

### CAMP: Clarion Alley Mural Project

The Clarion Ally Mural Project (1993 -) was the brain-child of Aaron Noble and Rigo 93, both accomplished artists and, at that time residents on Clarion, an ally which ran between Mission St and Valencia St just south of 17th Street in San Francisco.

Dismayed by the awful state of the place, they came up with the idea of inviting various artists they knew to design murals, which they hoped could go up on the many surfaces running the length of the ally. They then went about seeking permission to paint the various walls and garage doors from whomever they could. In most cases they were successful and where the owner wasn't to be found they painted anyway. Around forty artists were invited to transform a wall with a mural, an invitation that came with a materials budget, a patch of tabula rasa and much community spirit.

The mural I eventually painted - a huge realist rendering of an escalator - blended humorously into whatever activity happened to be taking place around it, of which there was a polar variety over any given week. Some of this activity was the reason the whole project got started in the first place. . The alley itself was narrow and had a slight hill, and since it fell under the maintenance of heaven knows who, it was host to the typical misadventures one might expect. It also had the smelliest run-off I have ever encountered which left oddly hued stains in great swaths spilling out at the Mission St exit following any rainfall. It had perhaps more than the usual amount of shady activity since not only was it open at both ends, it had a subtle indentation around the mid-point that could hide a person from view from either end. This recess happened to be the site I had been offered to execute my design.

It was a garage door and its size and prominence suited my project. The covered a small garage that belonged to the house which backed onto it, and the door was of the pull-up kind, about nine feet wide by six high and made of plywood which was flat and without trim. The general rule seemed to be that owners of the various sites up and down the alley exerted claim over them, but maintained, incomprehensibly, that they were not responsible for their upkeep. A nebulous municipal zoning ordinance established that neither was the city of San Francisco.

The alley, along with its inventive patchwork of facades and fencing, also had tilting utility poles weighted with a network of sagging power lines that threatened to block out the sky, along with another network of fissures and splits in the bald and swollen tar on the ground. On various bicycles of dubious provenance I'd belt up the alley holding my breath till reaching the door of the loft exhaling only when safely indoors. Such was the prevailing breeze that whatever was fermenting further up wafted down toward the entrance collecting there in toxic eddies that could toss even the most stout hearted out of the saddle. It was a leaden sweet and sour tang of human waste and MD20, one in a number of popular electric wines around, blending with the occasional small rotting carcass here or there.

One time a large blue garbage bag containing 40 decaying bodies of uncooked chickens had been discarded beside a wilting utility pole right underneath the windows to the loft. The

smell was astounding. Regularly too, those residing within would be treated to astringent profanities erupting suddenly on a quiet morning, or to some blood-curdling howl at 3 am, inches from the ear just on the other side of thin wooden walls. The building looked fairly inconspicuous in a certain way and definitely didn't look like the cozy home it was. The featureless facade had recently fallen to an impromptu explosion of graffiti which was being added to weekly by every tagger passing through. Sharp and snarling shapes in mostly black. In one legible spot large three-dimensional letters spelled the word "CHILL" with a basketball size i over the i. This beast of burden was host to a haze of incomprehensible splutterings that sprouted from it like fleas from a dog till the whole what used to be white wall buzzed with a rabid urgency at a full and deafening volume.

This graffiti we noticed, kind of camouflaged the building. We discovered this when we sprawled across the bed on the upper floor within and dangled our heads out the window. Anyone outside, barely ten feet away, didn't notice us at all. All manner of gruesome things were heard and seen. Some snapshots were taken. We stood outside once and examined the window from the point of view the hangers-out. The ordinary design of the window, partially concealed as it was by a thick utility pole, conspired to cast the eye way. The constant lookout required to both ends of the alley by the smokers, shooters, blow-job-givers, helped divert attention from the window as well. It was remarkable how effectively invisible we were.



The window from which observations were made.

In searching for subject matter I came across a curious book, "What's What; A Visual Glossary of the Physical World". It dated from the 1970's I think. One would think a tome bearing such a claim would be as big as The Physical World itself, but, while weighty, this minor contribution to the settling of categorical scores and insignificant differentials was no bigger than an average coffee table book. It had an interesting collection of intriguing items

within, if only in many cases, for the mystery surrounding the rationale for their inclusion in the first place.

Up for examination and useless explanation included things like: bathtub, labeling, knives, badminton, decorative stitches, toothbrush, satellite (useful), bus, bird, spider, handbag, coffin, river, wave, root system., bride, ritual items and so on, all with just enough copy to point out the totally obvious.

On page 273 was the paper clip. Its image was appropriately subordinate to the office stapler on the same page, which one might take to be a commonsense ordering of the items by use-value in proportion to their complexity and therefore be useful information of sorts.

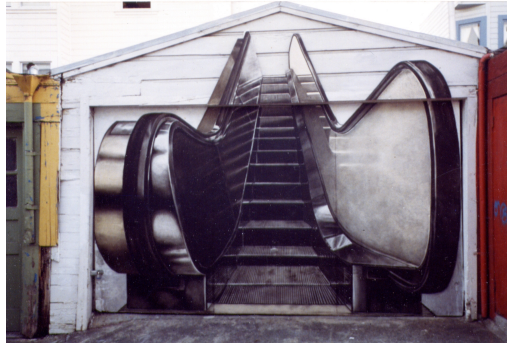
From the picture of the paper clip were abstracted the following 7 points of note: # 2 leg, # 4 leg, # 1 bend, # 2 bend, #1 leg, #3 leg and # 3 bend, extended from the picture like flags on sticks in a didactic approach that was compellingly eccentric. My favorite, to which I would return again and again when at incurable odds with the world, was the page explaining cartoons, titled, "Cartoons". In a generous spread covering two pages the featured panel showed two men carrying a large pane of glass. One of the men looks worried, the other is drunk, his intoxication signified by a curly line called a "spurl" above his head. 'Squeans' surround it and he had "oculama" in place of eyes. The pane of glass is identified as such by striations of "dites".

Because of the "staggeration" near the drunk, the glass is exhibiting "agitrons". They walk past a wall with "brick symbolia" and toward an angry looking cat that is speaking "jarns", "quimps", "gawlix" and "nittles" via it's "maladicta balloon". They are background to a boy being chased by an even angrier dog who sports a "lucafect" on it's nose and streaming "hites" followed by "briffit" in its wake.

The boys's legs are rendered in fanned out multiples creating an impression of momentum, not unlike Duchamp's painting Nude Descending a Staircase. This formalist element goes by the term "blurgits" and the drops of panicky sweat that leap from the boy's head are called "plewds". He is heading for an open man-hole which emits a "waftarom".

All the invisible lines of tension, dynamism and stress the average urban dweller might endure on any ordinary day was here rendered perfectly legible on the bright page in its own sympathetic cuniform.

I like the rich fantasy world of cartoons and I singled out the picture titled "Escalator" with the idea that the mural should be fairly ordinary and matter-of-fact in image and rendering blending in with the surroundings in a cartoon kind of way. It would interact with the buildings thus providing a kind of Tex Avery portal from one world to another on the fuel of the imagination alone. It worked even better at night as in the dimmed light it became eerily three-dimensional.



The completed mural on Clarion Alley 1993.

When the mural was eventually complete and the usual rotation of figures had re-established themselves to the site, a lonely casualty trudging the alley one night was heard exclaiming in delighted surprise, “Hey! stairway to heaven, man!” Much fun was had by passersby, who, some high as kites, would pretend-climb the steps in grand imaginary escapes.

This amusement was not confined to the socially disenfranchised or chemically impaired, either. One afternoon a crew attached to a pastel TV series, *Nash Bridges*, showed up to film in and around the alley. The prop unit fabricated a matching three-dimensional step with the idea of creating a surreal chase escapade. In the end this avant-garde plot twist was abandoned and perp and law went about things the old fashioned way, running back and forth past the murals in take after take the whole day long.



Before any drawing could begin the garage door had to be sanded down and prepared with new coats of primer. The site, being in a nook of sorts, was a convenient place to relieve oneself with the result that decades-worth of urine had baked into the paint, which under the sander caused a fume so stunningly strong it induced serious swooning. New base coats tamed the stink a good bit. Tinted coats of paint were followed by charcoal, then synthetic charcoal and finally the surface was misted with multiple coats of non-sheen varnish. It took about a week to complete.



The design of the mural required the addition of an extra piece of wood at the top of the doorframe in order for the image to fit proportionally. Within a day the small gap between the wall and the attachment became a neat hiding place for one of the alley dweller's drug paraphernalia, as I discovered one morning when a man followed me up my ladder to retrieve them.

Each day various souls would pass by and stop to talk. It was a lovely to hang out and meet random people in an unplanned way. It was fun to lift open the garage door suddenly. It made a kind of eye/brain paradox. The stairs of the escalator seemed to compress in a spatially impossible way, and the whole thing sort of 'whooshed' into an event horizons folding onto itself bending the brain a little bit.



A year after I had moved away from the city Aaron called one day with the news the escalator had been tagged. I had always figured the image might become a soft target with its abundant open space on tidy planes. It was remarkable how long it had remained unmolested, though - somewhere in the region of a whole year thus far and much longer than some of the other murals, now numbering around 40. As we talked Aaron slowly revealed that, actually, the tagging had been provoked by the CAMP organizers *themselves* in a strategic attempt to nab a particularly tenacious tagger who had been hitting a number of murals on the alley for months. Since my mural was directly outside the loft where CAMP was headquartered, it would be easy to stake out, he said, and so it was chosen as bait. A small -tiny - tag was scribbled on the mural. Days passed with no response and vigilance waned. About a week later he emerged one morning and was dismayed to see four huge fuzzy-edged letters had sprouted and ravished their modest lure whole, devastating tentacles everywhere. There was no telling whether repair to the mural might trigger an upping of the ante thus setting off a further swarm of graffiti.

I was eager to visit San Francisco again to see friends, the magnificent park, the telescopic hills, eat excellent pupusas and burritos, so decided to travel out to California in the following weeks to make repairs.

A schedule of maintenance was never really possible and eventually another tag appeared. This set off a relentless assault, which finally obliterated the image completely and for keeps.

I discovered its disappearance by accident while searching for map coordinates to send a friend who had emailed asking where it was. They were in the city right now and wanted visit the mural. Google Street View had added the alley by then and making my way down it I could see the loft had long since been erased, a multi-story residential building in its place. I was completely surprised to see nothing at all remained of the escalator. It was drowned entirely with a painting of a glow-fish on a black background, the small piece of wood showing the top of the escalator being the only remaining fragment. I had to relate the sad news to my friend. They trekked to the alley anyway and related their thorough enjoyment what the site had grown into, with dozens more murals added over the years. It's a riot down there now.

A great majority of those I knew who lived in the neighborhood and around the city have of course, been forced to leave because of drastic increases in rents which accompanied the dot com waves, making the city no longer affordable, a condition which has only magnified. It is a thrill to see the alley's murals have maintained a stalwart force against such a tsunami of development and money-driven turnover. It is still a beautiful city, incredibly magically and amazingly beautiful (sigh).

- J M



Trading the old fashioned way.