



VISUAL ART

The writing on the walls

The B_Line has resurrected the nearly 50-year-old Hubbard Street Murals project.

By ELISA SHOENBERGER

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The first thing you see is a large cement viaduct bisecting the Fulton Market neighborhood. But when you walk closer, it resolves into an explosion of brightly painted murals. One mural shows photo-realistic children while another shows an elephant riding a penny-farthing bicycle.

This is the B_Line.

“It’s a gallery and a museum of street art,” explains Levar Hoard, its chief curator and managing director. The B_Line—as in “making a beeline for”—is a reincarnation of the Hubbard Street Murals, which started in the early 1970s.

Since its rebirth a little more than a year ago, the B_Line has expanded to cover five city blocks, from Aberdeen to Green streets, with decorated underpasses in between. Seventy-five artists from Chicago and around the world have created these astonishing murals.

Hoard, a Fulton Market resident, had spent years walking by the fading murals. Three years ago, he finally decided to look into the history of the neighborhood and discovered that in the 70s, it had been predominantly

African-American. At the time, Chicago was experiencing cultural shifts as people were pushing back against racism and power structures.

Against this changing backdrop, Ricardo Alonzo, the founder of the Hubbard Street Murals, explains, “Chicago was having a rebirth of social issues that had taken to the streets in the form of public art,” most notably the Wall of Respect that went up in Bronzeville in 1967. Alonzo was inspired to, as he puts it, create “a universal message that concerns us all.”

That message was about protecting the environment and saving endangered species, inspired by Genesis 1:28: “And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” Each of the murals would show scenes of nature and wildlife.

In 1971, Alonzo and 12 students began painting the viaduct along the 900 block of Hubbard Street, but the project expanded in 1972 when

it received city funding to employ 50 students from nearby high schools at \$2.30 an hour—along with four School of the Art Institute seniors to supervise them. By 1979, they had completed the murals on the mile-long stretch between Ogden and Desplaines and employed more than 500 young people. That year, the city funding ran out and Alonzo moved to Arizona to pursue a career as art specialist for the U.S. Army.

Karen Smith and Fred Montano, a former student of Alonzo’s, picked up the torch in the late 1990s after the Union Pacific Railroad made repairs to the viaduct that damaged the original murals. Their goal was to create new murals while also restoring the old ones. They wanted the project to be community driven: “Anyone could submit a mural idea,” Smith says. Anne Marie Harm, who originally joined as a volunteer, helped lead the project from the mid-2000s until 2009 when she too left town.

Attempts were made to keep the project going but little happened until Hoard decided to revitalize it. Having lived in Miami, he was surprised that Chicago lacked an art district comparable to Miami’s Wynwood Walls, an

outdoor area with over 80,000 square feet of murals. “How do we know we are world-class in Chicago?” he asks. “You don’t know that until you benchmark to see what other cities are doing and then you attempt to go above and beyond that. It is my hope to make the B_Line that world-class example for Chicago.”

Hoard first met with Adrian Guerrero, then Union Pacific Railroad’s public affairs director for Chicago and Cook County, to determine the steps necessary to restart the project. It would require the cooperation of Alderman Walter Burnett Jr.’s office, the police district, and the community.

The B_Line’s first mural was an abstract piece painted by the Chicago artist Lefty Out There at 895 West Hubbard. It was unveiled during EXPO Chicago in September 2017. Merlot, Amuse126, and other Chicago-based artists soon made their own contributions. Felipe Pantone, an Argentinian-Spanish street artist, was the first international artist on the B_Line, decorating an entire underpass at Peoria. The B_Line has also hosted several events.

The artists submit their designs, some of which are then chosen by a small com- ➔

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mittee of other artists and local community members based on the artist's experience, style, and skill level. Hoard explains that they wanted to avoid including artists who already had a lot of murals in Chicago. "We want this to be a one-of-a-kind destination experience in Chicago," he says. Contributors have full control over the material of their murals, though they are asked to be mindful of the Bennett Day School nearby. Hoard may provide some curatorial support as well.

While there is a 501(c)3 for the project, Hoard explained that much of the funding has come from private donors as well as corporate sponsorships and fees from commercial shoots.

Hoard has big plans for the B_Line. He wants to make it more of "a world-class street art project" with 200 new and old murals. He aims to permanently seal some of the older murals in place to keep them on display.

Hoard sees the murals as one part of a much larger project. He and his team are working with the alderman and CDOT to lay sidewalks alongside the murals, move the bike lanes, and install better lighting. His long-term plans include connecting the B_Line to the Riverwalk and the 606.

Hoard has brought in SAIC students as interns to learn from the artists. Two of the students, Kalan Strauss and Saul Palos Rodriguez, have even painted murals of their own. He hopes to expand the program to bring in students from underresourced schools. He wants to have a diversity of artists and mural images.

"You are going to see true diversity reflected in the art," he says. "That's something that started in 1971, that's how I'm keeping it alive in 2018, going into 2019, and I take that very seriously." 

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Above: Murals painted at Aberdeen and Hubbard, 1973

 COURTESY THE B_LINE

Left: Artists assemblage, 1973

 COURTESY RICARDO ALONZO