



By Peter Keatings Photographed by Matthew SalaCuse for BLAZE















is wall documents are there to be read. Phat that flowers underground before it ripples onto the urban scene. Paintings as varied and complex as a hip hop artist's seamless flow. In a society

where public space is increasingly dominated by corporate entities, Brett Cook-Dizney stands at the forefront of a new generation of American artists.

Born and raised as Brett Cook in San Diego, the 31-year-old New York City-based artist known for his spray-painted portraits began his career as a graf writer during his teen years. Even then, Cook-Dizney preferred drawing figures to designing a personal letter style, the practice that dominates graf writing. At the University of California at Berkeley, the young art/education double major adopted the name Dizney, a nod to his figure-oriented work. He also took on a new agenda. "In college, I realized my

THE LIFE OF A PAINTING

COOK-DIZNEY TAKES A PHOTO OF RAFAEL PEREZ, A SECURITY GUARD AT PS. 1 IN QUEENS, N.Y.. MAKES A SKETCH, FILLS IN COLOR AT HIS HARLEM STUDIO AND TRANSPORTS IT FOR DISPLAY IN PEREZ'S

SOUTH BRONX NEIGHBORHOOD

viewership could be more than just graf writers," he says. "I wanted to do things that affected a lot of people."

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His work questions many of the values that underlie hip hop as well as other forms of popular culture—materialism, consumerism, anti-intellectualism,

name-brand consciousness, gun iconography and sexuality. To confront these issues, he's had to reinvent every aspect of his art creation.

Using everyday life as his subject matter, Cook-Dizney composes portraits of the underappreciated worker and the "miseducated" youth, poor and working class people who don't fit neatly into America's official history and don't usually have a voice. A visual archaeologist, he's an artist who lets the hood speak for itself.

The events that affect the lives of urban folks also find expression in Cook-Dizney's art. A recent piece installed at PS. 1's Contemporary Art Center in Queens, New York,



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olks also find liece installed ns, New York, deals with the impact of the Amadou Diallo case on the local community. He compiled original research on police brutality and spoke with residents about their relationship with the police. He then used a series of photos and text to accompany his paintings of the people he'd interviewed.

Cook-Dizney challenges the way artwork operates and circulates by extending the language of painting beyond the walls of the ghetto to outside museums and galleries. The Studio Museum in Harlem, SoHo's Thread Waxing Space and San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts have all showcased his pieces. His ultimate goal, however, is always to erect his work in a local neighborhood.

Cook-Dizney's innovative style is based on blending the most fundamental level of painting with graf—work technique. "I'm not doing anything my traditional painting teachers would do, and I'm not doing anything graf writers would do, either," he says of his style, which concerns itself not only with can control, the domain of graf writers, but also with tone and color—terms that

interest traditional painters. "I try to use my can control and understanding of color and layering to show people the existence of a new vocabulary in spray paint and visual art in general."

Brett Cook-Dizney paints our movements in and out of pleasure and pain toward joy and then back again. His work empowers individuals, bringing them together and helping them to understand that they can rise above the conditions forced upon them by others. Ultimately, the faces he renders represent value beyond a market price—love, care, kindness, service, solidarity and the struggle for justice. "What I do is more complex than selling a person something," he says. "I paint regular people. What I do is not a reproduction. All the colors, marks and tones are what make the feeling. It's about one soul talking about another."

Peter Keatings is a composite figure who doesn't do what the academy does and doesn't do what the street does.