

NY CULTURE

Updated January 2, 2013, 3:05 p.m. ET

Signing Out of the Digital Age

An Artist Conjures the Era When Storefront Signs Were Handmade Works of Art

By REBECCA ROTHBAUM



Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal
Steve Powers at his new Icy Signs shop in Brooklyn.

The storefront resides on a slowly gentrifying, scruffy strip of Fourth Avenue straddling the Boerum Hill and Park Slope neighborhoods of Brooklyn. Standing out among the bodegas and the bars, its playful, cryptic sign reads in vaguely retro, brightly colored lettering:

ESPO's CREATIVE OUTLET:
ORIGINALS, MULTIPLES
AND INVALUABLES

This is the new home of Icy Signs, Steve Powers's decade-long bid to revive the dying art of sign painting and, in the process, transform New York's commercial streetscapes.

"There's a lot of the classic storefront look of New York that's just dissipated rapidly," said the 44-year-old Mr. Powers on a recent afternoon in the shop, which opened in December after earlier incarnations in downtown Brooklyn and TriBeCa. It serves both as a workspace for his crew and as a gallery that offers his own limited-edition prints and enamel-on-metal paintings. "We're trying to put our foot in before that door closes completely."



Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal
Art for sale.

In its quiet way, this mash-up of art and commerce is one of Mr. Powers's most radical projects yet—which is saying something when one considers his résumé: In the 1990s, he was the graffiti writer ESPO (short for Exterior Surface Painting Outreach), tagging storefronts, sidewalk grates, and providing an insider's view of the art form in the 1999 book, "The Art of Getting Over." That year, he was at the center of a high-profile vandalism case following his arrest for participating in a protest after then-Mayor Rudolph Giuliani attempted to close the controversial art show "Sensation" at the Brooklyn Museum.

In 2007, Mr. Powers was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship, using the grant money to travel to Ireland, where he painted the first in what would be a series of public murals around the world.



Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal
The shop's storefront on Fourth Avenue.

"I consider him to be one of the innovators," said Jeffrey Deitch, the former New York gallery fixture and current director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. With his new sign-painting work, Mr. Powers is helping to redefine the meaning of public art by creating work that boosts local economies and builds communities, said Mr. Deitch, whose now-closed Deitch Projects represented the artist. Said Mr. Deitch, "He's really invented something."

Icy Signs, which has outposts in Philadelphia and Johannesburg, South Africa, is also a product of Mr. Powers's longtime preoccupation with the visual language of advertising, going back to his early graffiti writing, which he saw as its own kind of brand—albeit one that "doesn't advertise anything but itself." Starting in the late 1980s in his hometown of Philadelphia, he'd paint

prophetic “ESPO stores” on the whitewashed facades of out-of-business shops.

Later, moving away from graffiti in what seemed to him like a “logical step,” he channeled the seductions of billboards and shop signs to explore ideas about religion and consumerism, as in his 2012 “Love Letter to Brooklyn,” the massive mural that wraps a Macy’s Parking Garage in downtown Brooklyn with such sentiments as “Euphoria is you for me.”



Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal
A public mural by Mr. Powers in downtown Brooklyn.

“I’m interested in stripping out the commercial, stripping in the emotional, providing something that looks like advertising but it’s conveying the business of human living, the transactions we make in negotiating with our families, the love we give back and forth, and the ways and means we navigate life,” he said. “The fact that sign painting is so clear and so direct makes it the perfect thing for expressing the most confusing and complicated issues we deal with.”

Still, he draws a clear line between his own art and that of Icy Signs, which is, above all, aimed at drumming up business for clients. “Ultimately, if we’re making a sign for a business, it’s a commercial enterprise,” Mr. Powers said, adding that the difference is in the craft of painting, in creating something pleasing to the eye that will endure. He acknowledged a soft spot for the hand-painted paper signs that supermarkets post in their windows to trumpet the daily specials. “I could paint the most crass, commercial sign, but if I do it with a brush and I do it with a little bit of passion, it will transcend that crassness. It does every time.”

He said his endeavor traces back to a seminal 2003-2004 project in which he partnered with the arts organization Creative Time and commissioned more than three dozen artists—including Rita Ackermann and Swoon—to create signs for 60 shops and attractions in Coney Island. The Dreamland Artist Club was aimed at stemming a rising tide of computer-printed vinyl awnings. “We weren’t trying to make art,” he said of the Coney Island effort. “We were trying to make good signs. And in doing so it became very artistic, just the act of having an artist doing that.”



Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal
His work for City Reliquary, a nonprofit museum of city artifacts in Williamsburg.

Mr. Powers admitted that it can get complicated. In the years since the Dreamland Artist Club, Icy Signs has taken on a mix of paid and free commissions, the latter being what he refers to as the “holy enterprise”—work for organizations or businesses he deems deserving of a hand-painted sign but that wouldn’t ordinarily be able to afford one, let alone one with Mr. Powers’s name attached. (He has also offered to paint free signs for businesses affected by superstorm Sandy.)

One such beneficiary is City Reliquary, a nonprofit museum of city artifacts in Williamsburg with which Mr. Powers felt an instant kinship. Bill Scanga, the museum’s president and co-founder, said he was worried at first that Icy’s work might be too conceptual for the scrappy institution. But he said the recently installed finished product—a bright red-and-yellow sign evoking its storefront home’s former life as a deli—was just what the museum needed. Said Mr. Scanga, “it fits right in with the rest of the neighborhood.”

A version of this article appeared January 2, 2013, on page A24 in the U.S. edition of The Wall Street Journal, with the headline: Signing Out of the Digital Age.

Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved