

Arts



Left: Nikki S. Lee's "The Hip-Hop Project #1," one of her photos from the Stony Brook exhibit, Say It LOUD! Iona Rozeal Brown & Nikki S. Lee: A Hip-Hop Conversation.

Below: Notorious street artist Shepard Fairey has contributed his piece, "Hug Bombs," to C.W. Post's exhibit, Tawkin' New Yawk City Walls.

Wild Style Council

LOCAL ART EXHIBITS EXPLORE THE IMPACT OF HIP-HOP CULTURE

BY JESSE SERWER

There's a pivotal scene in Charlie Ahearn's definitive 1982 hip-hop document *Wild Style*—a scene later sampled as the opening salvo in another quintessential B-boy document, Nas' debut *Illmatic*—where graffiti writer Lee Quinones (playing Zorro, a thinly veiled version of himself) must defend his lifestyle to his military brother.

"Stop f**king around and be a man," the furloughed Army man tells his younger sibling after seeing the graffiti-strewn walls in their familial home. "There ain't nothing out here for you."

"Oh yes there is," counters Zorro, who's just snuck in through a side window, motioning to his bag full of spray paint. "This."

It turns out there *was* something out there in the city's train yards, and the crumbling walls of the South Bronx. While he gave up writing on the 2 and 3 trains nearly two decades ago, Quinones, like Doze Green, Futura 2000 and numerous other graffiti writers from his era, turned his love of "bombing" into a long, well-respected and profitable career. Quinones' graffiti-inspired canvasses command prices in the tens of thousands, and his commissioned mural work remains in demand the world over.

Another sign of its acceptance as a legitimate art form is the arrival of a graffiti-inspired show in the heart of Long Island's Gold Coast. *Tawkin' New Yawk City Walls*,

currently featured at C.W. Post's Hillwood Art Museum, isn't a graffiti show per se—its title is meant to be taken literally, exploring the gamut of art inspired by and related to walls in New York City—but graffiti and other aspects of early hip-hop culture form its obvious center.

Quinones' work isn't featured in the show, but he looms over it in more than spirit, appearing in a set of photos by Ahearn. Across the room is "She's A Brick House," a recent mural by Sandra Febrara, aka Lady Pink, Quinones' love interest in *Wild Style* (and real life at the time), and the most accomplished female graffiti artist.

Post professor John Fekner, himself a veteran of late-'70s New York graffiti culture, curates *Tawkin'*, which bridges the gap between Gordon Matta-Clark's early-'70s video explorations of NYC's underground infrastructure, and the more familiar, and recent, stencil work of *Obey Giant* creator Shepard Fairey.

Born in Manhattan and raised in Queens, Fekner occupies a unique position in graffiti history: Already immersed in the world of art theory and exhibitions by the mid-'70s, he didn't eye graffiti with the curious, but detached interest of his peers. Affiliated with South Bronx alternative-art outpost Fashion Moda, Fekner stenciled statements like "Decay" and "Broken Promises" onto walls near decrepit Charlotte

Street to draw attention to the area's physical deterioration. "We were trying to correct those conditions," explains Fekner, whose stencil "Wheels over Indian Trails" greeted thousands of commuters every day at the Queens Midtown Tunnel in the 1980s.

"This show is not so much about hip-hop per se, as it is about considering work that embodies and reflects some of the uniqueness and spirit of the culture," Fekner explains, noting pieces like Monika Bravo's "September 10, 2001 Uno Nunca Muere La Vispera," which features video footage of the World Trade Center walls shot a day before 9/11. "The intention was to provide an arena for viewing the work of these artists in a new environment removed from the clutter and chaos of their original settings."

Across the Island at SUNY Stony Brook, curator Keith Miller—an adjunct art history professor at Post—also drew inspiration from the uniqueness and spirit of hip-hop culture for *Say It LOUD! Iona Rozeal Brown & Nikki S. Lee: A Hip-Hop Conversation*, which opens at Stony Brook's Student Activities Center (SAC) Gallery on Feb. 10.

"With things like the cross-pollination of cultures and the globalization of hip-hop, I saw these two women were merging into spaces that were strictly tied-down conventions, and now they are not," Miller explains of the "conversation" between Brown, an African-American artist who employs Ukiyo-E

(traditional Japanese woodblock print) to examine Japanese hip-hop and the historically charged act of blackface, and Lee, a controversial Korean-born conceptual artist whose work entails morphing herself into subcultures like skateboarding, exotic dancing and, in this case, hip-hop.

As with *Tawkin' New Yawk City Walls*, the artwork does not necessarily deal with hip-hop culture, but without it, the "conversation" surely would not be possible.

"This very specific local culture has been internationalized," Miller notes. "Italy and Berlin and Mexico have these big hip-hop scenes, so does Japan—you see that in Iona Brown's work. And hip-hop culture has this long-standing interest in Asian culture, the most obvious example being the Wu Tang Clan.

"Nikki Lee's whole thing is, 'I can be anyone,'" he continues. "Iona Brown is more specific—she sees this clash between people and who they are. 'Is that really what you are? If that is what you are, then what am I?' And it goes back and forth." ●



The Hillwood Art Museum at C.W. Post will present Tawkin' New Yawk City Walls through April 9. For more information, call 516-299-4073. The Student Activities Center Gallery at SUNY Stony Brook will present Say It LOUD! Iona Rozeal Brown & Nikki S. Lee: A Hip-Hop Conversation from Feb. 10 through March 16. For more information, call 631-632-9392.