

CHORUS CABINET ART PROGRAM, DUNEDIN: A REPORT ON WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES TO REDUCE GRAFFITI

Jo Seddon

The sight of a blank wall covered in bright spraypaint incites heated debate in some situations, and admiration in others. In Christchurch, brightly painted walls have become a symbol of urban creativity and portray a positive image of a city rebuilding itself after the calamitous events of February 2011. In the case of a well-known graffiti artist like Banksy, his images have made their way to auction houses for sale in the art market after literally being chiselled off the wall.¹ Is graffiti street art or vandalism? As a social phenomenon, graffiti runs the spectrum from tagging (a term often used to define the subculture of illegal mark-making on public and private property) to street art – which in a city like Christchurch is seen as an important element in urban renewal. As “art for the community” [it] reigns with a power that exceeds its modest egalitarian origins – once there, it cannot be avoided. It’s an access point into ‘art’ for everyone, including those who never actively seek out art in galleries or otherwise.”² At this end of the spectrum, wall art is seen as ‘permissible’ and attractive. It is viewed by a wider audience as hip and respectable, and in most cases is also respected by the graffiti subculture.³



Figure 1, Chris Newman's *Cliff Curtis Cabinet* is part of a collection of 11 of the most tagged cabinets in Rotorua, which were turned into works of art in 2014 with support from the council.



Figure 2. Dunedin artist Andy McCreedy's *Dunedin Derby Cabinet* is in Jones Street and reflects the local roller derby team, a group of passionate skaters who are putting Dunedin on the map in this dynamic, athletic, all-inclusive and entertaining women's sport.

In 2010, telecommunications company Chorus began a trial in Auckland to test if commissioned artworks on its telecommunications cabinets would decrease the frequency of unsightly tagging. This proved so successful that the programme was extended to other areas around the country. These cabinets have become works of art in the street, often telling stories about the area in which they are located and embraced by local communities.⁴

The main criteria for considering a cabinet as a candidate for artwork is the frequency of tagging, as the mural becomes cost-effective by eliminating cleaning costs. However, other factors are also considered, such as community or council requests and involvement. The final decisions regarding design and content remain with Chorus; while the artwork has to be something they feel the community will enjoy, the company makes an effort to let artists come up with something individual.

Dunedin's rich history of art meant that the city was an ideal candidate for the cabinet art programme, and its selection has been amply justified by the diverse designs submitted by local artists. Several are graduates of the Dunedin School of Art including Aroha Novak, Sam Ovens, Spencer Hall and Jack Pillans.



Figure 3. Aroha Novak's *Carisbrook Cabinet* on the corner of Burns and Neville streets, South Dunedin, near the site of the former Carisbrook Stadium, was painted in 2014. Front, back and side views are shown.

Aroha's decorated cabinet can be found at 9 Neville Street, Caversham; backing onto the site of the former Carisbrook Stadium or 'House of Pain,' it pays tribute to a sports ground that has meant so much to the people of Dunedin. Living and working in Dunedin, she says her work constantly interrogates issues of escapism through various media, as well as the social, political and economic inequality still prevalent in contemporary society.

For the Chorus commission, Aroha created a stencilled scene of bright fuschia flowers, pastel leaves and a tui. Along with the fantail and huia, tuis are one of the guardians of the twelfth heaven in Māori bird lore. The tui has 12 white feathers at its neck to signify this, while the huia and fantail both have 12 tail feathers. She also paid homage to the Carisbrook grounds on the back of the unit.

Sam Ovens is a DSA honours graduate who is putting his talents to good use as a fulltime screenprinter, artist, freelance designer and musician. His contribution to the Chorus mural portfolio reflects his love of punk rock, electronic music, the band Devo, cats, archaeology, candy, brightly coloured curiosities and, as he says, "the wonderful surroundings of my hometown, Dunedin." Trips to his local dairy for icecreams and other snacks inspired some of the treats featured in his mural. Sam says, "I love paint, ink and creating colourful imagery which looks delicious. I love Dunedin. We are the Flying Nun, artsy, punky city, so let's at least reference that a little in our surroundings." Chorus loved Sam's mural so much that it was selected to appear in the annual Chorus Cabinet Art Calendar and has made its way around the world to be admired in places like New York, London, Singapore, Johannesburg, Brisbane, Sydney, Vancouver, Istanbul and Santa Clara.

Jack Pillans is part of a collective of artists who have been painting murals on walls around Dunedin as part of Dunedin Street Art, adding vibrancy to many drab areas of the city. Some of their funding has come through online fundraiser Givealittle. Jack opted to pay tribute to the kakapo for his cabinet outside 508 Kaikorai Valley Road. His work has been extremely well received by locals, with one saying, "It has transformed what was a hideous canvas for vandals into a work of art. We love the cheeky bird that peeks out at us as we walk past. Great work and thanks so much to the artist."

Spencer Hall is probably best known for his work as a graphic artist with the Dunedin Comic Collective and for his contributions to a host of workshops such as zinefest and storylines. For his cabinet in Brockville, he collaborated with fellow artist Gavin Ashworth on a design influenced by Dr Seuss, an American writer and cartoonist famous for his children's books, which he both wrote and illustrated. Their work is appropriately located near a children's playground and has been very popular with local children.



Figure 4. Sam Ovens' cabinet work, *De-evolution/Extinction*, is sited on the corner of Dundas and Castle streets in North Dunedin.



Figure 5. Jack Pillans' *Rare Bird* can be spotted in Kaikorai Valley Road, Dunedin.



Figure 6. Spencer Hall and Gavin Ashworth created *Dr Seuss* in Dunedin in Brockville Road, Brockville.

According to Chorus Stakeholder Manager **Jo Seddon**, the Chorus cabinet art project is a win-win for everyone. "We are able to combat tagging and give our communities some great art out in the streetscape, as well as support local artists to showcase their talents. I'm sure the fee we pay the artists helps too."

- 1 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/lynndouglass/2013/02/20/banksy-mural-chiseled-off-building-about-to-be-sold-at-auction-for-700000>.
- 2 Eloise Callister-Baker; "Kick the Can: How International Street Art Took Dunedin by Force," *The Pantograph Punch*, 4 September 2015, <http://pantograph-punch.com/author/eloise-callister-baker>.
- 3 Ronald Kramer; "Painting with Permission: Legal Graffiti in New York City," *Ethnography*, 11:2 (2010), 235–53. Dr Ronald Kramer, a sociologist at the University of Auckland, says graffiti is a multifaceted and historically fluid culture. His research has looked at a group of graffiti artists who have painted with permission since the 1990s and has found that these artists espouse values that most would not hesitate to recognise as 'conventional'.
- 4 More information and photographs of murals around the country can be found on the Chorus website, including information about upcoming locations for future projects: <https://www.chorus.co.nz/cabinet-art>.