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Mural majority

The Bloomingdale Trail gets its artistic due, thanks to a group effort



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Pass a long, empty cement wall:
What's the first thing that comes to
mind?

If your answer is something like "blank slate" or "raw potential," you're thinking like some West Town artists who happened to have the same idea at the same moment. The fruits of their inspiration can be seen along Bloomingdale Avenue between Western and California, where several colorful and varied new murals have been taking shape over the past year or so.

The seemingly endless wall in question is the north face of the Bloomingdale Line—the abandoned elevated train tracks that run west from Ashland Avenue along Bloomingdale, which is two blocks north of North Avenue. West of Western Avenue, this former Canadian Pacific Railway freight line acts as a sort of unofficial boundary between the longstanding, predominantly Puerto Rican Humboldt Park neighborhood to the south, and the newly sprung, condo-riddled West Bucktown to the north. To some residents, the crumbling, thickly overgrown viaduct represents an eyesore and traffic obstacle. To some homeless folks, it's a perfect place to set up camp. To some renegade urban explorers, it's a fascinating if less than legal playground. And to some local artists and community groups, it's a blank canvas.

As Laura Putre reported in this paper on October 12, a protracted campaign is afoot to convert the Bloomingdale Line into an elevated bike trail and multi-use



Photos by Kathryn Rosenfeld



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and West Loop

Bucktown.
Wicker Park.
Ukrainian Village
and West Town

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Near West
and West Loop

Bucktown.
Wicker Park.
Ukrainian Village
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"linear park." According to park advocates as quoted in that article, the city would need to purchase the tracks from Canadian Pacific in order to begin the conversion process. But in practice, no one seems entirely clear on who holds jurisdiction over the structure. I'd always been told they were old CTA tracks, but CTA referred me to Metra (which, for the record, has nothing to do with the Bloomingdale Line other than using its western end to store unused cars). The city maintains that the rail company still officially holds the tracks. Yet the muralists had only to go through First Ward Alderman Manny Flores's office to obtain the necessary permits. (For his part, Flores seems to support the murals wholeheartedly; he was even seen painting a bird on one mural during a recent weekend workday.)

This functional vacuum of authority leaves room for individuals to step up and, consistent with the grassroots nature of the mural as an artform, assume control over the beautification of their own streets. Enter Stephanie Garland and Maria Vargas, members of the Acme artists' community at Western and Bloomingdale, and Reza Khazeni, an artist and officer of the West Bucktown Neighborhood Association.

Garland and Vargas are the lead artists on a mural project that has been taking shape since spring, covering the entire side of the viaduct between Western and Artesian with brilliant color and intricate imagery. The mural—due partly to its sheer length, and partly to the number and variety of artists and community members recruited to work on it—is a changing flow of environments, figures, and artistic styles. The concept, according to Garland, is a "drive-by gallery" of the various art practices that people the neighborhood; the artists envision a perpetual work in progress that artists can change and add to over time.

In an unusual creative twist, the mural incorporates several "four dimensional" art forms we wouldn't ordinarily expect to find in an outdoor painting. The artists wanted to incorporate not only visual art, but all the forms of creativity represented in the Acme community and the larger neighborhood. In one spot, a man sits at a typewriter composing poetry, some of which appears above his head. And in the center of the mural, a huge white moon hovers above a neighborhood skyline, its form morphing into the figure of a pregnant woman. The empty moon is meant to serve as a film projection screen during openings and special events.

If murals ideally represent the communities from which they spring and in which they reside, the Acme piece embodies the collision of tradition and change, domesticity and street culture that is West Town. In radically fluctuating scale, a sandal-clad mother—we see only her feet—pushes a stroller along an undulating sidewalk that sports painted "chalk" drawings, the contributions of neighborhood kids who have helped with the mural. Further east along the wall, spray-painted, stylized figures—one has a boom box for a head—break dance on a huge checkerboard. The tapestry concludes at the corner with a purple-robed psychedelic woman walking a duck on a leash and a surrealistic ocean scene featuring sea turtles and a flying galleon.

A couple of blocks west, under the overpasses at Maplewood and Rockwell, several more murals have sprung into being recently. These are the work of Khazeni and several artists he's recruited through the Bloomingdale Mural Committee—a group he formed under the auspices of the West Bucktown Neighborhood Association. The four murals borrow liberally and playfully from the history of modern art. The western wall at Rockwell sports an interpretive reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica*, which Khazeni says embodies "all the elements of our neighborhood—harshness, fights, corruption, crime, and people being involved."

I remember seeing this mural go up last summer; how inspired, I thought, to put the Guernica in our divided neighborhood—a timeless image for a world and a community at war, and, as Khazeni puts it, "a piece of art history in our neighborhood." A recent graffiti tag on one of the figures shows the mural already becoming woven into the larger visual fabric of its environment.

Khazeni's other work, which covers both the walls and pillars of the Maplewood underpass, is a humorous riot of color and imagery that borrows stylistically from sources as diverse as classic Hollywood film, comic strips, Op Art, classical Greek architecture, and the collages of Henri Matisse. Stand in the middle of the street and face east to see a geometric design guarded by four different-colored caryatids adorning the graceful pillars and arches of the old viaduct. Face west to find a random-seeming collage fronted by a hilarious if inexplicable series of headless, hairless dead chickens. These perform various activities, including parachuting, tap-dancing, cooking, or crossing the street while thinking an empty thought balloon.

Here's where it gets complicated: Both the Acme artists and Khazeni separately say each of their projects will eventually cover the entire expanse of viaduct between Western and California (Garland and Vargas say their mural will extend eastward too—clearly, all of these artists are thinking in terms of possibility rather than limitation.) Indeed, this whole stretch has already been primed with white paint in preparation for murals to come. For the artists, only time, the approach of winter, and the availability of materials stand in the way of their vision of a fully mural-bedecked viaduct. Vargas cites the enthusiasm of neighbors, community groups, and artists from around the city who are waiting in line to contribute their skills and ideas to future murals. Khazeni, meanwhile, has been busy hoarding paint factory seconds, and soliciting donations of and for supplies from residents, businesses, and government agencies.

But far from the competition their designs on the same empty space might be expected to generate, the artists all exude the spirit of collaboration and cooperation innate to mural-making. The two groups have talked about a possible joint project, and each seems to view the other's work as complementary to its own. It probably also helps that, thus far, Khazeni has focused on the viaduct's underpasses, while Garland and Vargas are working on the side wall. Still, the artists' almost utopian vision of an ever-evolving, ever-growing series of pieces expanding and morphing to become one big, harmonious, track-engulfing mural is hard to resist.

"I am very excited to work with them," says Khazeni of the Acme artists, "and think these two projects will merge without us even having to work on merging them."

Reflecting the international history and radical political roots of contemporary muralism, Humboldt Park's murals have long been bound up with community identity and the effort to preserve it in the face of gentrification. Many murals throughout the neighborhood prominently feature the Puerto Rican flag, and/or anti-drug, anti-gang, pro-education political messages. A couple of years ago, one of the neighborhood's oldest murals became a flashpoint of the fight against gentrification when a developer began to build over it. Titled *La Crucifixion de Don Pedro*, the 1971 mural at North and Artesian depicts key figures in the history of the Puerto Rican independence struggle. When it became threatened, residents came out in protest to place their bodies between the construction crew and the mural that, through its longevity as much as its content, had become a symbol of the community.

Another 1971 mural, *Together We Overcome* located at Division and Hoyne,

was recently restored through the efforts of its principal creator, artist John Weber. Weber is a co-founder of the 35-year-old Chicago Public Art Group (CPAG) and its Public Murals Project, which is dedicated to preserving and restoring historic murals as well as helping create new ones.

A similar if younger piece of mural history already lives on the Bloomingdale tracks. Across Western from the Acme space, the viaduct sports a mural that lead artist Dzine describes as "for and dedicated to Puerto Rican political prisoners." In front of a waving Puerto Rican flag, three clenched fists bearing the message "Knowledge is Power" rise from a band of Wild Style graffiti (vibrant 1980s-style graffiti) that morphs into human figures. Today an internationally exhibited painter, Dzine started out as a graffiti artist and muralist on the streets of Chicago. He created this mural in 1992 with a group of other artists and students (all of whose names are listed), overseen by a neighborhood committee formed by the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (CPAG also played a part in producing the work). Gardner says the new murals will work around existing ones, citing in particular the historical importance of the Dzine piece. Vargas similarly stresses the need to preserve the neighborhood's "melting pot" character and "preserve what was already there" as the new murals take shape.

"There is something incredible about work that has no owner and is subservient to its environment," local muralist Jeff Zimmermann has said. Murals are by their very nature of their places—they are community art forms chiefly in that they affect and are affected by the communities in which they exist, and only secondarily because they are usually created in and by community. Evidence of mural history is all over the Bloomingdale viaduct, from the Around the Coyote-sponsored, student-created murals in Churchill Park, to Year of the Child, a remarkable multimedia piece dating from 1979 and covering both sides of the underpass at California. Several other murals created by students and community members dot the tracks as they stretch westward.

The works in progress and promised murals to come by Gardner, Vargas, Khazeni, and their many collaborators won't really transform the Bloomingdale Line. Rather, they join an existing stream of imagery that flows through both geographic space and time, connecting the community to its multifaceted heritage, and today's muralists with their predecessors.

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