

DAZE delivers 'Urban Message'

BY KRISTOPHER SPENCER
For The Mirror

Birmingham's Masterpiece Gallery welcomed New York graffiti artist Chris "DAZE" Ellis for the opening of his first metro Detroit exhibit on July 16.

The "Urban Message" exhibit, which runs through Aug. 22, presents DAZE's recent oil and mixed-media work, which is clearly an extension of the artist's earlier spray-painted graffiti and gallery work.

"When I switched to oils I carried over the sense of the color I used with spray paint," said DAZE. "The graffiti element is still there."

Closely associated with artists such as Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf and Ronnie Cutrone, DAZE has been collected by many prestigious public organizations, including The Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Groninger Museum in The Netherlands, and commissioned for murals by the Bronx Zoo and York College. In fact, his last three exhibits — in Florence, Milan and Basel — have sold out.

Much of DAZE's recent work deals with life on Coney Island, the renowned amusement park near the 36-year-old artist's childhood home in Brooklyn. The work captures the diversity of the local culture, along with the garish color of the



KRISTOPHER SPENCER/The Mirror
"Coney Island Pier" by Chris "DAZE" Ellis, currently on exhibit at Masterpiece Gallery.

neighborhood's past and present. Paintings like "Kiddyland Spirits" and "Coney Island Pier" even feature ghost-like images beside "living" figures.

"Coney Island is changing," DAZE explained. "It's valuable real estate and the landscape is in transition. I wanted to capture the sense of change."

"I don't want to be nostalgic," he added. "I simply want to capture a mood and create timeless work."

Much of the work features jarring juxtapositions of imagery. One of the most successful examples may be "Morning Noon Night," which employs a triptych effect across one 48 by 78 canvas.

Flanked by abstract depictions of the rising sun and the night sky is an up-

close-and-personal look at rush hour; bodies jammed together in subway space, the faces painted with the anxiety of the urban crush.

The juxtaposition is particularly poignant in that the sunrise is something short of a nuclear blast and the night sky is split into several screens inspired by CNN's broadcast of SCUD explosions over Iraq during the Gulf War.

Although DAZE's compositional sense is strong, his compassionate, albeit cartoonish, depiction of humanity is his long suit. In his best work, the characters are as distinctively drawn as those in the work of Robert Crumb.

"I was always drawing," DAZE said of his youth, which included taking the subway to the Manhattan High School of Art & Design. From 1977 to 1983, his work was almost exclusively displayed on the shells of subway trains. In 1981, he started showing art in venues catering to the New York punk scene like the Mud Club. Gradually, more prestigious galleries and museums took notice.

As the oldest of five children, DAZE is well-adjusted to his international success.

"My parents always knew I was artistic, but they didn't push me in this direction," he said. "To make a living at art isn't something easily explained to one's parents."