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Bushwick Gets a Fresh Coat

By AMY O'LEARY



Gaia, well-known among street artists, paints — legally — on a building in Bushwick, Brooklyn.

Growing up, Joseph Ficalora would sit on the roof of his family's steel fabrication business. In Bushwick, Brooklyn, in the 1980s, it was one of the few safe places outdoors. The view was grim. The streets were dirty. Graffiti was endless.

After all the factory workers went home for the day, a rotating cast of prostitutes worked the block, withering under their addictions. As a boy, he thought the book "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn" had to be some kind of joke.

When you ask him today if he has any good memories of the neighborhood, where he lived just up the block, Mr. Ficalora comes up empty.

Joseph's father, Ignazio Ficalora, was murdered on these streets in 1991. He was knifed for his wallet and a worthless chain around his neck when his son was only 12.

Most people want to hold onto their past as it was, but Mr. Ficalora has found greater comfort in obliterating it, bathing the neighborhood in paint.

Today the rooftop of that family business, GCM Steel, offers an eye-popping panorama of street art. More than 50 multicolored murals have transformed a swath of nearby buildings into a vast outdoor gallery called [the Bushwick Collective](#), anchored at the intersection of Troutman Street and St. Nicholas Avenue.

Bushwick, where light industry nudges up against row houses and apartment buildings, is at the most visible moment in its long process of gentrification. A variety of new bars and cafes are set to open this month. An organic market and a Russian bistro are on the block where Mr. Ficalora's father was killed. And once rusted, tagged-up buildings are now bright feasts of imagination. A forest of Russian bears lives down the block from a liquid nightmare trapped in a bottle. A broken robot in a bow tie reclines along a wall. Faces of children reach three stories high.

Mr. Ficalora, who is now 34, has become the neighborhood's accidental curator.

"There's nowhere to paint in Manhattan, so the Bushwick Collective gives all those people that come a spot to be up in New York, which is kind of everyone's dream," said an Australian artist who goes by the name [the Yok](#) and has done several pieces in Bushwick, as he was painting a mural last month with his partner, Sheryo.

Just a year old, the collective has grown at a phenomenal pace. And it has emerged at the same time that the city's foremost street art destination, the [5 Pointz building](#) in Queens, is nearing the end of its own run; its owner is planning to replace it with residential towers.

"It's good to have another option," the Yok said.

(Initially the Bushwick project was called Bushwick Five Points for the intersection at its heart, but it has since renamed itself to avoid any confusion with the Queens space.)

Now, the walls of the Putnam Rolling Ladder Company, the Excalibur Bronze Foundry and the buildings where Mr. Ficalora's family makes steel curbs for the city are all canvases. Most passers-by do not know who made the art, or why the murals have clustered there, but the works are signed by well-known street artists like Gaia, Hellbent, Pixel Pancho, Alice Pasquini and Hansky, a group with a range of styles rarely seen in one place.

It would be hard to find a more authentic street artist than the graffiti writer Cost, [who blanketed New York](#) with tags, stickers and enormous roller pieces in the early 1990s. He was one of the original five artists Mr. Ficalora invited to the area, and he covered the wall of an auto repair shop with posters reading, [“Cost Was Here.”](#)

On any given weekend, there are small bands of visitors photographing walls on streets that used to be empty. A French family came looking for the murals a few weeks ago after reading about them in a tourist magazine. A Turkish woman snapped pictures on a Sunday walk with her daughter, and said she planned to return next year. A woman with a face tattoo and two toddlers in tow paused in front of one mural.

“All this fantastic art keeps popping up,” she said, spinning her head to scan the walls. “I love it.”

Mr. Ficalora has no background in art (“marketing is as creative as I get,” he said). But he has worked at the family business since graduating from college, and now runs the company with his cousin Frank Mattarella. This has prepared him, he said, for managing the outdoor gallery, wrangling permits and wall space from other businesses.

Mr. Ficalora couldn’t have imagined any of this when his mother, Lea, was told she had a brain tumor in 2008. After his father’s death she had never remarried. She devoted herself to raising her two children, speaking a Sicilian dialect at home but only a little English.

Mr. Ficalora immediately canceled a business trip overseas to be at his mother’s bedside. But the stress of juggling work and her care wrecked him, he said. He barely slept, surviving on cup after cup of thick Italian espresso, developing an ulcer that he would discover months later, after vomiting blood.

As two years dragged into three, when his mother’s surgeries and the expensive pills stopped working, the doctors told him in 2011 that things were coming to an end. When he talks about that, his face drops into a tough frown; he holds himself together until tears burst. He wipes his cheeks, hard, with two fists.

“When she died, I thought it was going to get better. It got worse,” he said. Returning to normal life in the neighborhood where he had lost both parents felt impossible.

“What was the point of life then? You come down this block, you see graffiti on the walls, you remember all bad memories,” he said. “I turn another corner, I see where my dad was murdered. I turn another corner, I have memories of my mom. There was nothing left for me to want.”

Last year, as Mother’s Day approached, Mr. Ficalora took some paint outside his office to cover the graffiti across the street. By 8 a.m. the wall had been tagged. No amount of white paint would solve the problem. Feeling out of options, Mr. Ficalora started Googling “street art” — and his work as a curator had begun. He found artists he liked and e-mailed them invitations. There were just a few rules: nothing offensive to children, women or the local businesses, and no politics. No one is paid for the work. The artists donate their own supplies and time, and the building owners donate their wall space. The project took off quickly, attracting painters from Argentina, Russia, Singapore and South Africa.

“It seems like every time someone was coming to New York, even internationally, they’d come up and get a wall, and get a substantial wall,” said [Joe Iurato](#), a contributing muralist.

Mr. Ficalora has no plans to slow down. He has, he says, “a lot of walls in my back pocket.”

He no longer looks at the neighborhood the way he used to. Instead of painful memories, he sees a year of new experiences.

On a recent afternoon, he walked the neighborhood, greeting friends in fluent Spanish and checking on a new row of businesses under construction nearby. As he rounded the corner he spotted a newly renovated apartment building glistening under a fresh, even coat of cornflower blue.

“What a mistake,” he said under his breath.

The building, he said, would be tagged with graffiti in no time. Standing next to the plain, pale blue, he just shook his head. “It’s such a waste of paint.”



Joseph Ficalora, the area’s curator, stands before a portrait of his mother, who died in 2011.