

# Capturing the moment of creation

## Filmmaker Pablo Aravena documents the modern graffiti movement

### FILM »»PREVIEW

**NEXT: A PRIMER ON URBAN PAINTING**

Featuring filmmaker Pablo Aravena and the Heavyweight Collective Saturday, September 16 HiFi Club

ROBERTA McDONALD

As the debate rages on in Calgary as to the legality of graffiti and who has the right to adorn their property with the controversial art form, *NEXT: A Primer on Urban Painting* is coming to the HiFi Club for a Calgary Underground Film Festival fundraiser.

As part of the event, world-renowned artists the Heavyweight Collective will be painting throughout the evening with Smalltown DJs and TYG manning the decks.

In creating the documentary, Montreal filmmaker Pablo Aravena wanted to delve further into a culture that has been evolving over the last 40 years into a respected art form and to look at the subtle differences in the styles of graffiti in major urban centres around the world.

In a telephone interview from Montreal, he explains how a bit of serendipity helped him to connect



**Spraying what's on their minds — the film *Next: A Primer on Urban Painting* celebrates graffiti**

He notes the negative stereotypes associated with graffiti are misguided and misinformed. "It's not gang graffiti," he insists.

While galleries from Tokyo to Calgary have been providing wall space to graffiti artists, there are

still those who see it as a negative form of expression. Here in Calgary, graffiti is systematically covered up and criminalized. Aravena says it's natural for there to be differing opinions as to its value.

"It's like any other cultural movement. It's being measured and quantified as it evolves," he says.

Grffiti also lends vital colour to the sometimes bland urban landscape.

"It shows a city is living. It gives it edge and vibrancy."

After touring his film around the world, Aravena cites Melbourne, Australia as an example of a major urban centre working with artists to find a viable compromise. He says graffiti walls have become tourist attractions and the city has taken note and is working with local artists in a proactive way to showcase their talents.

Still, the struggle between big businesses that can afford to purchase massive billboards and the sides of buildings and artists who view those spaces as potential canvases continues to smoulder.

"Ultimately, it goes to a bigger argument. Why can I be bombarded by 500 billboards every day? The street is public, yet if you pay for it (advertising) it's OK. If you're a private citizen, it's not OK."

"It's about freedom of expression. We pride ourselves on these rights, let's not give them away," he says.

Aravena has no doubt that graffiti and graffiti-inspired art will evolve on its own terms and continue garnering legitimacy.

"It is art. Period."



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In a telephone interview from Montreal, he explains how a bit of serendipity helped him to connect with elusive graffiti artists around the world.

"It was very much right place, right time," he says, adding his connection with the Heavyweight Collective helped him to make contacts throughout the graffiti world. I wanted to capture the moment. It's not like the impressionists who are all dead. It's an aural culture that is very much connected. They all know each other."

From the catacombs of Paris to the grey brick of Sao Paulo, Aravena presents graf artists in their element. At times, their faces are obscured to protect their identities and there is a sense of guerrilla warfare as they create their work on buildings, trains and vans.

"It's basic human desire to leave a mark and express something," he says. "It's not just vandalism, it's deeper than that."

Exploring the roots of any art form is crucial to its understanding and Aravena examines graffiti from its beginnings in post-Vietnam New York where the movement began out of a sense of restlessness and political upheaval.

Aravena says a steady diet of advertising has spawned a new generation of artists who are filtering what they see and presenting a fresh vision.

"People grew up with ads and logos and slogans, it's the language of capitalism. It has the potential to do so many things."

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