



Graffiti Retrospective from Bronx Bombers VIC 161 and TAG at White Room

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by Dakota Arkin Cafourek

Bursting color and energy fill The White Room Gallery in Bridgehampton. In “Up From the Underground,” for the second year in a row the gallery is hosting an exhibition of graffiti artists, this year featuring [V.P. Dedaj aka VIC 161](#) and [Domenick S. Vetro aka TAG](#), Da’ Bronx Bomber.

With roots in the Bronx at the dawn of graffiti, both artists’ shared youth was dedicated to their high-risk, high-passion pursuit of filling the city with color and making their marks. The White Room exhibition is a retrospective of their paintings and mixed media work from the 1980s up to the present day, including a large scale collaboration created specially for the show.

The one-of-a-kind piece, [Wild Style Nights](#), is being sold by the gallery in four separate panels through a bidding process, with a portion of the proceeds going to help hurricane victims. Each of the separate 8-foot by 4-foot panels is cut in half and framed in the back with hinges so it can stand as a screen or be mounted on a wall. Prospective buyers can place bids and get for more information by visiting the gallery, where the overall piece is out front, or go to The White Room Contemporary Gallery Facebook page. Bidding will continue until the “Up from the Underground” show closes on October 22, 2017.



“Wild Style Nites” by Domenick S. aka TAG Vetro and V.P. aka VIC 161 DEDAJ, 2017. 18 x 16 feet. Photo by Kat O’Neill, Courtesy of White Room Gallery.

Dedaj was responsible for the “Up From the Underground” exhibition title, which references graffiti’s roots in the underground and is also a play on words, as riding the trains was called “up.”

Among other occupations, graffiti artists considered themselves “writers,” and Vetro and Dedaj have long been masters of “writing” graffiti letters in different styles. In addition to tagging—applying their chosen name on any available surfaces—writers challenged themselves with different letters and numbers. “The more letters, the more challenge, the more you shine,” explained Dedaj.

“Painting the trains, while in the public space, was something we did for each other and ourselves,” Dedaj said. “Even if the creation wasn’t going to last, the enjoyment in making it and the feeling of

expressing yourself as you're doing it made it all worth the effort."

Vetro added, "I do miss the thrill of doing spontaneous graffiti, illegally. But now, I'm too old for that. Instead, I take that energy and it's always with me and in my work." The architects of New York graffiti were mere teenagers, driven and inspired by the spirited sounds of rock and roll. "We had to get it out of our system and onto the MTA system," Dedaj said. "In the Bronx from 1973-76 the standards for graffiti were set and are still followed today."

Speaking of her interest in mounting exhibitions by graffiti artists, Kat O'Neil, Co-Director/Partner of The White Room Gallery recalled that "living in New York City, I'd always loved graffiti; it was like this ephemeral art, there and gone."

An ode to New York graffiti, the two artists' collaborative painting, *Wild Style Nites*, created in real time on Saturday, October 7, attracts viewers from Bridgehampton's Main Street into the exhibit. "The essence of graffiti is Wild Style," Dedaj said, referring to the original formula for intricately interwoven and curved overlapping letters and shapes favored by the Wild Style crew that he joined in 1974. "The piece is intended to show how important it is to respect where you came from," said Vetro. "We create well together because we understand each other's style and we trust each other as artists to work together on the same canvas."

Born in Brussels, Dedaj brought his interest in art and his natural abilities and curiosity with him when he moved with his family to the Fordham section of the Bronx as a child. "The Bronx was a tough place; it was like the Wild West back then," Dedaj recalled. "But it was also a vibrant time," he said, citing the rising counterculture in music and art, the antiwar movement, and the black light posters and Peter Max billboards that commanded attention around the city. Recalling the first time he caught sight of a graffitied train car, "I felt connected," he said. "I thought, I want to do to that."

Today, Dedaj's work continues to be influenced by graffiti. In the White Room's front gallery, his series of aluminum panels reflects the three eras of MTA subway car color schemes. Each 47 by 36 inch panel is welded in aluminum fabricated in California, even depicting the car's nails and base beam. "When you tap it, it should have the echo and feel of tapping the train." *Tequila Sunrise "N"* is depicted on a Blue Ribbon train, gray with a blue stripe, dating from graffiti's golden era in the 1970s. The "N" of the title is in a classic graffiti simplified bubble style.



"Tequila Sunrise "N"" by V.P. aka VIC 161 DEDAJ, 2015/2016. Spray enamels, oils and acrylics on hand fabricated aluminum "Blue Ribbon" IRT subway panel, 47 x 48 inches. Courtesy of White Room Gallery.

"'White Elephant' cars were put in place by Mayor Ed Koch in the 1980s to deter graffiti. Instead, they made for a nice canvas," said Dedaj. *Moody Blue Arrow*, painted on white aluminum, shows

two cartoonish light blue arrows bolded with a black border reach up and then point down like waves across a large rippling green heart. Inspired by Vincent Van Gogh's sunflowers, orange and yellow bubbles applied with spray paint rain from the top edge of the painting; Dedaj used his fingers to blend the colors for the bubbles' translucent descent to the base of the canvas.

Atop a maroon aluminum canvas evoking the 1990s red bird train, *One Love* is a rendering of a bright pink heart. The heart symbolizes a staple of the Bronx burrough's San Gennaro Festival—a satin heart bearing "I Love You" that young men would try to win in a game of chance for their girlfriends. The repeatedly doodled "one love" is a reference to the artist's own love for the words and music of Bob Marley.

Dedaj learned how to work with different materials from experimentation, his university professors, and his friends and crew. "I use what I need to convey a message and bring it to life; it's intuitive," he said. A classic example in "Up from the Underground" is *Mystery Train*, a mixed-media piece that employs mounted subway tiles, a poster for Alfred Hitchcock's "Strangers on a Train," enamels, oils, and acrylics on wood. "123" in Broadway style font is written across the tiles.



"Mystery Train" by V.P. aka VIC 161 DEDAJ, 2017. Enamels, oils, acrylics, mounted subway tiles, adhered poster on wood with wood frame created by artist, 82 x 42 x 1 inches. Photo by Dakota Arkin Cafourek.

The piece has the essence of the subway platform: a wall of text and pop culture references, combined with movement. Blue and black lines swipe left and right. A diagram of a train car is drawn neatly in the backdrop of the energetic canvas. "I don't like when graffiti is too perfect," said Dedaj, "instead it should indicate the decay and rebuilding of the city."

"Everyone and their mother tagged, even my sister wrote graffiti," Vetro said of the graffiti culture that so many in the Bronx wanted to be a part of. "You write? What do you write?" was a frequent question in the streets, Vetro said, and once moving on the subway kids whipped out their markers to write their tag. Vetro took on the name "TAG" because no one was writing it. "When someone would ask me, 'What do you tag?' my response would be, 'You just said it.'"

Vetro was an affiliate of the United Artist crew in the Bronx in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Dedicated to graffiti and its history, and an admirer of his mentors in the streets, he's fully self-taught and took whatever risks he had to just for the opportunity to create art. At age 13, he started making his own markers.

"Money to buy calligraphy markers was hard to come by," he said, "we'd steal Ban roll-on antiperspirant, empty the containers, then, sneak into our middle school to snag erasers. We'd bend the erasers into the containers and use Flo-Master inks to dye them. The substitute markers

were small enough to stick inside a pocket if authorities came, and each antiperspirant container could be an additional color.” For Vetro, graffiti has always been about the artistic challenge of outdoing each other in skill and style, and pushing each other forward.

In *Dead Man’s Hand*, Vetro pays tribute to two of his mentors and friends, SEEN and the late BILLY 167. Working with oil paint for the first time, Vetro’s painting depicts the Batman villain known as the Joker with a two-pair poker hand on a canvas with the two taggers’ names. Knowing it would be exhibited in Amsterdam, Vetro wanted to introduce Europeans new to graffiti to the greats through this dedication piece. “It’s important to remember the true pioneers that started graffiti,” Vetro said.



“Dead Man’s Hand” by Domenick S. aka TAG Vetro, 1988.
Oil on canvas, 34 x 32 x 1 inches. Courtesy of White Room
Gallery.

In *Birthday Suit*, three skeletons rise from a jack-in-the-box of flames and skulls. Vetro is drawn to the idea of “here today, gone tomorrow,” he said, referencing the difference between graffiti and creating paintings. “It’s why I paint a lot of my work, the image is deeper and an expression to be left behind,” he said. “The advantage of working on the canvas is that it’s lasting.” The skeleton is his revealed, naked self, Vetro said, noting that he finished this acrylic painting on his own birthday.

On the canvas and in mixed media sculptures, Vetro’s bold animation style invites audiences into his wild imagination. White gallery walls disappear behind freestyle scenes of bright pink, furry monsters floating in pods through outer space in *Space Travel*. Clowns recur in his paintings and sculpture. In *Klown Train*, a three-dimensional mixed media piece, a blue ribbon subway car against a brick backdrop morphs into a speeding clown with eyes bulging forward and a sinister, crooked-tooth smile. T-A-G is affixed to the side of the car in hot pink bubble letters. Vetro said he finds clowns “amusing to create and paint and express. I find them fun. All my work has a lot of humor.”



“Klown Train” by Domenick S. aka TAG Vetro, 2004. Mixed media, 12 x 24 x 2
inches. Photo by Dakota Arkin Cafourek.

As Dedaj has turned from moving surfaces to the motionless canvas, he has explored entirely different styles, turning his focus toward pop culture. As part of a series on musicians and tragedy, the piercing green eyes, red lips, and beehived raven hair of Amy Winehouse hold court on a

canvas in a red frame.

A longtime admirer of her vocals, moved by her suffering and saddened by her loss, the artist handpainted Winehouse in the form of a deity. In *The Ecstasy and Agony of Amy the Divine*, a halo of light is created by bouncing colors, which signify jazz notes for Dedaj. A large horseshoe over her left shoulder, spray painted over in a sickly blue-green, is a reference to her tattoo that didn't bring her any luck. 3:45 p.m. is printed on the frame: the time she was pronounced dead. Dedaj's attention to details yields a creative flow of double entendres and a spiderweb of meanings for viewers to take with them.



"The Ecstasy and Agony of Amy the Divine" by V.P. aka VIC
161 DEDAJ, 2017. Spray enamels, enamels, oils, acrylics on
wood with wood frame created by artist, 47 x 30 x 1 inches.
Photo by Dakota Arkin Cafourek.

When Vetro isn't working in the many mediums he has taken up—from acrylics and airbrushing to tattoo art and sculpture—he's sketching concepts for his next idea. "A part of me was pushing my own self," he said. "It's a big job to educate yourself when you're self taught. I've gotten into different mediums because that is what I wanted to understand and do. Everything in me is inspired by the people I'm with."

BASIC FACTS: "Up from the Underground" is on view from October 4 to October 22, 2017 at The White Room Gallery, 2415 Main Street, Bridgehampton, NY 11932. www.thewhiteroom.gallery

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