

WHERE THERE'S A WALL

Meet the Paris artists who have brought art to the streets

Amid the cocktail chink and chatter of a gallery's first night, Miss-Tic, a petite figure with a mane of black hair, fur coat draped vampishly over her shoulders, poses briefly for photos. Unlike Banksy, the cult British street artist whose work is now commanding galactic prices in New York and London, Miss-Tic's "mystique" doesn't owe much to playing hide-and-seek. It's hard to be incognito when your stenciled likenesses are out there for all to see. But one sort of recognition has followed another: paintings by this witty, provocative, self-conscious Parisienne are being tipped by the smart money.

It hasn't happened overnight. For over 20 years, Miss-Tic and her fellow comrades-in-arts have been taking the crumbling walls of the city's less favored quarters as their canvases, most of them using the "pochoir" (stencil) as the medium of choice. Enfants terribles when Banksy was barely more than an enfant, they have stayed the course long after others have dumped their aerosol cans and aliases. Are they artists, or activists? Or both?

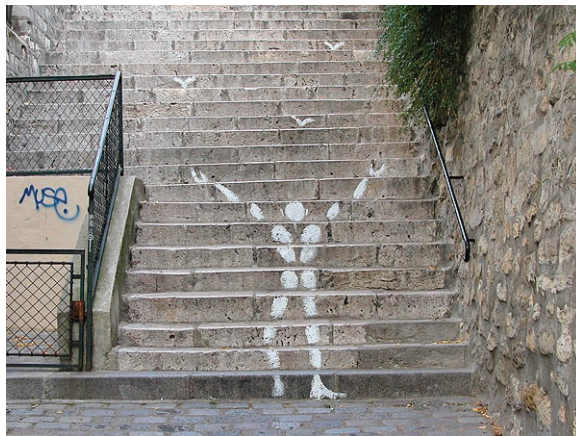
Neither, it seems, in this particular case. Miss-Tic regards herself not as an artist but as a writer and says she isn't motivated by politics. That's a tiny bit disingenuous, since her pochoir images set out to subvert the iconography of women's glossy magazines, and the feminist subtext is pretty clear. "What they didn't give me, I took," her sultry, spiky brunettes proclaim. "Fear what you wish for: wish for what you fear." It's her use of punchy bon mots that most sets Miss-Tic apart from other "first-generation" pochoiristes—that, of course, and being a woman, which might explain why she likes to get the last word. (I sympathize.) On a good day, she coins the sort of epigrams that wouldn't have shamed Oscar Wilde.

Miss-Tic has come a long way since her street pochoir debut, made after she broke up with Blek le Rat, who's considered to be the founder of the Paris pochoir scene. Along with gallery shows, there have been commissions from Vuitton, Kenzo and movie director Claude Chabrol, while London's Victoria and Albert Museum now owns two of her paintings. But don't worry; you'll find plentiful examples of her work in the 6th arrondissement, around the Butte-aux-Cailles (13th) and in Belleville (20th), where she has an atelier. And if you can't resist owning a Miss-Tic of your own, you can still pick up a work on paper for a modest €3,000 or so at auction—though you should know that "To possess is to be possessed," to quote Mlle T.

For Jérôme Mesnager, read art over activism. In his airy atelier in the eastern suburb of Montreuil, he's surrounded by elaborate re-workings

of his "Corps Blanc" (white body, shown), his leitmotif more or less since he graduated from the craft-oriented Ecole Boule. "Painting in the street, on canvas, on wood, it all comes down to the same," he says. He shrugs off my questions. "It's all in the book," he says, waving a copy of "20 Ans Qu'il Court" (Editions Critère).

Well, yes, up a point. Mesnager emerged on the street-art scene in the early 1980s, though he's a painter rather than a pochoiriste. His Corps Blanc, a lithe figure resembling an animated artist's mannequin, evokes light, energy and joie de vivre. The motif has proved so engaging that Mesnager has since painted it as far afield as the Great Wall of China. Nearer to home, this free spirit crops up wherever you least expect it. Flying from a trapeze in the 19th, draped down



a flight of Belleville steps, paddling an open canoe near the Canal St-Martin, it's at its most powerful in the last enclaves of working-class Paris, where it speaks to local identity, a sense of belonging. It's often humorous, and sometimes poignant, especially when it appears in mute protest on condemned buildings, at Bercy, for example, before the area was redeveloped.

Easy to see how these "petits bonhommes blancs" have captured the hearts of Parisians—not to mention the city's cleansing staff, who've learned to tip Mesnager off when his creations need to be touched up. Receiving a carte-blanche commission at a boutique hotel in the 6th has brought a stream of international clients to his door. Does that mean he's tempted to give up street art? "I'll keep going as long as the demand is there," he answers, equivocally. Then he grins: "When I paint in the street, I've got the whole world as my public."

Mesnager's longtime collaborator is Nemo, a veteran pochoiriste whose calling card is a solid-looking gent in a raincoat, a brimmed hat pulled hard down over his face. It could be a disquieting image. It isn't, thanks to the accompanying details: a red balloon, say, or an

umbrella in a gust. Nemo's "petit bonhomme noir" tumbles stylishly over the same terrain as the Corps Blanc, playing light to its shadow. On the whole, Nemo prefers the shade, too. Not for nothing his moniker means "no one."

Now the subject of a book ("Nemo par Pen-nac," available at www.amazon.fr), Nemo took his original inspiration from an unlikely source: a reprint of Winsor McCay's early 20th-century cartoons for the New York Herald. Helping his six-year-old son color in the pages, he was seized by the urge to experiment. "Back then, there was politics all around," he recalls. "We encouraged each other. There were lots of condemned buildings, lots of space ... We didn't ask permission."

Twenty-five years on, Nemo's signature pochoirs have become part of the city landscape. No slacker, he's also taken his art to Tokyo and has worked extensively in Colombia, a country about which he is passionate. (The feeling's mutual, earning him the nickname of Bogotá's "other mayor.") His message? There isn't one, the retired computer engineer tells me. "The images stand out. Whether they're worrying or playful,

well, that's up to people to decide for themselves ... It's a character that belongs in the city, like something out of a detective novel. Someone might find it sad, and then the sun comes out, and they'll see it quite differently." He muses on the challenge of finding empty walls. "There are places ...," he says, suddenly mysterious. It's the perennial concern of a pochoiriste.

"If you see a wall you haven't painted, you immediately want to," sympathizes Gérard Laux. He's half of Mosko et Associés, two former print-worker colleagues who joined forces in 1990 in a bid to brighten up the Moskowa quartier, in the city's north east. Some of those early pochoirs are still in place. At the other extreme, others were demolished in a week. They sometimes team up with Mesnager and Nemo. "There's no rivalry," reveals Laux. "It's an exchange; there's a real bond of friendship between us."

The duo "specialize" in pochoirs of exotic wildlife. Their tigers, meerkats and prancing zebras add a splash of color—and a whiff of liberty—to the urban jungle. "It's about improving the city, bringing pleasure to people," Laux says. "And it's a passion." Mosko et Associés exhibit commercially (see site: www.moskoetasociés.fr). They also take commissions, such as the dapper giraffe who adorns the wall of the Marais bistro where we meet. But they continue to paint without permission, and they've opted not to offer their work at auction. It's part of a determination to distance themselves from a commercial trend that threatens, at least, to take the street out of street art.

"We don't want to get carried away. We still want to paint in the street and in rundown areas," says Laux. "Everything that causes the prices to soar takes you further away from the people."

—By Amanda MacKenzie