



TASTES LIKE REVOLUTION

LOCAL MURALIST CACHE SPEARHEADS A CHICKEN-LED REBELLION



P H O T O B Y O S C A R Z A G A L

>> It's Sunday at dawn, and a green SUV comes to a halt at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Benton Way in Silver Lake. The city is barely awake. The only other sign of life: an empty westbound Metro bus. Cache, a 31-year-old graffiti artist, exits the SUV and gets to work. He unloads two milk crates of paint, a ladder, trays, rollers and a plastic bag bulging with dozens of spray paint valves. To buy the materials for his latest mural, Cache dropped down to \$15 in his bank account. But he's not concerned.

Cache knocks cracked paint off the wall, waterlogged from recent rain. He rolls the wall with sky blue house paint, erasing three of his locally famous chickens — bulbous white birds with triangular beaks, bright red combs and gleaming black eyes. He leaves two sections untouched: a woman with an all-seeing third eye that a friend painted and a chicken riding a bike accompanied

by the phrases “R.I.P. Val One” and “Ride Forever,” in honor of a fellow bike messenger who was shot a few years ago in Silver Lake. “The trippy thing is, it was on the same corner his brother died on ten years earlier,” says Cache. “Both got caught up in gangbanging.” Many of Cache's friends joined gangs as youths, but Cache forged a more artistic path — “a better outlet to express myself,” he says.

For the past three years, Cache has collaborated with friend Eyeone, known for his black-clad Zapatista characters. Later in the day, Eyeone joins Cache at the wall. By nightfall, two chickens are batting around a beach ball on an idyllic meadow. Off to the side, a chicken sits reading *Ishmael* by Daniel Quinn, one of Cache's favorite books. Thought bubbles lead to chickens and Zapatistas with sticks and monkey wrenches, breaking the gears in a machine.

KILLING WALLS FOR PRIDE

Cache grew up in Guatemala, surrounded by revolution, but it wasn't civil war

that brought him to the States. “My father became a raging alcoholic,” he says, “so my mom left him.” His mother flew ahead to Los Angeles, leaving her daughter and two sons with a trusted family friend. Two years later, she earned enough money to bring Cache and his siblings to L.A.

Cache learned more hard lessons once he arrived. “When I grew up, we had maids, who were indigenous people, who [would] do anything to survive. It was shocking when we came here — my mom was a maid.”

The family moved to “a rough neighborhood,” the corner of Third and Columbia. By the age of 12, Cache was befriending graffiti artists. “Youngsters have to prove themselves to older guys to kick it with them,” he says. “My friends were doing big murals and I was helping out. Now I'm doing murals, they're helping out.”

At first, Cache's mother didn't approve of his tagging. “My mother used to kick my ass. Literally. She thought it was vandalism.” But that changed when Cache was in his mid-20s, when he began painting murals. “[People] don't look at it as vandalism because it's little characters,” he says. His mother is the one that dubbed him “Cache” — Latin American slang for “stylish” — after he started wearing saggy pants. He eventually adopted it as his graffiti name.

Cache lives in Silver Lake, and often paints along Sunset, but is willing to paint anywhere. “If it's an abandoned wall, I show up and paint it. If I see a wall I really like and it's somebody's property, I'll show 'em pictures of recent murals. ... It makes the community look a little better.” He's done several murals in South Central. “It's the easiest place to get the walls, and most of my buddies live in South Central.”

Cache is also a member of K4P, a crew known to “Kill Walls For Pride,” since the late '80s. He enjoys the collaboration, but misses the old days, when crowds gathered at Belmont Tunnel. The shuttered tunnel near downtown is being razed for condos “People wanted to turn it into a community park, but there's no

money in that,” he says in disgust.

Cache is equally infuriated that graffiti is under attack. “The can has been criminalized. In most countries around the world, graffiti is recognized as art. Here, they think we're doing something wrong.” Take, for instance, the example of south L.A. tagger Gustavo “Guser” Romero, who was recently sentenced to a year in jail and five years probation for doing over \$100,000 in damage to Metro buses — a punishment Cache finds unwarranted. “White collar crimes that affect hundreds or thousands of people go unpunished, or the offenders come out scot-free with a slap on the hand,” he says. “Graffiti on a bus might be an eyesore, but so are the lame billboards on the side of the buses telling you what to consume, what to think, what to watch. The only difference is that there is no revenue to be collected off of graffiti.” His worry is that graffiti — “the voice of the oppressed” — will eventually vanish altogether.

Man One, who owns graffiti-focused Crewest Gallery downtown, shares his concern. “The city and county are destroying murals on a daily basis. ... It's at our own expense; we're not asking for city money, and we're doing it to beautify the community.” Eyeone seconds the criticism. “In a city like L.A., graffiti serves a function that schools don't, especially with cutbacks in art programs,” he says.

But Roxane Marquez, press secretary for First District County Supervisor Gloria Molina, a vocal graffiti opponent, disagrees. “Most of our residents and merchants consider tagging a blight. In response, we've put measures in place to get it removed.” Those measures include a 1-800 number that brings whitewashing within 48 hours.

CHICKENS BECOME POLITICAL

Cache painted his first chicken in 2003, near downtown. “The chicken thing started as a joke,” he says, “but once I started reading and exploring the socioeconomic spiral, I figured there's a way to open

people's minds. Carlos Castaneda wrote about *humaneros* — human coops. I realized we're no different than chickens.”

He first embraced what he calls “revolutionary thinking” after visiting Macondo, a Latin-focused music, book and thought emporium in East Hollywood, founded by Eyeone's parents. “The more I paint, the more political I get,” says Cache. “Everywhere I look it seems like colored people serve the upper class, and the middle class is hanging by a thread. This is affecting family structure, community, everything.”

While other artists have capitalized on their characters with prints and vinyl figurines, Cache prefers to “keep it as true as I can.” His formal training is limited to a beginner's drawing class he took at LACC in 2006. He's painted on canvas, but prefers how his hand connects with the wall. “We're really good friends. Canvas is more synthetic. It's the elements, air, the sun, the crowds that make it all happen.” The few times he has shown pieces — at Crewest and at Scion gallery in Culver City — they have all sold. To earn a living, he has spent the past 11 years as a bike messenger.

Over the years, Cache has garnered a fair amount of respect in the graffiti community. Man One applauds him, saying, “He has smart design, knows how to incorporate his pieces into the landscape of the wall, and has his trademark branding — which is contemporary.”

Cache values the support. “People appreciate something that comes out of the community,” he says, “though there are some haters.” As a result, Cache carefully polices his walls. Once a tag goes up, he's there the next day cleaning it up.

While painting the wall in Silver Lake, pre-teen skateboarders hang around. Some ask Cache and Eyeone to paint their boards. The artists do, no hesitation. One boy wears a pair of shoes that Cache painted with chickens last year. “I'm one of the few people from the community with a voice,” says Cache. “I want to use it to affect the community.” **NA**