

New York's People

# Crossing the Graffiti Bridge

*Wild figures of an almost comic book stature, constructed with acrylic and spray paints dominate the canvasses and sculptures of the one-time subway graffiti artist known as Daze.*

by Sharmila Voorakara

One of the several graffiti artists discovered by the New York media in the late '70s, his initial canvasses were the sides of New York City subway trains. Describing the early days as a subway graffiti artist, Daze says, "I kind of got into subways as a way of getting it out there. I saw a lot of kids trading sketches — it was a whole secret society. I did it as a way of getting away from the traditional techniques I was being taught in school."

Spray paints were once his mainstay. Although the lush color and surreal figures strike back to those early days, he's been able to expand to oils and acrylics, while keeping the raw undertone of spray, which he says is much more adaptable and spontaneous. The paintings are done free hand.

Despite the elements of graffiti that he maintains in his present art, he is seeking to draw the line between present and past. "People seem to focus solely on that period of my life, they have a romantic vision of what it's like to be a graffiti artist — but now, I feel that I'm doing what's much closer to what I want to express."

Now 28, Daze today works out of a studio in the Bronx covering canvas with a mixture of spray paints, acrylic, and oils. He says that the friendships he formed when painting the trains have been dissolved, partly because of his "making it" in the art world. "One thing that's a little sad about what I'm doing — whenever money enters into what you do — your relations with people and things change. In a way, I miss that



Daze with "Third World"

circle of competition, but I think it's destined to happen."

Daze says his art consists of two categories: the urban environment — things he sees — and fantasy — dream-like surreal landscapes and shapes. They're the kinds of figures found in "Third World," "I.O.U.," and "Live Video."

He says he tries not to paint with one interpretation. "In the more fantastic ones, the interpretation is pretty open. I'd rather have viewers free to come to their own interpretation, rather than set one out for them."

For the past eight years, he has supported himself through sales of his work, and he shies clear of government

funding. "The government has a strange system for funding," he says. "Young artists never get funded while established artists get grants. People like Lichtenstein get grants, and at this point in his career, he doesn't need them. I also don't like to have the criteria for my work dictated to me."

There are not many avenues available for young artists with different ways of expressing themselves, he says. His interest in the comic form began at a very early age and remains because of its "immediate impact." But it hasn't been easy to get people to accept his work as art. The bright colors, and the fantastic faces are not what the American mainstream of art buyers and admirers considers art.

As a consequence, he exhibits frequently in European galleries. In November, the Brooklyn-born artist will open a show in France. A second show will follow in June. "People in America don't accept my art as 'legitimate.' Europeans look at it in a different way. Art is more a part of their culture. Here, people don't grow up with art. In Europe, a different voice is surrounded with less controversy — and people seem more open-minded. I align myself with what jazz and blues musicians went through — what they were doing wasn't accepted here until it was accepted in Europe."

While booming rents and lack of venues make it increasingly difficult for young artists to survive, Daze says, "I never relied on a studio situation. I painted on the roof, it didn't stop me from doing what I wanted to do."