

# Mural, Mural on the Wall

By [Ted Loos](#)

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With their sheer size, wall murals bring a significance and a heft that a canvas can struggle to muster — sometimes big ideas need to be delivered with large dimensions.

Murals were a staple of life in ancient India, Greece and Rome, used to highlight stories of civic and religious import. The Renaissance may have brought the artistic apogee of frescoes. Then in the 20th century, Mexican muralists put a modern spin on the medium.

So the brightly colored outdoor works commissioned for the World Mural Project, part of the Pride events in New York this month, fit the pattern nicely — they speak for a community wanting to celebrate, educate and just be seen.

“It’s one of the key pillars of why Pride exists, to provide visibility,” said Chris Frederick, the executive director of NYC Pride, which commissioned the project. The organization collaborated with the L.I.S.A. Project NYC, which specializes in public art, on curating the program.

“It was important for the 50th anniversary to have a massive display of L.G.B.T.Q. and allied art on a citywide scale,” Mr. Frederick said, adding that it was the first mural program that NYC Pride had initiated.



Jonathan Cohen, an artist also known as Meres1, finishing his mural on Meserole Street in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times



Mr. Cohen at his mural on Meserole Street. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

The idea came to Mr. Frederick “after the insanity of the whole Banksy thing,” he said, referring to the mercurial and elusive street artist who makes headlines whenever one of his works pops up on the urban landscape or in an auction house. (He caused a stir last year for secretly building a shredder into the frame of one of his works in case it was sold at auction. It was. It self-destructed.)

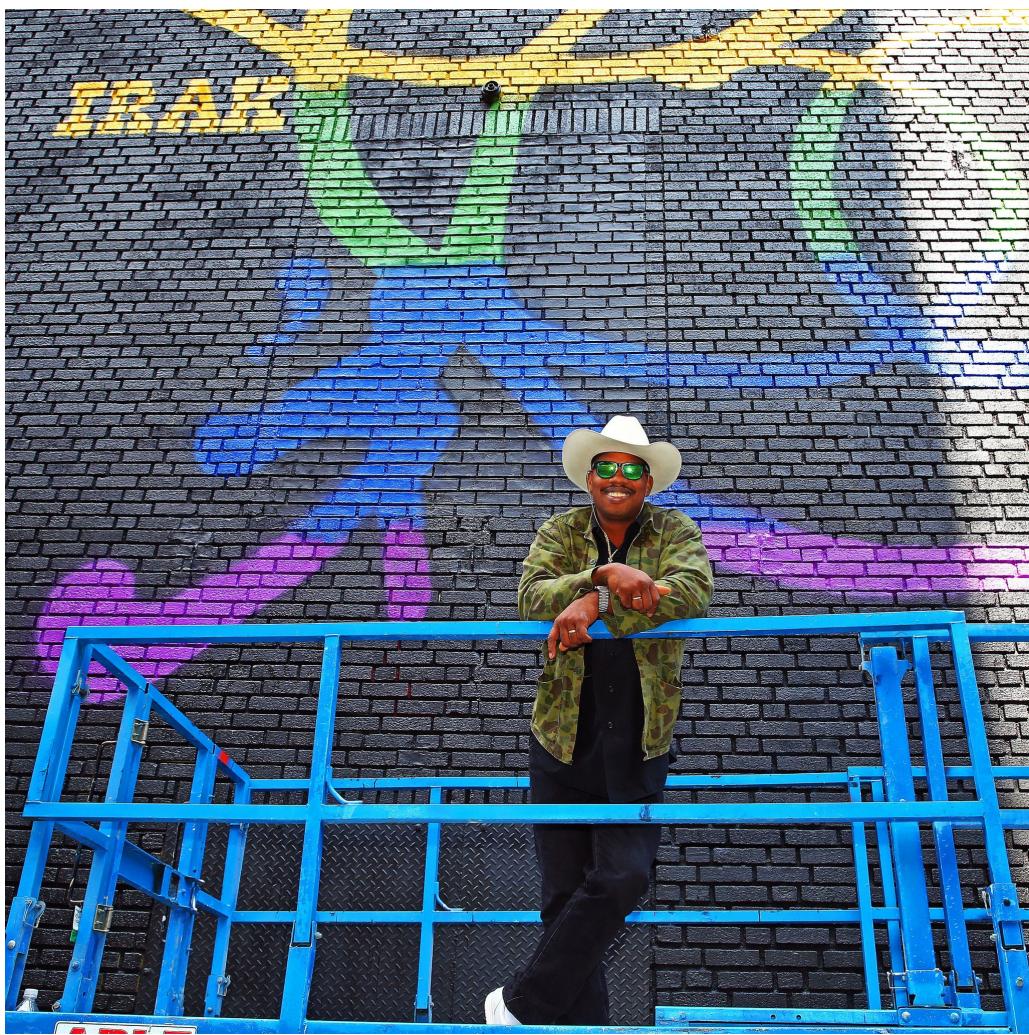
Mr. Frederick wasn’t prepared, though, for the logistical and organizational challenges of getting 50 murals up; they were furiously underway all over New York in May and well into June, with many location and schedule changes along the way.

“When we first came up with this idea, we didn’t really understand how big it would be,” he said, chuckling slightly. “It’s taken a lot to get off the ground.”

Geographic diversity was one of the project’s goals. Although the murals are in all five boroughs, Manhattan has the most, including several in the windows of Macy’s in Midtown. Staten Island has only two, with the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn having some number in between.

“We wanted to wow people and make them want to tour all five boroughs,” said Wayne Rada, the co-founder and executive director of the L.I.S.A. Project NYC. He added that though the original goal was 50 murals, there will be a few more than that once the project is completed.

When it came to choosing artists, some of whom had collaborated on murals, Mr. Rada selected a mix of muralists, some with name recognition — like John Matos, known as Crash, and the artist known as Buff Monster — and some less known. Everyone was paid for participating, with the cost of their supplies also covered.



Kunle F. Martins, an artist known as EARSNOT IRAK, at his mural on the corner of Suffolk and Delancey Streets in Lower Manhattan.  
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

The criteria were artistic skills, for one, and experience with mural making would be helpful.

The artists have another thing in common: enthusiasm for the project.

“Oh my God, it’s so exciting,” said Sam Kirk, who splits her time between New York and Chicago. “I used art as a way to come out, at 15. It’s a huge communication tool.”

She creates murals with her “partner in art and life,” Jenny Q; they are painting one in the East Village that depicts the L.G.B.T.Q. activist Victoria Cruz.

"I wanted to recognize someone who's alive today," Ms. Kirk said.

As for technique, she likes to mix it up. "I use both spray paint and brushes," she said. "That gets the effects I prefer."



Justin Russo's work on Meserole Street in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Justin T. Russo, a New York-based artist and illustrator, on the other hand, said he was "analog," devoted solely to the paint brush.

Mr. Russo did a mural in Williamsburg that riffs on the Alfred Eisenstaedt photograph of a V-J Day kiss. In Mr. Russo's imagining, the scene stars two male sailors, one of them wearing high heels. It's meant to encourage "talk about trans identity."

It made sense to him for Pride because “that image defines celebration,” Mr. Russo said.

The concept of commissioning murals for pride was “very smart,” Mr. Russo said. “As we’ve been seeing lately, street art is helping to define contemporary art.”

And Mr. Russo feels strongly that creating the murals can be fun, too.

“I have enlisted a group of hunky friends” to help paint, he said. “The rule is, you have to be shirtless and you have to be cute.”

Being gay was not a requirement for the mural project. In fact, “sometimes, being an ally has more value,” Mr. Rada said.



Steph Burr working on her mural on Bruckner Boulevard in the Bronx.

Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

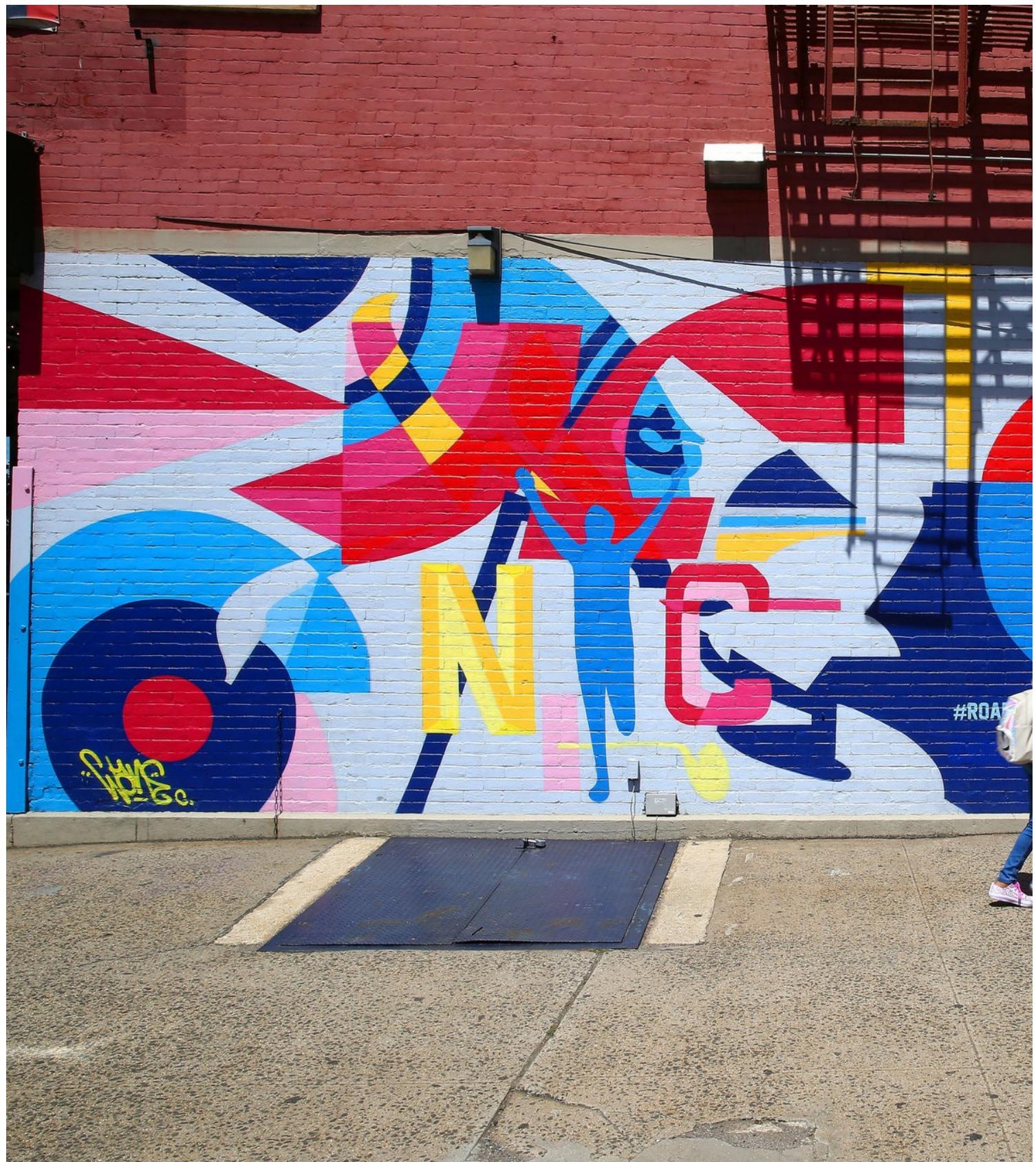


Ms. Burr's mural at Wall Works on Bruckner Boulevard. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Steph Burr, an artist based in Torrington, Conn., described herself as an ally. “Most of my friends are L.G.B.T.Q.,” she said. “This is a fight that has to be continued over time.”

She was standing in front of her just-completed mural in the South Bronx — in it, a spaceship emitting a rainbow was beaming down a friendly looking alien, composed mostly of a big eyeball and fangs.

A London-based artist, Remi Rough, was chatting with her; he had just finished a small, abstract design for a metal gate adjacent to Ms. Burr’s work, and he was finalizing plans for a larger wall.



A mural by Remi Rough off Bruckner Boulevard. Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Remi Rough celebrated the artistic diversity of the murals' creators.

"I'm more abstract, and Steph is more illustrative," he said. "Not everyone comes from the graffiti tradition, though I do." (Graffiti being the unsanctioned division of mural making.)

And he added that the genre sometimes doesn't get the respect it deserves.

"When Diego Rivera was doing murals, no one was calling him a street artist," Remi Rough said. "He was just an artist."

One of the best-known painters in the bunch, Buff Monster, stopped by his completed mural on the Lower East Side in late May; he was wearing heart-shaped sunglasses, and many people said "hi" to him because his studio was just a few blocks away.

"I wear a lot of color, and I use a lot of color," he said. "I fit in with Pride."

His huge mural, featuring big-eyed characters that he calls Mister Melty and the Melty Misfits, measures 94 feet wide and 31 feet tall. (He had painted the same wall a few years before.)

These days, Buff Monster concentrates on making his works in the studio, selling them in galleries and working with commercial clients.



The mural at 125 Chrystie Street in Lower Manhattan painted by Buff Monster.  
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

“But every once in a while, I do a big crazy one like this,” he said, adding that he was happy to get this commission.

“It’s nice to be involved with a project that raises awareness for big topics like equality,” he said.

Artistically, the challenge was “not to be too heavy-handed about it,” he said, in terms of the Pride theme. “Making a big colorful scene with appealing characters makes it fun for everyone.”

Some of his Melties were frolicking, but one seemed to be anxiously grimacing. Buff Monster said that was part of the big picture.

“I think it addresses the trials and triumphs of the gay community,” he said. “They’re not all happy characters. Life is about dealing with hardships, too.”

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