



spraycan SAVANT

WORDS ALANA BROADHEAD / PHOTOS LOGAN DAVEY / SUPPLIED



IF YOU'VE DRIVEN AROUND TAURANGA OR MOUNT MAUNGANUI, THE CHANCES ARE GOOD YOU'VE SEEN AN OWEN DIPPİE ARTWORK. EPIC, LIFE-LIKE PAINTINGS ONE STOREY HIGH OR LARGER, THEY'RE IMPOSSIBLE TO MISS.

Pablo Picasso said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up." It's one of Owen Dippie's favourite quotes, and goes some way to explaining this young man's one-eyed fixation on his career path.

As far back as Owen can remember, his life has been devoted to art. At Kawerau Primary School, every other subject felt like a chore. His maths book became a sketchbook. His science book became a sketchbook. But his conscientious parents valued education too much; he wouldn't be allowed to slack. Rather, his mum recognised his passion and worked to channel it, signing Owen up for painting classes with local artist Edward Hunia. Every week for years, Owen eagerly awaited his lesson, where he would learn the fundamental techniques (mixing colours, crafting light and shadow) that still serve him today.

By fifth form, he was essentially drawing and painting full-time, teachers sending him to the art room rather than deal with a distracted and disinterested pupil in their class. One high school teacher though, Mike Linklater, took an interest in the young artist, introducing him to fine artists and art history. Owen was inspired by '80s prodigy Jean Michel-Basquiat (who originated as a graffiti artist) and Renaissance masters like Michelangelo.

Of course, fine artists were not his only role models. The NZ graffiti scene was very strong, our NZ street artists were internationally recognised, and Owen - like most of his teenage peers - looked up to them. The boy who idolised hip-hop stars and movie characters (and drew astonishing pen portraits of them) soon took his sketches to the street.

A LEGITIMATE ART FORM

In 2000, on a trip to Auckland, Owen saw an Otis Frizzell (pioneer of the NZ graffiti culture and son of noted NZ artist Dick Frizzell) exhibition in Aotea Square. It was a moment of realisation that the street art he loved so much could be a legitimate art form and a career path. With his parent’s adjuration to commit to tertiary education ringing in his ears, he enrolled in Auckland’s Whitecliffe College of Arts & Design.

For the years Owen lived in Auckland, he was immersed in the art worlds of both studio and street. As you might expect, our biggest urban centre is also the heart of our graffiti culture; where NZ’s graffiti heavyweights live and create. Owen was surrounded by the phenomenal creations of artists such as the now world-renowned TMD crew, and at a time when a growing number of graffiti artists were taking it off the street and into their own galleries and business ventures. Street art was becoming more accepted; its best practitioners were commercially in-demand.

Owen was creating outdoor murals with regular paintbrushes at the time. But when a friend encouraged him to try a spray-can, he found that the accomplished techniques he’d learnt with a brush – creating different textures, stroke weights and thicknesses – could all be adapted to work with the can. His first large mural wielding a nozzle like a brush was a one storey tall likeness of hip-hop icon Biggie Smalls. He ended up doing five huge portraits in that one location; one after the other in a state of complete flow, feeling like working with his newfound instrument was “almost a calling”.

AIR TO BREATHE, ART TO MAKE

Owen eventually moved back to the Bay of Plenty and devoted himself fulltime to his art. He barely made ends meet. Not that that troubled him, not in the least. Owen Dippie seems only to need air to breathe and art to make. So for years, that’s what he did - he just lived to create, prolifically, all the while establishing relationships with other street artists from New Zealand and across the world. As he improved and finessed his skills, he began to make a name for himself, locally and internationally.

It was those international contacts, recognising Owen’s talent, who encouraged him to visit New York. He sold his car to make the airfare, setting out with just a few dollars in his pocket and a dream

to paint at the famous 5Pointz, Queens – an outdoor exhibit space, where artists come from around the world to paint the walls of a 200,000 square foot factory complex.

He added a black and white portrait to the living collage of more than 300 other murals. Hosted in the homes of fellow artists, he toured the graffiti mecca that is NYC and soaked up the inspiration. He returned a couple of years later, this time hopping from borough to borough, creating portrait elegies to hip-hop legends in their home neighbourhoods. He painted KRS One in the Bronx, Nas in Queens and Biggie Smalls in Bed Stuy, Brooklyn. As he worked on each piece, he felt the love the community had for that person, and experienced first-hand the impact his lifelike portrayals could have. He signed them OD, his nickname since intermediate.

Back at home, Owen’s parents were pushing for him to open his own studio; a place from which to produce work for sale. Says Owen, “I come from a hard-working family. For them to have a child who’s a ‘starving artist’ hasn’t been easy for them. They’ve always supported and encouraged me, but they’ve said if you’re going to be an artist, you’re to take it seriously and make it a career.” Bouyed by his reception in New York, he leased a space and got to work.

He spent every day and night sketching and painting, making T-shirts and prints of his work to pay the bills. But what he really wanted was big blank canvases. Walls...

With his best shirt ironed and buttoned up, Owen began knocking on building owners’ doors. He’d have a respectful petition well rehearsed, and always promised to paint over the art immediately if the owner didn’t like the end result.

In parts of New York, building owners were practically begging to have an OD original on their wall, and Owen would have to apologetically disappoint most. But back in New Zealand, he says, “It was the opposite. It was very hard. It still is, really. We’re still knocking on doors.”

But sometimes the answer was yes. Like the retailer who agreed to let Owen paint Sir Edmund Hillary’s portrait on his back wall. Owen was inspired to create a memorial to the legend soon after his death, and wanted it in a very public place. “Painting a portrait of someone who’s passed is a special thing. I’d seen the profound effect it could have on people. It’s almost as if they’re alive again.”



Erin and Owen Dippie on their wedding day in New York, 2013

When he couldn't get permission to paint walls, he'd construct wooden billboards on which to paint. Far from being paid for the artwork, the vast majority of Owen's projects have cost him money – many hundreds and sometimes even thousands of dollars in paint. One of his few paid murals is a huge depiction of both Elvis and Michael Jackson, commissioned by the owner of a jukebox rental business who recognised the attention-grabbing force of Owen's work. As you drive along Tauranga's 15th Avenue, it's not just the sheer scale that gives the impact. It's the impeccably smooth gradient rendering that makes each portrait almost three-dimensional; the incredible likeness he captures.

In 2010, Owen was invited back to New York to be part of Artifacts, an exhibition with some of street art's biggest names on the roster. This time, he stayed for a few months, returning to 5Pointz to create a two-storey high artwork. It is a portrait that took two weeks to complete. Visible from the 7-Train, literally thousands of people a day see this piece. The stark contrast of a dramatic black and white portrait against the kaleidoscopic landscape of hyper colour street art is quite breathtaking.

By this time he'd met and fallen in love with his now-wife, Erin. She was helping guide his career, becoming his manager. Owen's first studio was getting too small, so they found a bigger space on Ashworth Lane in Mount Maunganui, a space where - in time - a small gallery could also be created. On his return from New York, he moved into the new studio, and one year later, the OD Gallery opened its doors.

The gallery (open to the public Tuesday to Saturday from 12 to 5pm) sells original paintings, art prints, t-shirts and more. As yet, it brings in only a small amount of money. Erin explains, "This is all one big passion project really. We make just enough money to get by, and no more. He doesn't care if he's paid. He just wants to create."

As luck would have it, the industrial Ashworth Lane has an abundance of blank canvases on which he can create - a row of warehouse walls. Since moving in, Owen has beautified them with epic portraits of Princess Diana, Johnny Cash and Albert Einstein. His vision is to create a mini art district, turning an overlooked

industrial area into an outdoor art gallery. Similar projects are happening all over the world. Once such is taking place in post-GFC Detroit, where a derelict stretch of the city has been transformed into the 'Grand River Creative Corridor', rejuvenated with over 100 huge murals by artists of all kinds.

Owen says, "I love public art because it is free, it's there for everyone's enjoyment, it doesn't matter what you're wearing. Art is a language all people can enjoy. I think the more art in public places, the better."

Owen's vision for public art soon extended beyond Ashworth Lane. In 2011, he approached Creative Tauranga with an idea to replicate a Goldie painting in the CBD. It was the first and only time Owen Dippie has ever requested or been given any kind of arts grant. Creative Tauranga came on board with funding that only just covered his costs. The final artwork is nothing short of awe-inspiring. As a writer from the Bay of Plenty Times said, "On a windy day you almost expect the subject's hair to move."

LARGER THAN LIFE

The positive reaction from the public to the Goldie was overwhelming, and it fertilised the seed of a bigger idea. Councils spend many thousands of dollars painting graffiti out over and over again. What if graffiti was replaced with permanent, beautiful artworks, from a range of genres? Owen discussed his idea with wife and manager Erin, and they pitched their initiative to a few people they knew, people with connections to council and other CBD bodies. Inspired, a few individuals put up their hands to make the vision a reality. The Larger Than Life project was born.

The project team includes Annie Hill (Priority One), Rhys Arrowsmith (Tourism BOP), Anne Pankhurst (Chamber of Commerce), Jane Denton (Tauranga City Council Graffiti Prevention Officer) and Adelle Hadfield (Tauranga City Council Strategic Planner). It's an impressive stable of hands, but the project is entirely independent, reliant on funding and goodwill.



“ I think the more art in public places, the better.”



Opening night of the OD Gallery in Mount Maunganui





“I want to keep creating art that’s available to everyone.”

The Larger Than Life concept is to create 15 grand scale artworks around Tauranga. Two have already been completed, and a third is about to get underway.

The first three locations were scouted, permissions obtained, and paintings planned. The series’ inaugural artwork - a three-storey tall depiction of The Girl with Pearl Earring - can be found on the side of the Kale Print building, at 219 Cameron Road.

Next came a representation of The Creation of Adam – a fresco from Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel ceiling. The painting encompasses one entire exterior wall of the CBD’s Elizabeth Street carpark complex. The third piece in the series - another homage to Michelangelo – will be started in the coming weeks. Owen felt having two Michelangelo’s on the same building would be fitting; complementary to one another. The subject of the painting is to be a surprise.

These three Renaissance masterworks will be joined by up to a dozen more from various art genres. But it all hinges on funds. Yes, dear reader, this project needs donations - of funds and of

walls! The new owendippie.com website has facility to make a donation to Larger Than Life.

Despite growing acclaim for Owen’s work, negative perceptions definitely still exist. “People will come up to me - even while I was painting the Goldie - in the middle of the day, in the centre of town, and say, “Do you have permission to do this?” That’s part of the reason that I attempt to paint Renaissance art. To help people see that spray-paint can create beautiful artwork, not just vandalism.”

“I’m trying to blur those lines. I don’t want to be thought of as a spray-can artist. I’m just an artist.”

An artist for whom painting is a first love. Owen is currently painting artworks for a NZ-iconography themed exhibition to be held at his gallery in January. Owen’s shows turn out people from every walk of life, from five year olds to 85 years olds. Owen recalls, at his last exhibition, a lady in her 60s purchasing a painting of rapper Biggie Smalls. She had no idea who the muse was; she just appreciated the form and the work.



MASSIVE MURALS RESPECTED

Owen has also recently painted murals at two Bay of Plenty primary schools and has just been commissioned by KiwiRail to produce a series of massive murals along the Tauranga-Auckland line, both to keep taggers off the tracks (the respect for Owen’s work means it is rarely graffitied over) and to give Auckland commuters something to look at.

As for the future, he’d love to start travelling, spending a few months of each year painting overseas. “I’d love to paint a Goldie in New York, or to paint a massive portrait of an ordinary New Zealand woman in Rome. I’d love to paint Pavarotti in Italy...” But home will always be where the heart is, and if there’s something Owen Dippie loves more than his art it’s his new wife and their three fur-babies; Dee, LaLa and Major.

“Most of all, I just want to keep creating art that’s available to everyone. I like to imagine someone driving or walking down a random street and encountering something that inspires them, or just better their day. Art that makes people feel good, or feel something. That’s very important to me.” ■