

TAGGING WESTWARD

Seattle Weekly, Anna Fahey

REVIEW

Stepping From The Shadows Exhibition.

SEATTLE, WA

The Independent Media Center

Review: Anna Fahey
Seattle Weekly

VISUAL ARTS REVIEW

TAGGING WESTWARD

Making graffiti art legit.

BY ANNA FAHEY

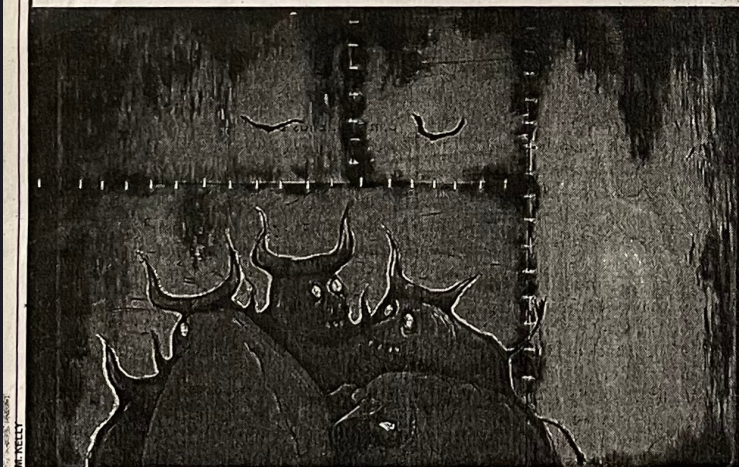
STEPPING FROM THE SHADOWS: URBAN ARTISTS' WORKS
Independent Media Center Gallery
1415 Third, 262-0721
noon-3 p.m. Mon., Wed., Fri.-Sat.;
5-8 p.m. Tues., Thurs.; closed Sun.
Ends Thurs., Jan. 31

SPEWING FROM the wide-open mouths of two red cartoon monsters—one close to the floor on the right and the other high up on the wall to the left—is a wave of words, color, and images. "This is the limbo where I live," artist Amir H. Fallah explained to me when I caught up with him at the Independent Media Center, where he was working on a site-specific mural for the gallery's current exhibition, "Stepping From the Shadows." Fallah, who moved from Iran to Baltimore when he was 7, says, "I make hybrids from the icons of two cultures because I'm not really American and I'm not Iranian; I live between the two worlds." Floating in this matter are Islamic temples and scenes from suburban Baltimore. While the lexicon of American graffiti informs the raucous composition, the entire surface is meticulously embellished with the overall patterning of traditional Iranian folk art. Even the title, with the artist's signature slyly slipped in, *Into*

against "graffiti vandals." Overnight, "Stepping From the Shadows," an exhibition of graffiti writers from Seattle, as well as California, Oregon, Maryland, and New York, is cast in a more defiant role.

While most of the artists in the show are obviously proud of their anti-establishment persona, most are hesitant to go into too much detail about their illicit activities. Some have given up illegal art altogether. Out of a dozen artists, only two or three go by their real names. This is partly for anonymity from the law, partly because it's traditional in graffiti circles, and partly because a goodly portion of graffiti artists are involved in the music industry, MCing and DJing. Indeed, the lineup of pseudonyms and abbreviations—Spaze Crafte, Katsu, Joker, Mune, Nak, Cause-b, Pars, Siloette, J.D. Davis, M. Kelly, Anna Antic—reads like a hip-hop concert bill.

The work is as stylized as the tag names, but surprisingly, most of it makes the transition from the street to the gallery with panache. Pars, whose commissioned work can be seen around town (look in the bathrooms of Café Septième on Broadway, for example), makes delicate, almost monochromatic paintings of eerie, distorted creatures whose soulful glances evoke abandoned children pleading for affection. Pars paints on found objects—the backs of cookie sheets or street signs—consistent with the graffiti artist's propensity to use



Amirica, Out of Iranica, scrolls backward—or rather, from right to left—across the mural, referencing the artist's native Farsi.

On the walls of a gallery, this work is undeniably art. In the street, it's considered vandalism. At the same time that "Stepping From the Shadows" celebrates the emergence of a new generation of urban artists into the brightly lit galleries of the art world, the city of Seattle last week announced a new campaign to combat graffiti on the streets. The new program will offer rewards of up to \$1,000 for tips that lead to the arrest or filing of charges

whatever surface is available and adapt to its texture and shape. Another local, M. Kelly, who moonlights as a painter while working as a graphic designer, makes thick, exaggerated outlines blocking out bold narrative compositions. J.D. Davis, a San Francisco writer, has written captions directly on the wall next to his installation of photographs of various styles and periods of street work, newspaper clippings about vandalism, and other memorabilia.

GALLERY Coordinator Lauren Holloway, guest curator Maria Medina, and local

VISUAL ART



Amir H. Fallah at work.



artist Pars have organized the exhibition with a loose hand, acting more as coordinators than as curators. Medina explains, "I wanted to maintain that sense of utter freedom that graffiti artists have in the street, so I

gave the artists pretty free rein about what to show." Holloway attests that her personal mission at the gallery is "liberating the art from omnipotent capitalism"—by which she means that the gallery asks for no commission if artwork is sold. Omnipotent capitalism is what drives many graffiti artists to paint in the street in the first place, vying for ownership of public spaces where paid advertising is acceptable and unsolicited artwork is not.

But "Stepping From the Shadows" may be a misnomer since—far from being neglected—street art is hot everywhere these days. Cycling back to the graffiti megastars of the '70s and '80s—Jean-Michel Basquiat (a.k.a. Samo) and the ubiquitously commodified Keith Haring—the urban look is infiltrating the art world anew. Yet again, galleries are scouring the streets for the raw authenticity of youth culture. Belltown's new Cut Kulture Gallery proclaims that its mission is to show "street art" exclusively. The Nation nightclub has been mounting monthly art shows of local graffiti writers and graphic designers for some time, as has Capitol Hill's Houston Gallery.

Walking the same fine line that the artists do, galleries bank on the fact that the look of street art stuff has become widely appealing to the mainstream sensibility while attempting to maintain the sense that this form of expression represents a rebellious subculture.

afahey@seattleweekly.com