preppy with pearls and expensive handbags making ourselves look affluent and sweet. Then we would walk into art supply stores behind a group of the rowdiest friends we had, acting as if we didn't know them. They would walk up to the register and ask the clerk a bunch of random questions about various art instruments. While the clerks focused on watching our rambunctious friends at the counter, we would load up on paint and walk out. Our friends would then follow. We would reverse the plan at the next location, although it usually worked better if we were the thieves as most of our friends would immediately cause a clerk to follow them through the store.

I always giggle looking back at how we used to be considering who we all are today. Julie (2Cute) now lives on Kibbutz in Israel and is happily married with 5 beautiful children. And every one of our childhood "thug" vandal friends are either famous artists, in law enforcement, well paid digital artists or independently wealthy. We are all very happy and successful. And, with the exception of Julie, we are all as close as we used to be, albeit spread all over the country. We see and speak with one another frequently and travel to be together to paint and spend time with each other's families. Still close after 30 some odd years. It's nice!

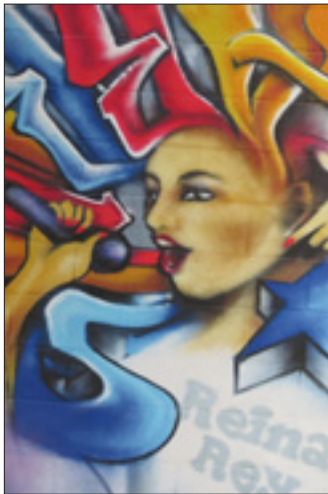
WHLR: Is graffiti an art form to you, or it is a means for a political forum? Or both?

AA: Graffiti is primarily an art form to me. Coming from the group of graffiti artists that I developed with, there is a responsibility that they take really seriously - which is to keep building on the traditional New York style. The laws that my peers and I judge each other by are very strict, so

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often the process of creating a piece that “holds up” within our peer group is an exhausting exercise in and of itself. My peers and I are content to just show off our skills. However, in my old age, I do find myself slowly becoming attracted to representing women. It’s funny. When I was young I didn’t feel separate because I was a woman painting with my peers. In retrospect I recognize that what myself and female peers did was groundbreaking, so I’m tapping into those themes and emotions more and more these days. I am also now a single mother of a 16 year old girl, I find myself being the subject of show and tell, so the question of feminism seems like an area of interest to generation Y girls. I do find myself creatively responding to or pushing back against common stereotypes of women, which can be depicted in the Tufts mural. You see Molly painting graffiti, and Reina Rey Mcing, and a female spinning records on the turntable. That’s common amongst my peer group, but I’m realizing that my little art world bubble is unique and that those images are very uncommon in the mainstream.

WHLR: Why did/do you choose to simply often use your name “Abby” in different styles with your graffiti? On what type of surfaces did/do you paint graffiti? And what materials are needed to create graffiti art? Which colors do you like to paint with the most when you do graffiti? [Please feel free to apply these questions to “traditional” art as well.]



AA: I have several monikers aside from Abby. I use Ebony, and Bitch 106 as well. Using one’s name often just helps people recognize you more easily. I have been away from graffiti for many years while I was married and working as a corporate designer, so in this beginning, I’m choosing to portray my name to breed familiarity. I will eventually branch off to use my other monikers more often in the future.

I most often use colors on the red family which I am making a conscious effort to break away from. I blend a lot using similar colors. I am looking to combine more unharmonious colors into my work because it creates a more dynamic look.

The aerosol I most often use is Montana Gold (German Montana). It’s low pressure which allows for a lot of control. It’s also dominant in the retail market, so it’s the easiest to purchase here in Charlotte NC. I am experimenting more with Belton Molotow which features lines that offer transparent coverage, high pressure and low pressure. I love to use Montana Hardcore (Mtn 94 or Spanish Montana) when I can get it. It’s the lowest pressure I have ever used and it smells like bubble gum! As for acrylic paints, I always use heavy body, which is generally the most expensive. I am not partial to any brand, just whatever is heavy body and on sale. As for Oils, I strictly buy what’s on sale. I’m not a sophisticated enough oil painter yet to be able to note the finer differences.

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I am extremely picky with canvas though. Cheap canvas has a hard time holding any paint aerosol acrylic etc. Good quality canvas can stand up to many layers of coverage while maintaining the integrity of the fiber. Cheap canvas napps up on you, you lose the tooth (the grooves) of the surface after one coat and it just never looks as delicious as a good quality canvas. Good quality canvas photographs much better as well.

WHLR: Is there a set process you go through when you create graffiti? [Please feel free to apply this question to your “traditional” artwork as well.]

AA: My art process always starts with a sketch. The process of execution strictly depends on where and what I am painting and how much time I have to accomplish it.

With graffiti, in my house, I have a wall where I keep maybe a dozen of my most recent black and white outlines in different styles. This gives me an opportunity to monitor my growth, and plan the final painted piece. I have my personal goals that relate to complexity of letters, and complexity of extensions. So I look at this wall, each row is categorized by moniker, I have battle pieces that consist of mechanical letters that use many arrows, then have simplified outlines I have developed specifically because I foresee using them with very elaborate intricate fill ins. So this is a wall of planned pieces if you will.

When the mood strikes me or the right occasion calls for it, I’ll pick one off my wall and think about where I am painting it. Then I draw the proportions of the setting, and figure out how big or small it will be within that space. I scan it, adjust its size and placement in the planned environment, and print it out. Then I usually take tracing paper and lay it over the sketch to plan the designs or characters that are going to share the space with the piece. Last night, I was developing a piece for a mock train battle. So I drew the mock train in illustrator, scanned the battle piece and placed it onto the mock train with other elements I sketched. Then I took the black and white file to Kinkos made several enlarged versions of it. When I got it home, I dropped in different color scenarios in using Copic, Prismacolor and Touch markers. I think I did 3 comps before I finally settled on a color story I thought worked well. That’s typically how I work on graffiti pieces.

Canvases are a whole different process. I tend to think of canvases as a series. I want to tell a story. So I’ll develop each one in thumbnail form, then I weave in unifying elements asking the question “what’s going to be consistent from one to the next?” Then I think about how the elements are going to live in the environment. What the color story will be etc. It’s a much lengthier process and I feel like I treat my canvases more like a graphic design project which I think is bad because I wish my process were more organic. When I finally figure out exactly where each character is going to be posed, I hire models. Then I develop a sketch and pin it to the wall behind the easel and then just go in on it.

WHLR: We’ve also read that you’ve done murals in in the San Francisco Bay Area, and now in Charlotte, NC. Were these murals commissions?

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AA: I have never done murals in San Francisco. I paint at several areas in Charlotte but only recently have been hired to do paid murals in Charlotte, so mostly I paint for myself.

WHLR: The “paintings\_for\_Matt” (a series of nine portraits of different women) found on abbygraff.com are nice. Would you like to tell the story behind them? [Who are the women? Does the ethnic background play a role in these paintings? etc...]

AA: This series was done for a show at bOb gallery in New York. I titled the show HomeGirls. It’s a play on words to some degree because each of the women represents different cities where I have lived or called home. I thought HomeGirls would be appropriate as well since traditionally a “Homegirl” is a ‘girl from around the way’. Since the location of the show was New York, I thought it appropriate to name the show “Homegirls” because, although I have lived in many different cities, New York will always be home. It gave all my peers an opportunity to reconnect with me after years of me being on the west coast, so in a sense the show was a coming home show.

The series features women who represent my moods and experiences in each city that I have lived in. For example, Philly is painted using fatigue green because I felt like I was under siege going to college. Between the isolation of being an urban New Yorker coming to a suburban fine-arts based college in Pennsylvania, and the stress of working my way through college, being away from my family and support system, it felt like a warzone. The woman appears militant (afrocentric headwrap), closed off (dark shades and headset), defensive in her posture. Another example would be “New York” which features a young carefree girl blowing bubbles and wearing a candy charm bracelet. Her afropuffs spell out New York in a ‘throwup’ style. (A ‘throwup’ is a bubble letter quickie that graffiti artists do to get their names up all over the city quickly.) This is a tribute piece to a friend “Cer TPA” who was the first writer to take me to bomb trains who was killed several years ago. To support the theme, her candy charm spells out ‘Cer RIP” and she is blowing a TPA (The Public Animals) bubble. The Public Animals was the first graffiti crew to accept me, so this painting represents my earliest experiences as a graffiti artist.

The rest of the series features more of the same, women whose hair and colors represent what I was feeling during my stay in each of the cities featured.

WHLR: What words of advice do you have for aspiring artists, women or men, in your field(s)?

AA: Advice to female artists:

A) Look for a place to live where you can sustain a safe clean living that allows you time to create. Time and expense are major factors in being able to afford the lifestyle of an artist. Aside from needing to eat and have a place to live safely, you have your health and healthcare to consider, transportation, the expense of materials. So remain flexible of where you live.



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B) Travel light. Don't be a pack rat because as an artist you may need to pick up and move or travel often.

C) Live in a place where you can focus. If too much social activity is happening, I feel my personal life and creative life is compromised.

D) Incorporate to keep your hard earned money. Always be aware of what you are taxed as an artist and it's painful but you have to build that into the price of your work. If you incorporate you are able to write off a percentage of your travel and expenses.

E) Be organized. It's as simple as buying a filing box with hanging folders. A cheap \$14.00 filing cabinet/bin from Walmart will help you keep receipts and bills organized. Get a good accountant who will take time with you to itemize your taxes each year and who is familiar with artists and savvy about filing laws which change yearly so that you hold onto as much of your income as possible.



F) Keep good credit, almost at the expense of everything else. There have been disasters in my life that I have had to solve with my American Express Card. With that said, I almost NEVER use it, simply because I can't afford the interest.

G) Control your appetite for luxury items. Live simply, but splurge when you can within reason, but get

to know how to eat well on 10 bucks a day because if you are surviving off your art, you really don't know when you are going to get paid again, no matter what a client tells you.

H) Never think your ideas are foolish. Develop them. Keep developing them. You may find that a kernel of an idea that you create can sustain you for life and inspire others for generations to come.

One last piece of advice is to make every effort to support yourself. You never want to be stuck in a bad relationship with a roommate or romantic partner and unable to leave because your income depends on this person. Always make sure you can survive on your income so you are neither a burden to nor an indentured servant to your mate. Maybe this means your art gets on ice for a while. It's tough but you gotta do what you gotta do.

