

## AT SYRIAN BORDER, INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS PAINT FOR HOPE

Continue mission of Artistic Humanitarian Aid in Poorest Israeli Communities

A daring group of international graffiti artists headed to the Golan Heights up into the dangerous demilitarized zone between Syria and Israel to help paint messages of hope and add color to an area made desolate by proximity to war.

Along the dangerous demilitarized zone on the border of Syria, a team of famous international street artists are in the midst of an artistic humanitarian mission. A witness called it "Banksy without Borders." The artists participating, famous and distinctive in their own right, are now continuing on to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to teach graffiti in some of the most poverty stricken communities within Israel.

Near the abandoned town of Quneitra, groups of families live against an almost constant backdrop of explosions that can be heard coming across the narrow border with Syria.

A psychological toll weighs on the civilians constantly hearing stray gunfire and living under the threat that the next rocket might land in their fields, groves, or even on their home. Many moved to the Golan Heights because they felt that the remote area would be idyllic and peaceful.

The team of international artists from the US, Britain, Czech Republic, Israel, and Gaza painted messages of hope and did their best to add color to an area that looks has a stark emptiness — once comforting now forbidding. Among them were graffiti and urban arts superstars including CES, NORM, AROE, CHEMIS, COL WallNuts, and the tattoo and graffiti centerfold queen, GYPSY ONE.

"Graffiti has always been the art of the people," says Craig Dershowitz, founder of Artists 4 Israel (A4I), which has assembled this artistic task force to bear witness to the destruction along the Syrian border and do what they can to add color and vibrancy to combat bleakness.

A4I originally became internationally known for transforming the bomb shelters of Sderot, near the Israeli border with Gaza into works of art. "We couldn't end the fighting," says Dershowitz, "but art brings its own measure of peace. Our mission is humanitarian, not political."

Seeing the suffering along the Syrian border, the artists came to help. Call it color therapy versus PTSD.

In the end, the artists themselves expressed a feeling of being a bit shell shocked. Says graffiti legend CES from the famous TUFF CITY crew in New York, "I had my share of hard times growing up, but what people take as normal here is unbelievable. I was teaching kindergarten



On the tank: Craig Dershowitz, Artists 4 Israel Executive Director "Art Over War"

kids to paint and all of a sudden we could hear machine gun fire. I fought the urge to hit the deck, the kids seemed to not even notice."

Inspired by what they have come to regard as heroism on the part of ordinary people, the urban artists are now heading into the interior of Israel to do painting projects with poverty stricken children from Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. It is the kind of work that helped the artists themselves, as they grew up in inner cities. "They'll be teaching Israeli kids how to make sense of the world and cope with adversity through graffiti," explains Dershowitz.

As soon as they return from Israel, the artists will be doing rounds of interviews in the United States and a gallery exhibition. "What should be really interesting," says Dershowitz, "is to see how the artists' experiences near Syria and in Israel affects their art. How do you make sense of a life where rocket attacks are normal, and machine gun fire doesn't even make kindergarten kids nervous?"

Continues Dershowitz: "After the Golan Heights, we went directly to Jerusalem where we painted in two locations: the Pais and a school. The school is an interesting place as it sits in between a low income and a high income neighborhood. The children of politicians and executives mixed comfortably with from families just on the poverty line. There were Jewish and Muslim children, black and white and a number of Asian students. From my perspective, there were absolutely no issues with such a diverse student body and all the kids seemed to travel in mixed groups with multi-ethnic friendships.

We started at the school in the late afternoon of the first day. When the students left school for the day, they were surprised (and very, very happy) to see us there. They immediately ran up to us and started interacting with the artists. Our artists returned their energy, giving out stickers, drawing pictures, painting their t-shirts for them and even engaging in some soccer and basketball as the sun set. Parents came over and asked if we would be around later or the next day as they tried to drag their kids home and away from the impromptu party. One artist in particular, who is covered with tattoos was a huge hit and all the students were looking at his body art and pretty soon they were asking all of our artists to give them "tattoos" with pen, markers and even spray paint.

The tattooed artist painted a giant shark and the kids took turns posing with it, sometimes pretending to be scared and other times pretending to pet it. Another artist drew giant, intricate roses. Two of our team claimed a giant wall right across from the playground and created an image of Mickey Mouse spray painting the letters of the school and of their respective graffiti collective names, showing a unity and an original usage of the Mickey character.

As night fell, the local community was invited to a cultural festival we hosted in conjunction with the Pais. There were over 300 young adults who participated in a giant breakdance performance, a drum circle and a self-expression mural that ran the length of the schoolyard where students drew names and messages of unity with the help of our artists and their teachers. With the music booming well into the evening and

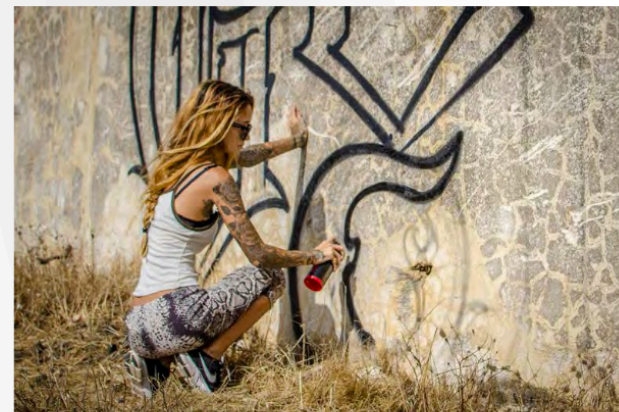


CHEMIS at work

students participating in art, it was the most fun place to be.

The next day, we were prepared for the younger kids and created images representing the 12 tribes of Israel on two walls while also making flowers, hearts and other simple drawings for the students, with the help of our team, to color in and practice using a spray paint can. We had over 300 different kids helping us and asking our artists if they could paint the lion red and green or the tree purple and we encouraged them to flex their imagination and creativity.

After leaving Jerusalem after those two days, we headed to Tel Aviv for some rest and relaxation. We spent a day at the beach and went back to work that night when we traveled to the Kfir Scout Base in South Tel Aviv. Located in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Tel Aviv (and all of Israel) the Scout Base is the strongest alternative to a life in gangs or drugs. It is the strength of this positive contribution to the community which originally drew Rihanna to come and paint a mural on their wall. As time had faded the mural she did, we unofficially collaborated with her and created a few of our own. The proud mascot of the troop is the lion and, among other drawings, we made a life-like three dimensional lion popping from the wall facing the entrance. On our final day, we traveled to the Dead Sea where, along the way, sits an old restaurant that was destroyed in one of the wars (rumors abound as to which war and which battle) and found it a proper and fitting end to the trip to take this one last opportunity to turn a victim of war into a canvas for art.



GYPSY ONE



AROE intrigues the children



CES with soldiers on Golan Heights - A Long Way From Tuff City, The Bronx