

# Dues Paid, Graffiti Artists Tag for a Price

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The location of the Graffiti Hall of Fame is disputed. Old school b-boys and subway car taggers say it's the playground of the Central Park East Secondary School at 106th and Park Avenue. Hipsters and bohemians believe it's the corner of Elizabeth and Spring Streets in SoHo. The curious New Yorker can take a day trip to find out who's right.

The playground at 106th glows with the light of a thousand spray cans. Artists' names appear in the juicy, electric, often unreadable style of the 1980s. Every square inch of available wall space is smothered in hazy neon hues and three-dimensional figures that seem to shake with the energy of their craftsmanship.

Behind basketball hoops, blue women wearing tropical flowers beckon the viewer to their surreal lagoon paradise. Across the court, the earth appears as an apple with a bite taken out of it, while a nearby yin yang symbol spins out of control and disintegrates. On the wall facing Park Avenue, an inferno of red and orange consumes an alphabetical list of hip hop's founders: Afrika Bambaataa, Fat Joe, KRS-1, Melle Mel, and so on.

For those who don't know what they're looking for, the playground is chaos. But some careful reading and a bit of background knowledge will reveal the intricate history of graffiti and its heroes. The most interesting image is not among the explosive murals surrounding the playground, but rather, a faint name drawn on the asphalt inside: Fase.

Fase is a forgotten subway tagger, one of many whose works were lost to the city's Clean Car Program in the late 1980s. But it was Fase who inspired NYC LASE, now one of the most prolific and successful graffiti artists in New York.

LASE also contributed to the 106th Street murals, but his most recent work found a different home last month, in the McCaig-Welles Gallery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. For LASE, and many of his less successful contemporaries, "get in a gallery or get out" was the writing on the wall. And he had no qualms about cashing in.

"It's really our time right now," he said. "The whole street fashion is taking over the world. The underground artist is the new rock star."

And there is some truth to his hype. LASE is making a good living from his art; his prices begin in the \$300 range, and he says that a sneaker deal with Adidas is in the works. "I'm taking all these opportunities to get very edgy. I'm going to break the usual customs," he said.

Unlike his earlier tagging, LASE's current work leans heavily in the direction of simplified Pop Art--a short catalogue of cartoonish grenades or his trademark "Grafhead," a menacing, distorted face drawn with bold black curves.

"I'm very much picking up where Warhol left off," LASE said, referring specifically to *Sponge Robbed*, a series of *Spongebob Squarepants* images with inverted colors.

LASE grew up in the Bronx and quickly entered the subway art culture of the early 1980s. His claim to fame was "bombing"--getting his tag up in so many places that it was unavoidable. He bombed the Bronx, then he bombed Manhattan, but when private art became a way to make a living, he shut the bay doors.

"When I was younger, I did a lot of vandalism," he said. "I'm not doing that anymore. I pretty much started the street bomb, so I pretty much have nothing to prove."

This is also reflected in LASE's changed attitude toward tagging other artists' work. Many taggers add their names to works of art they admire, but LASE lamented one of his Bronx murals that was recently marred by a graffiti novice.

"In the bigger picture, what you're doing is disrespecting this person's work," he said. "I've done it, and now it's happening to me."

When LASE threw a party to celebrate his exhibition in Williamsburg, many of New York's graffiti legends showed up. There was Futura 2000, Ewok, and even the ubiquitous Stay High 149, who sold pricey knick knacks--and pricier interview time--in the corner.

Also in attendance was the self-proclaimed "father of hip hop," DJ Kool Herc, who spun old school tunes with ceaseless grace. Amid a haze of burning blunts and breakbeats, artists reminisced about past deeds and new careers. Some twists of fate are stunningly ironic--Tabu 1, a well-known Brooklyn