

# PAINTING THE TOWN

by Renata Hopkins

... creativity can help to lift people's spirits.



*Paris* by Askew One and Mark Henare

If you visit Christchurch these days, you'll see some surprising sights among all the diggers and road cones. Huge faces peer down from the sides of buildings, multi-coloured animals leap through space, and a giant ballerina dances high in the air. Artists are hard at work alongside the construction crews. They are covering the broken city with colour, humour, and beauty – things everyone needs.



*The Black Hat* by George Henry (a reproduction from the Christchurch Art Gallery's collection)

## Street Art Explosion

Since the earthquakes, 80 percent of the buildings in the central business district in Christchurch have been demolished. Building a new city takes time – and while that's happening, creativity can help to lift people's spirits. Music, film, writing, and dance have all been part of the creative response to the quakes. But the most visible art form in Christchurch today is visual art, especially large-scale paintings. How did this explosion of street art come about?

After the February 2011 quake, Christchurch Art Gallery was closed.

The gallery began to display art in temporary spaces, including on the walls – and even roofs – of the city. A group called Gap Filler has also supported many creative projects, including the painting of large murals. Then, in December 2013, two public art events took place: a project called From the Ground Up brought a group of New Zealand artists to Christchurch for a week of creativity on the streets; and a major street art festival called Rise opened. That month, artists from New Zealand, Australia, and Belgium painted fifteen artworks on city walls.

*I seem to have temporarily misplaced my sense of humour*  
by Wayne Youle



## Shadows, Sunshine, and Dancing

One of the first public artworks to be made after the quakes is by Wayne Youle. His painting is called *I seem to have temporarily misplaced my sense of humour*. It is 37 metres long! The painting is a giant shadow board, like the ones used to organise tools. (You might have seen something similar in a workshop or shed.) But Wayne didn't just paint tools in his artwork. You'll see musical instruments, toys, and animals too. He explains his idea like this: "The mural is for those who lent their tools and their hands to all who needed help. And for those who lost something in the quakes, no matter what that something may have been."

"The mural is for those who ...  
lost something in the quakes ..."

Another artist with a message for Christchurch is Holly Ross. Along with her friend Olivia Laita, Holly painted *We Got the Sunshine*. The brightly coloured lettering flows over a wall near the Cardboard Cathedral on Madras Street. Holly says she wanted to do something that would make people happy. The words remind people to enjoy the good things in life, especially when times are tough.

Holly says the quakes have had a big impact on her recent work. "I definitely consider my audience a lot more," she says. "I want to paint things that will hopefully make people feel happy – and make the city a more enjoyable place to live."

The final wall painted in the Rise festival was by Tauranga artist Owen Dippie. He covered one side of the Isaac Theatre Royal with a huge painting of a ballerina (see page 14). Her glowing blue tutu can be seen from far away. Owen's painting is a reminder that the theatre will soon be home to dancers and actors again. You could say he has turned the theatre inside out, bringing its life to the outside.

But how did the other artists painting Christchurch get their ideas?

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*We Got the Sunshine* by Holly Ross and Olivia Laita

## Creative Inspiration

Unsurprisingly, inspiration can come from anywhere. Auckland artist Askew One takes photos of people with interesting faces and morphs them using contrasting colours and patterns (see page 8). Holly Ross is inspired by music. The words in her painting were taken from the chorus of a hip-hop track by P-Money. Artists are also inspired by other artists. Owen Dippie loves the work of Renaissance painter Michelangelo. Christchurch-based Tess Sheerin's favourite artists are M. C. Escher and Salvador Dalí. For others, comics and graffiti art provide inspiration.

The work of painting duo BMD often features quirky animals. One of their

large Christchurch walls shows a fox that changes shape and colour as it leaps through space. Another huge BMD painting on Cashel Street shows three strange creatures laid out on folded blueprints. Blueprints get talked about a lot in Christchurch these days, so BMD took the idea and made it playful. Instead of buildings, their blueprints show animals they plan to paint in other large artworks. From a distance, the paintings look three-dimensional; up close, they reveal hundreds of tiny details. BMD want their art to appeal to people no matter what their age – and whether they're into art or not. Like Holly Ross, they want to “make people smile”.



## Painting on a Grand Scale

When an artist paints a very large wall, they can't see the whole drawing – only the section they're working on. So how are these paintings made? Some artists transfer a scale drawing of their artwork onto the larger surface using a grid pattern. Another method is to project a photo of the artwork onto the wall and trace around the shapes. Other artists sketch their outline freehand. Christchurch artist Jacob Ryan (who's also known as JacobYikes) says, “I just let go and allow the work to create itself. I only guide it.”

A primer coat is often applied to the wall first to make a smoother surface. Next, artists choose from spray paint, house paint, or a mixture of the two. Brushes and paint rollers are used to apply the paint – but there are other fun ways to get paint on a wall. For *The Hope Bear*, Tess Sheerin filled balloons with paint and threw them at the wall to make splatter effects. Kids watching were invited to help throw the balloons! For another painting, *Giraffing Around*, Tess filled fire extinguishers with paint.

“I just let go and allow the work to create itself. I only guide it.”

Blueprints by BMD



Other artists use stencils to make their art. Wayne Youle worked in this way to make his enormous shadow board. One of the world's most famous street artists, Banksy, also uses this method. Stencils provide shapes that can be filled in to form blocks of colour. These shapes can also be layered on top of each other to create a more complex effect.

When you're painting big, there are other considerations, like reaching the high bits. Artists need either a bionic arm – or proper equipment. BMD list some of the options, all of which they say work. "We started out standing on rubbish bins or balancing on bikes, then we sat on each other's shoulders. After that, we got our first ladder!" To get even higher, artists use scaffolding, scissor lifts, or cherry pickers. These artists need a good head for heights!

Ballerina mural by Owen Dippie



## Changing City, Changing Views

Artists who work on the walls of buildings know that their paintings might not last. This is especially true in Christchurch right now. Unsafe buildings are being demolished all the time, taking paintings down with them. When new buildings go up, they sometimes block existing artworks from view. Tess Sheerin accepts this as a part of making public art. "My murals hopefully capture a moment in time. I will miss them, but I believe they did their job for the community – and that's what is important."

Not every painting is loved by everyone. Wayne Youle says, "It's public art. You're going to get half-backers and half-haters. It doesn't matter what you do." However, in a city where something disappears every week, the energy and life generated by these paintings is what really matters. Whether you like every single one is beside the point. The art has been created because of what has happened to Christchurch, and that's the beauty of it.



Tess Sheerin painting  
*Quin the Duchess Duck*

If you'd like to see more work by the artists mentioned in this article, you can search the Internet for their websites. You can also visit the Christchurch Art Gallery's website: [www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

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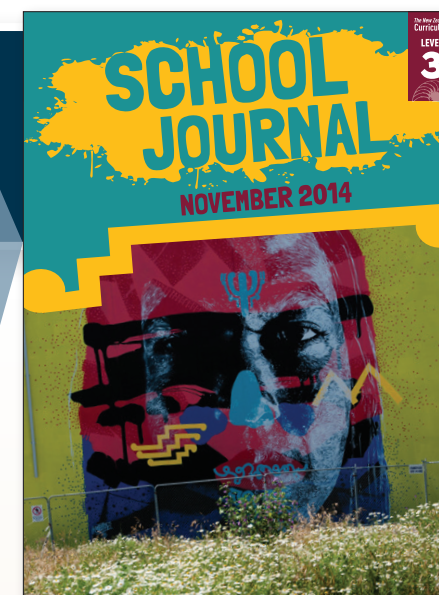
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