

Flower Breaking Through the Concrete: an Interview with Liz Lazdins

“Like so many young people, I felt invincible.” At around age sixteen, Liz Lazdins (aka Beloved, aka Liz1) took to painting graffiti (graf) in her native Hyde Park with zero hesitations. “I saw guys from the neighborhood getting their names up and I wanted to too.” she says. Since then, Lazdins she’s become a prolific artist/activist around Chicago; co-founding Vision Village, painting murals, and curating art shows. Weeks after the close of her the show at the Hyde Park Arts Center, we spoke via email about fears, hip hop, and, of course, art.

what did you do before tagging?

Before tagging I was pretty much a kid doing kid stuff. Just going to school, hanging with my friends in the park. I was mischievous but I wouldn’t say a trouble-maker. Right around the time I got into Graf others started getting into drinking, parties, drugs. I went to hip hop parties but my vices were rapping and bombing (better word for tagging).

do you see art as an alternative to violence and drugs and stuff?

Instead of reacting we have to be proactive. And you have to remember who the real enemy is. And feed your mind. And don't eat crappy processed food. Seriously, it will make you crazy.

I hate that I even have to ask this but what's it like being a female tagger? Is it easier now? Was it ever difficult?

There are a lot more women in the game now so I think women are more accepted within the subculture. Being in a male dominated scene did have difficulties. I was fortunate that I had some very positive supportive guys who gave me respect. But in my youth, I also had guys lie on me and gossip about me. The good thing about an intense activity like graffiti is that if you get up and have skills you will eventually get your respect overall. That is why it is so important now that women are more accepted on the scene that they develop their skills and continue to get up. I'm hoping to someday hear of an all-city *female* king of the city, someone who is consistently the most up on all train lines in the city. Doesn't really happen these days like it used to due to the buff and other factors.

in terms of violence, how has the scene changed since you started?

I really don't know. I'm not a teen anymore. I'm not on the trains and the buses every day anymore. I take my kids to school, paint when I can and don't go out much (sleep! precious sleep!) . I think the graf scene is still a safe-haven for youth trying to stay away from gangs. However, out of all the facets of hip hop graf is probably the most dangerous actually. Graffiti writers can get territorial and fight more than rappers if you would believe it, but nothing compared to what gang life is like as I understand it. When I was coming up we made a point to use rap, dance, djing and graf as a way to compete with each other (battle) rather than fight. Most of the time it worked. I think the youth of

today are smart as we were and I'm sure they have these and even more outlets. Of course those of us on the outside only hear about the bad stuff. All people these days are exposed to so much violence, dehumanization and sexualization. We are living in a constant state of war overseas and in the streets. I think all that is even more severe than when I was a teen. I pray for those coming up not to drink the Koolaid and see the brainwashing and fake "American Dream" for what they are- a distraction to keep them from being free and loving each other.

What is your greatest fear as a public artist?

All artists who engage in illegal activities worry about arrest of course. The real shame is the over-criminalization of graffiti and street art. Compared to what many urban youth could get into graffiti is tame and non-violent. Cities all over the world have embraced graf and street art- Barcelona, Sao Paulo, Berlin etc. It fills the streets with color and soul. It is ironic that the country that originated style writing with spray paint on trains is so slow to embrace it. Most likely that is because of who originated it- lower income brown-skinned urban youth. Now, we see as with many grassroots movements the appropriation of the letter styles, spray styles by corporations and media. We even see buses and trains wrapped with ads where our colorful tags and pieces used to be!

What exactly is people's beef with graffiti?

That depends on the person. Owners feel violated if someone writes on their private property. Companies feel their authority questioned when their billboards or busses get painted on. Politicians and cops worry that it will look like they don't control their city. Regular folks get frustrated because they don't always understand what the graffitist is trying to say. Mostly it is the idea that not everything can be controlled that stresses out the capitalists and government agencies. If graffiti writers and artists were given the freedom to create, most regular people would love all the beautiful artwork in dead spaces that they could see for free: The People's Art Museum.

You've also done a lot of activist work. Is it a challenge to balance your roles as both an activist and an artist?

Not at all. Social justice inspires my art and I hope my art inspires people to continue struggling for a better future. The issues appear naturally in my pieces because they are so much a part of my thoughts and the lives of those I'm inspired to draw.

Back in the day you helped found Vision Village, a hip hop community center.

How did that happen and what was your role in it?

A few of us rented a huge basement space. We lived in the side rooms and used the common space for activities. It started with Upski, Lunchbox from Stony Island, photographer Morgan Pruitt and myself. Artists like Stu from J.Davis Trio, The Brickheadz, Stef Skillz, Tree Roots, Ang 13, Lavie Raven, Dmnology, and so many

others passed through the space to work on projects, crash, or just get a meal. The best were the rhyme sessions where we would just play and beat and all write verses. Oh and the freestyle sessions! We didn't play around back then in the rhyme cypher- it was a very intense spiritual thing we were doing.

Can you explain what you guys did?

We held drawing and writing groups, played chess, breakdancing practice, women's art show and other workshops. It was all very organic- a space for us to do our thing- there were no after school hip-hop programs back then. Music venues and art galleries for the most part were not trying to deal with us- a bunch of crazy street kids and young adults! And it was crazy too- we wanted to be rebels- have no structure- but we quickly learned that stuff doesn't get done that way and no one wants to do the dishes. The Village only lasted about two years, but it was a creative space for so many.

What kind of activist work have you been doing recently?

Lately I've been less on the activist scene - I'm recently married and raising two kids but I always try to think like an activist. For me this means engaging in conversations with friends and family about current events like Ferguson or the drone bombings in Yemen or the water in Flint. I also try to attend events that people organize or at least promote them because I know - organizing teach-ins or rallies is a ton of work usually done by a few dedicated people and at the very least the rest of us who want change could do is show up, learn something and incorporate in our homes or neighborhoods.

have you found yourself having conversations about the violence in the city?

I think you can't live on the south side and not talk about the violence in the city. So many people are affected by it.

have you had any uncomfortable conversations? Like, are there any topics that have been particularly difficult to broach?

Some conversations I've had may have been difficult for others but I don't get uncomfortable easily. Since my early teens I've been schooled by elders and witnessed white-privilege in action, racist cops, the uneven distribution of resources throughout the city. I spend a lot of time thinking about my own role in it all. For instance I'd love to paint murals in Englewood paying tribute to the community or just beautifying the wall, but in a way I think it may be inappropriate for a white-girl to be over there painting their walls when there are probably plenty of amazing local black artists. I'm not decided on these things but I think about them a lot.

The exhibit you curated over at the Hyde Park Arts Center recently closed. can you talk a little bit about your transition from working on trains to doing murals to showing in galleries(prior to *Creatures from the Concrete*?)

Look, when you have responsibilities - kids, jobs etc it is hard to risk arrest. Graf is a very consuming activity. There are those that can balance all that. I have discovered I am not one of them. I will still go on little missions but to be dope you gotta constantly

get up and I'm just not in that place. As far as my art, I wanted to be able to spend time and really draw and work on some small things (compared to walls). I've always found beauty in the details, the little flower breaking through the concrete, the flyers blowing around the square after a protest, ants doing their thing. Same thing with art. You can go into this little worlds with every stroke and every layer of collage. I love that

How'd you get involved with them?

My homie Lavie Raven put me in touch with Allison Peters Quinn from. She had the awesome idea to do an all female graf installation and I was honored to get that going.

The center was so supportive of my vision, I'm so thankful for that.

Could you describe the exhibit and the purpose behind it?

The exhibit "Creatures From The Concrete" was a 92 foot hallway on the second floor in their new Creative Wing. On one side we hung our "art pieces" -paintings, photos, plush creations and airbrushed clothing- and on the other side was a huge multi-media piece. The goal was to bring the streets inside by pasting up large and medium sized photo prints of streets and neighborhoods and spraying full-sized graf pieces directly on the wall. But we also wanted to draw the viewer closer into the installation with the collage element. I wheatpasted inspirational materials chosen by all of us throughout the piece. Imagine layers of flyers or posters. Those materials included personal iconography, poems, social justice flyers, images and personal items. We wanted to expose some parts of ourselves - what makes up the person behind the graffiti.

What was it like, being given this space, picking other artists, and working with them?

It was amazing! The women- Stef Skills, Shan, Gloe, Bel2, Zorzorzor, Monstrochika, Eve Rivera and Zena were on point! I picked them all because I felt they each had something unique to bring to the project and because I know that all of them will come and paint. When it's time to get down no drama or goofiness just goodness.

What kind of impact did the exhibit have on you, and what did you hope its impact on the community would be?

It really reminded me of what I love and it inspired me to do more large scale multi media pieces like that one. I hope that it warmed the Hyde Park Art community to the idea of more graffiti and street art, or at the very least I hope it gave the viewers a sense of the humanity that exists within every vandal.

What is, to you, art's role in the community?

Art is one of the many gifts that Allah has given us for self expression. It can be both a way to reach out to everyone and a way to speak secretly with each other. Art can tell stories or give energy to dead space. Good art can be entertaining, thought-provoking and mysterious. Not all art is meant to hang on your wall- Sometimes it is shocking or offensive. Sometimes it may make you cry. I love to stand around and study someone's

art and talk about it. A blank wall is ok sometimes, but only when it stands next to two colorful ones!

with graffiti, for some the appeal is about being able to make the city your own.

do you feel that?

Absolutely. When you feel you have no voice, no power putting your name up for the world to see feels good. Many might see the act as an illusion- a meaningless gesture, but actually a good graffiti writer knows the city better than 99% of us. They know where construction is happening, they know how to climb buildings, all the alleys, bus routes, when cops come on and off shift. Some even know how to run the train tunnels to get from one end of downtown to the other. They know all the quiet secret spots under bridges and through vacant lots and on freight tracks. And because writers often hook up from different neighborhoods they know more than just their areas. Sure they don't actually own any of that, but that knowledge is empowering (and useful).

What projects do have going on now?

I'm currently working on a new series of pieces that will focus on the 99 names of Allah. These beautiful names illustrate some of the infinite qualities of God and reciting them, among other things, softens, and heals the heart. Using my illustrative and graffiti style, the work will tie the names to relatable aspects of our daily lives. I'm hoping my pieces

will give an added dimension to the names, reveal a bit of the deeper spiritual aspects of Islam and inspire all types of people.

Did you grow up religious? How did you find islam?

Several years ago I found myself very grateful for how my life has turned out - I've been through many tests that most people don't even really know about - and for the gifts I received. I wanted to pray and give thanks and Islam was the best way for me. I grew up seeing Muslims on the scene and they were always so positive and focused and clear headed and those are all things I strive for. Once I learned more about the Prophet Muhammad's life- Peace be upon him- and re-read the Quran I really understood that a lot of the misconceptions about Islam are cultural- not based in the religion. It is probably very surprising to a lot of people that I made this choice- I've always been a bit of a hedonist and anti-establishment- but in reality I wish I had thought about this more when I was younger, I bet I would have accomplished so much more dope stuff. May Allah bless my family- I'm lucky that my parents have been accepting of my choice. My Mom for instance is amazing, she always supports me through all my unexpected choices. She just smiled and said, "Just so long as there are no multiple wives! I don't agree with that!" I don't know how she does it. It is important to me to make her proud.

