

# Avenue Concept Expands Into Public Art

“Sometimes it’s easier to roll a wall grey than paint a mural,” says founder of Avenue Concept, Yarrow Thorne.

Keeping a wall unpainted or painting it grey is the choice that local businesses and the city of Providence often make. Especially when it comes to graffiti art, there are more shaking heads and wagging fingers than nuanced understandings of what graffiti is, or more importantly, what it could be.

Avenue Concept, which started as Yarrow’s Cans (selling spray paint cans and enacting the first legal wall for artists to paint on) wanted to change this. “I think people who don’t understand graffiti are quick to say ‘graffiti,’ but they don’t really know what it means,” says Thorne.

Typically defined by letter styles, even the graffiti artists cannot agree on what ‘good’ graffiti should look like.

“What’s legitimate to one person is completely ridiculous to someone else,” said artist Greg Pennisten. “The misconception is that it’s all vandalism ... You can say [the artists] want to destroy, but it’s a desire to create something, to be a part of their environment, and they bring some very valuable skills to it.”

Pennisten suggests that America’s emphasis on private property and ownership plays an important role in graffiti facing more resistance here than it does abroad. In thinking about someone painting on a bridge, he says, “The paint doesn’t cause the bridge to function differently. You’re not damaging the bridge. You’re changing the color of a space that nobody cared about to begin with. But you’re going to be demonized for it.”

He also suggests that despite Providence’s graffiti scene comprising a range of people of different backgrounds, the misconception that it comes out of poor neighborhoods means that classism and racism likely also play a role in resistance to graffiti art.

Three years after Yarrow’s Cans was founded, it is difficult to see whether public perception of graffiti has changed. The businesses, communities and artists were not always seeing eye to eye with Thorne’s vision, and now, Thorne is moving on.

Avenue Concept is taking rapid steps away from graffiti and toward the broader realm of public art, including murals, sculptures and larger scale art projects, says Thorne. September saw the launch of “Influx,” a citywide series of public art projects including “Cultural Corridor” murals and interactive exhibits at Central and Classical High School, and The Dean Avenue Activisual Experiment, a full-day event that combined the launch of new art installations with live entertainment and a temporary skate park. Alongside the new projects, they’ve maintained a blog that highlights the new art and the artists behind it.

Thorne says his job is to create works the community will respond to. And apparently, they’re not asking for graffiti.

On the other hand, it may not have been what the artists were asking for, either. Artists who were originally on board with Thorne’s vision for commissioned graffiti work around the city are now not so

interested.

Two local graffiti artists, JusOne and Etips, who previously worked with Avenue Concept, say they felt taken advantage of with Thorne as the middleman. They say that Thorne thought that giving them space to work was good enough for them, and did not pass on a fair share of the pay or accreditation for projects they worked on.

Thorne says the organization will continue supporting “legal and positive street art and graffiti,” but that he is very excited for the new direction. “You can’t disregard [graffiti]. You have to keep that door open and have that conversation. But if people don’t want to have the conversation then you can’t stay on it. You have to move on and work with people who want to work with you.”