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Shepard Fairey and Other Street Artists Say Library Murals Boost Their Credibility

The 'Hope' pioneer, along with artists Retna and David Wiseman, discuss their city-commissioned works for the new West Hollywood Library at an art talk on Tuesday.

By [James F. Mills](#) | [Email the author](#) | October 19, 2011

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Shepard Fairey in front of his mural outside the new city council chamber. Credit [JamesF.Mills](#)

Shepard Fairey, who got national exposure for creating the Barack Obama *Hope* poster in 2008, has never had such a large canvas to display his work. His "Peace Elephant" now graces the west-facing wall of the [new West Hollywood Library parking deck](#).

"Most people don't offer me a permanent wall, so I just have to show up and paste it up and then duck out," explained the Echo Park-based artist to a group of approximately 75 people gathered in the new City Council Chamber.

Fairey was one of three city-commissioned artists to discuss their work on the new library parking deck at an art talk in West Hollywood Tuesday evening. KCRW's Frances Anderton moderated the discussion sponsored by the city's Arts and Cultural Affairs Commission.

LA street artist Marquis Lewis (Retna), who splattered the south-facing wall of the parking structure in obscure blue print, was also on hand to explain his work based on the Salman Rushdie quote: "Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest of place in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart."

Audience members noted that they could not decipher that quote from the symbols on the mural. "It's not a language that I've created," Retna said to the crowd. "If you want to put it in the simplest terms, it would be a font, or it's text based. It's an abstraction. At the end of the day, it's my own stylistic version of the Latin alphabet, the ABCDEFG. Those are pretty much the letters."

Lewis completed his work in just two days, having his crew operate a window-washers lift to move up and down as he held a paint brush over the desired areas, he said.

Ghost of a sycamore tree

Artist David Wiseman also joined the conversation. When the West Hollywood Library commissioned him to do an art piece overlooking the library's grand staircase, he was inspired by the sycamore trees in the area and their white branches, which he said resembled ghosts. He decided he wanted to create the appearance of a ghost-like tree emerging from the wall.

He installed a steel framework to be the branches then added the porcelain ceramic tree bark, flower petals and buds over that framework. Each piece of ceramic was individually glued on the frame.

"This piece really could only exist in this hall. It was designed with the architecture involved and it really could not exist in any other setting," said Wiseman. "Thank you, West Hollywood."

Competing artists

Having commissioned to do art for homes and businesses, including porcelain ceramic lilies on the ceiling of the Christian Dior store in Shanghai, Wiseman admitted he doesn't share the graffiti background of his cohort, Fairey.

The two attended the demanding Rhode Island School of Design, although not at the same time. They knew each other's work, but had never met until both were being interviewed for the library commission.

Ironically, Fairey said when he saw Wiseman there, he didn't think he had a chance of getting the commission. And Wiseman had the same reaction to seeing Fairey there. Both were delighted to receive the commission.

Not only does Fairey's work grace the west wall of the parking deck, he also was commissioned to do the mural outside the entrance to the new City Council Chamber. He said he struggled to incorporate themes and locations from West Hollywood's history into that mural, while also putting some of his own ideas into it.

"The challenge was figuring out how as an artist you're going to retain some of the potency of what you believe in," said Fairey, explaining that often public art ends up being watered down so as not to offend anyone. "You know how politicians are. When something is great, everyone wants to take credit. When something is controversial, everyone runs away. Not West Hollywood politicians."

Fairey said that peace has been a recurring theme in his art since the Iraq War began, adding that he is now finding inspiration from the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Graffiti over their works?

This was the second time in a week that Retna has spoken at a West Hollywood art lecture. He was also on hand Friday night to talk about his work as part of the [lecture series the city is co-sponsoring with Cal Arts](#).

Even though he is now getting commissioned work, Retna told the Friday night audience that he still does street art (graffiti) from time to time. When asked what would happen if someone were to tag or graffiti his work, he said that is unlikely to happen.

"I'm still part of a street club, so it's usually not in someone's best interest to go over my work," he said.

Tagging isn't a worry for the three library murals. Andrew Campbell, the city's cultural affairs administrator, said that those murals were treated with a UV and anti-graffiti coating.

"There's a solvent we can use, so it's easy to wash it off," Campbell told Weho Patch after the lecture.

The three library murals were paid for by a grant from the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Cadillac and Vanity Fair. Those murals will remain up for a year, at which time the City Council will decide whether to keep the murals up longer or commission new murals.

Wiseman's sycamore tree and Fairey's council chamber mural are both permanent, paid for out of funds for the library construction.

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