

# DRAW A LINE

Andrew Schoultz

## In This Day And Age Art Should Serve A Purpose

Andrew Schoultz tells us he isn't a very verbal person, but conversely we find he has a lot to say. He's open and forward, reactive to his environment and is fond of ancient German map-making techniques. Yes, we thought, this is going to be something very interesting.

We'd been in contact for a long while before the opportunity came up to meet with him in Berlin. Over a couple of warm May days we made his DRAW A LINE edition, showed him our favorite local graffiti spots and questioned him on his well-established career – something he modestly says he stumbled into. The Los Angeles-based artist is represented around the world by galleries like VI Gallery in Copenhagen and Mark Moore Gallery in Los Angeles, and he creates a number of public murals every year in response to local issues.

If Schoultz thinks his verbal communication is lacking, then he certainly makes up for it in his works. To him, art performs its best when it challenges something that has already been accepted. His fantastical canvasses, installations and murals show repetitive themes of war, imperialism and socio-political hardships, telling us that even if history is a fate bound to repeat itself, you should always challenge the man.



**Let's start at the beginning. You went to art school in California. What made San Francisco attractive?**

When I arrived in San Francisco it was a very interesting time in the late-nineties. There were certain things happening there that had an effect on a global scale. The mentality of making art really went against everything that the art world was about. People were pulling stuff out of trashcans and painting it, and suddenly this was revered. As simple as it sounds, that was something kind of drastic at the time and something that appealed to myself and many others.

San Francisco was a really community-based city. There was a grass roots sort of art scene. A lot of times you can go to school in a city and never really delve into the actual community where the scene is and what it means to be there. You exist outside of that by existing only in academia. I was getting involved in art shows and meeting other graffiti writers. We were doing things. You don't know at the time that what you were experiencing would turn out to be this really significant thing.



**A lot of artists spend years trying to achieve the success and international coverage that you've had. Apart from skill, do you think that a lot of your fortune has to do with being part of that community?**

To be perfectly honest, I think a lot of it has to do with being in the right place at the right time. San Francisco had a very original connection between community projects and commercial galleries and museums. Basically, what happened to me was this project called the Clarion Alley Mural Project, which was a crappy alleyway in the mission district where a lot of artists addressed political issues through art. I approached the project to do a wall and they let me, and it caused a lot of attention. After that not only was I offered to do other walls, but some of these non-profit organizations in the city took notice. Different kinds of chain reactions started to happen from painting a mural in this project. So that's a pretty rare or original thing, I would say. I was always doing what I wanted to do and all of a sudden that led to these great opportunities that I wanted to take advantage of. That's sort of the nature of myself.

**And you ended up with your works in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA)?**

Yes, then things really started to happen. The SFMOMA gives out this award called the SECA to a local artist every two or three years. I would always get nominated to apply and actually get a studio visit, but I never actually won the award. What happened though was that I became on the radar of the curators. Around 2008, Gary Garrels became the chief curator at SFMOMA and decided to acquire four of my works for the collection at the time and later on another piece. I was also invited to curate a room of Paul Klee works from their collection and make a number of my own original works in response to those. They've done that a few times with different young artists, it's an ongoing thing. Like I said, I never had a plan, but these certain opportunities came my way and soon after I started showing internationally a lot.

**Your mural projects are well known for incorporating local social or political topics. We'd like to know why you shifted from painting street graffiti to creating these types of murals. Do you think you have a duty to be socially responsible?**

A lot of things changed in the years and years of doing graffiti. Painting your name on rooftops, writing graffiti in the night and having these adventures is a lot of fun, but it's also a very self-serving activity in a lot of respects. I came to a point where this wasn't enough for me anymore and I wanted to serve a greater purpose than myself.

In the late nineties and early 2000s, there were a lot of things going on in my life and one of those things that I was constantly facing – and I'm sure many people in Berlin face – was the idea of losing my apartment. Gentrification is a major issue. It's a very hard conversation because in a lot of respects, gentrification begins when the artists show up to an area and make the area more interesting, which brings all the rich people in who all of a sudden want to live there because the place is cool. Then who gets displaced? The people who lived there in the beginning and then eventually the artists, too. It is kind of this cycle of things. I was suddenly being faced with a lot of issues that could be considered political. It was an awakening. Different things like this event in my life have sparked me to want to achieve something more with my art and for it to have a more engaging aspect in the public compared to some artwork that's just about yourself.

**There's a lot of dialogue on that subject in Berlin at the moment. How have you previously addressed it in your art?**

The most recent wall I did in L.A. is in the downtown area art district where a lot of people are being displaced in place of new fancy restaurants and apartments. Basically, this particular piece is addressing the real-estate speculation. There's a whole sort of attack with maps and phases of war. The underlying theme to the mural is that there are war tactics being used by real-estate developers to move into the neighborhood and conquer it. It can be debated that the message isn't being communicated well, but I don't believe that any art should be super definitive or super obvious. I think in a lot of ways the things to do with public art that work the best is when they work on a subversive or subtle level and the viewer has to think about what they're seeing.

## **What are the main issues or themes your artwork has been concerned with over the past years?**

For me, I feel like the time when some of the best art happens is when you are angered. I found myself feeling very angry throughout the period when George W. Bush was president of the United States and seeing the way our country inflicts ideological values onto others. The war in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan were a huge focus in my work for many years. Then came the dawning of Obama and hope and I thought I wasn't going to be so angry anymore, but the economic fallout crisis of 2009 happened and all of a sudden you're watching this insane ship go down with all of these people losing their jobs and houses. Suddenly, I found my focus became more about global economics and the rise and shine of China's effect on America's labour, and outsourcing jobs and all these different things.

All this stuff is all related: war, the environment, global economics, outsourcing materials, the use of carbon fuels... You can't really start to talk about one of them without really addressing all of them in their entirety, because otherwise you'll have holes in your story. And I'm not saying I have solutions to any of this stuff, but it's stuff that I find is relevant to make art about. Not everybody has to have these burning issues or burning angers, but I feel like art serves its best purpose is when it is questioning something that has been accepted. That's sort of the underlying theme of all the work that I make.

## **Let's talk about how the American flag became part of your works.**

Back when George W. Bush was our president it was told in a number of ways that our flag was being frowned upon. Then when Barack Obama was elected, the flag was flying high in the air. That's fascinating to me – how literally in a very short period of time, the American flag as a symbol went from being unpopular to being admired. This duality is what intrigued me about it, so my idea was to order a bunch of American flags and stretch them as if they were canvasses to play around with as a background. Upon ordering these flags and receiving them I came to find out that they all come with a certificate of authenticity, but in fact these military-grade American flags were outsourced and produced in China. I viewed that as something I really wanted to then talk about in my work – the rise of eastern economy taking over in a lot of ways.

## **That's pretty incredible. How was it received when you used the flags as material in your work?**

It was very controversial. Who are the people who are most affected by this outsourcing of jobs to China? It's the unions, the blue-collar workers, the whole middle of the country. Who are the people who most take offence to the desecration of their flag that I have to deal with? It's the same crowd. They're the same people who take hard-core pride in the flag, but are also the ones who are so affected by the outsourcing of jobs to China. To show that these flags aren't actually produced in America made perfect sense to me.

## **A lot of your work (constructively) criticizes your home country, but what do you like about where you come from?**

To live in America I have the privilege to criticize the country I live in, which is part of what I love about the country. It's actually the most patriotic thing you can do, to question the powers that be. As an American, or as a German, we live very privileged lifestyles as compared to a lot of parts of the world. Part of being able to view the world and see my own country in the way that I do has been a privilege of being able to travel. When you actually go to a third world country and you see people who are really poor and without even the basic essentials of life you start to realize that even the very bottom tier of society in America has it better than some parts of the world. Everything that I love about my country is what fuels me to criticize my country – to criticize it in a way that you are trying to change it, that you have hope, that you take pride in your country and want to see better things in your country, and you want to see the way they act in the world is better too.

## **Do you think there is a need for provocation in art in order for it to be authentic today?**

I feel it's my duty in some way or another as an artist to address some of this in my work. I have nothing against making pretty pictures, that's part of what I do as well, but I think that in this day and age art should serve a purpose. You can sit here and dissect art and talk about all these little details, but I feel in some ways that I'm not a verbal person. That's why I chose painting. The idea of making artwork is more of a nonverbal communication where I can best discuss the ideas that I have, much better than I am here.

Andrew Schoultz will have a solo exhibition at Ruttkowski;68 in Cologne in October this year.