



PUNK COCK
BY PAUL X. WALSH

Paul Walsh, Punk Cock.
Photograph by Supriya Sehgal.



Art & Travel

Down the Road of Stories

Discovering Auckland's mood in graffiti with a walk down K-Road gives a colourful recap of the city's past few decades

SUPRIYA SEHGAL

As a travel writer, a measured pace of discovery when visiting a new town is hardly a virtue I can tout. Instead, I cannot wait to be let in on the local scene – be it food, music, hippest pubs, most-legged hikes, or places that only discerning travellers frequent without a worry of holidaying hordes. The only way to speed up deciphering the true character of a city is to latch on to a local who calls it his or her home.

Fortunately for me, when I arrived in Auckland, I met Paul Walsh, a graffiti artist who agreed to walk down the oldest thoroughfare in the city – Karangahape, or simply K-Road. The two-hour stroll revealed an unpretentious city, honest to its muddled Polynesian heritage that

has been overtaken by the rapid march of development. But one that hasn't lost its striking character. Our prism was the unsaid graffiti-hood of Auckland – K-Road – a colourful recap of the city's past few decades.

We met at the St. Kevin's Arcade on Karangahape Road, a seemingly innocuous start to the walk. I was expecting a dingy street with a decided ramshackle seediness about it, but the arcade was an insipid building with modest restaurants, pharmacies and tailoring shops. It was only when we walked down to the steps of the basement that the foot-to-ceiling wall of bold colours excited the eyes. Paul explained that the genesis of Auckland's graffiti scene was

never wedged in the dark anguished backdrop that melded with the hip-hop culture of the 1980s. It was simply the voice of a few artists in tight groups who moored their artistic expression on these walls. The relationship between the city, the artists and the breed of taggers that comes in the wake of graffiti has had its ups and downs. 'Taggers', he explained, 'are an incorrigible bunch of youngsters who deface the graffiti by writing or scratching on it'. The relationship of both illegal activities is a tenuous one.

What we were going to stroll through was the work of some of the prevailing artists like Owen Dippie, Askew New (Elliot O'Donnell), Flox (Hayley King),

DEUS (Elliot Francis Stewart) and GASP (Liam Hindlsey) who had started as graffiti bombers but have graduated to become respected and awarded artists, with their own studios and commissioned work. Apart from them, works of world acclaimed graffiti crews, Cut Collective and TND (The Most Dedicated, or back in the day The Most Dangerous), appeared first. Paul initiated me into the artistic nuances, explaining how use of stencils and word-based designs that once held sway on the scene had now transitioned to art and characters – more accepted by the public. It's a handful of artists like Component (Sparrow Philips), once part of the Cut Collective, who still use stencils. It helps in finishing complicated pieces neatly and quickly. Entranced by his bold work in stencil, complemented by freehand designs by Enforce1 (Garry Wong) and Trustme (Ross



Misery (Tanja Jade Thompson) and TomTom done as a part of Al Fresco festival held in the city. Photograph by Supriya Sehgal.



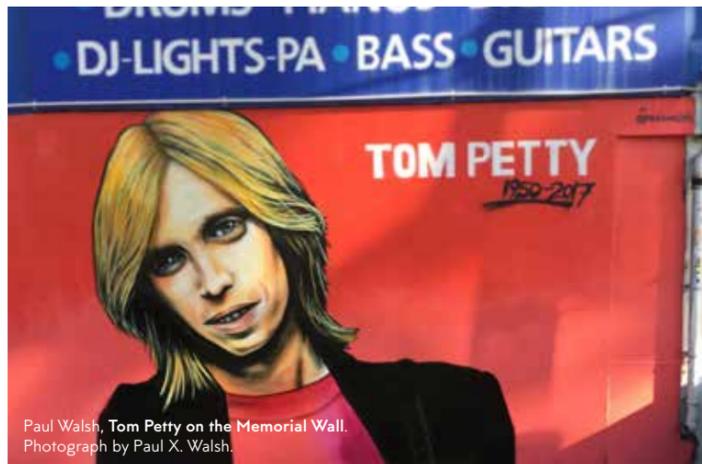
Paul Walsh, Prince on the Memorial Wall. Photograph by Supriya Sehgal.



Paul Walsh's work on the telecomm boxes. Photograph by Supriya Sehgal.

Liew), we spent a couple of minutes absorbing the sprawl of colour, in silence.

As we walked behind the arcade on a narrow strip of tarmac along a park, Paul weighed in on the current 'graff' scene, which peaked in the late 2000s. Political angst and anti-establishment tenor has subsided over the years, making way for a variety of work. He fortified his opinion with a fine example of a depiction of summertime in New Zealand. It is the work of Misery (Tanja Jade Thompson) and TomTom done as a part of the Al Fresco festival held in the city. A triple storey building has become the canvas to showcase babies enjoying the spoils of summer – bikinis, fruits and splashing in water. A stroll away is a wall with the characteristic touch of Charles and Janine Williams – a massive native bird of the islands, wings spread over several feet.



Paul Walsh, Tom Petty on the Memorial Wall. Photograph by Paul X. Walsh.



Paul Walsh's work on the telecomm boxes. Photograph by Supriya Sehgal.



St.Kevins Arcade. Photograph by Supriya Sehgal.

Paul found his own calling in something unique – a mangle of telecomm wires contained in metal boxes in the streets of Auckland and Rotorua. He had started painting them on a whim. When the Telecomm Company, Chorus, identified him, he was commissioned to paint all of them in the city. What would have earlier been a blind spot for me suddenly came into sharp focus. Over the next hour and a half, I spotted several of them,

delighted at my success if I managed to identify his work. Paul's own inspiration lies in daily things, not always veering towards serious undertones. Deep topics and social commentaries are obliquely put. Instead, he chooses light-hearted, goofy ways to stay relevant. One of my favourites was a box with a Dodo sitting on a cassette – both extinct. The other was a 'Dog at Work' – literally a dog wearing an orange reflective jacket and a clipboard, masquerading as a parking attendant. Paul's most favoured is the thought-provoking 'Punk Cock' on a larger street wall, challenging racial inequality, standing for gay rights, rooted in his love for the music genre, Punk Rock. 'Until everyone's free, none of us are free,' he summarised poignantly as we stood in front it.

I noticed that the art was not confined to graffiti alone. There were aberrations that made us stop for a closer look. In the late 19th century, K-Road was one of Auckland's busiest and most eccentric shopping districts with a number of vegetable and fruit markets. It was an important artery of the town that connected the harbours to the main city. Naturally, the essential vegetable market had a firm address here, along with the entertainment pockets of strip clubs and seedy restaurants. The artist, Misery, decided that an ode to the vegetable sellers was long overdue. Bronze sculptures were her choice of expression. A child and a piglet fighting for a carrot held my attention longer than others. They've survived for over five years, scattered on the pavement and bends of K-Road.

Then there was sticker art, with cheeky, anti-capitalist messaging taking up only tiny places on walls, poles and pillars. We squinted to see several along the restaurants on K-Road until we finally came to a large wall overlooking a cemetery, where a massive Tom Petty glanced in the direction of the graves. This was Paul's Memorial Wall, which has featured John Lennon, Prince, Chris Cornell, Chester Bennington and several other artists. His work started as a tribute to Lennon, as the owner of the wall wanted one of his favourite musicians on it. Ever since, Paul is back on work whenever the world loses a music stalwart. The irony of it facing the cemetery is not lost.

As we closed the walk, I asked about the main nemesis of graffiti in Auckland. That morning, I had read there was resistance brewing in some neighbourhoods, which had branded graffiti as an urban menace and bad influence that made people feel unsafe. Brushing away taggers as harmless, Paul emphasised that one had to keep the work protected from them by having a good relationship. As for the people, there were always others who were supportive – like the business that supports his Memorial Wall. There is tremendous and continuous effort needed to challenge preconceptions and have art spaces pop up with regularity. 'The trick is to not get too attached,' he says.

If the walls themselves could talk, they would affirm that the artists' imprints keep the grit and soul of a city intact. How else would it feel like home?