

She Loves the Moon

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Choose Your Own Adventure books used to be a staple of rainy-day recesses at the grade-school library. And yet, on an otherworldly beautiful San Francisco day in July, there they were: couple after couple, hand in hand, choosing their own adventures along the perimeter of Dolores Park. With their eyes glued to the pavement, they found themselves engrossed in a story spray-painted on the sidewalk below them. *"She tells him about the dream journals she kept since she was 12, filled with watercolor sketches and the lyrics of subconsciously composed songs,"* reads one sidewalk entry stenciled in red. *"She tells him about the telescope she uses to examine the intricate surface of the moon."*

Last month, 43 whimsical snippets of text like the above passage were stenciled onto city streets, tracing the smoldering saga of a man with a yen for a woman who only has eyes for the moon. Depending upon which paths readers choose to follow, one can enjoy 16 different story combinations, four endings, and hike nearly four miles up and down San Francisco's hills and flats.

The mysterious duo behind the sidewalk stencils titled *"She Loves the Moon"* call themselves *"The Strangers."* For purposes of identification, there's the Tall Pale Stranger and the Short Dark Stranger.

The inspiration for the stenciled sidewalk-novella came to them after glancing at other street artists' work. *"We were walking by this awesome stencil of a purple cartoon bear on the street and we had a vague notion of doing something more interactive with stencils,"* said the Short Dark Stranger.

They elicited literary suggestions from friends, made their own stencils, and painstakingly matched geographical locations to plot devices. *"The stencil that mentions the sun glowing off Bernal Heights in the distance well, if you look up from that stencil at a certain time of day, you'll see Bernal Heights with the sun glowing off of it,"* says the Tall Pale Stranger.

Going from *"Hey, that's a great idea!"* to spraying down stencils at 15 seconds a pop took around six months of brainstorming plot twists, mapping the interlocking paths on a computer, cutting 43 stencils, and, of course, writing the damn story. The Strangers furtively painted the town red literally over a couple of days in early July.

Of course, all that work will eventually disappear once city graffiti crews paint over it. Transience is an occupational hazard with stencil art as is getting caught by the police.

The masterminds behind *"She Loves the Moon"* are almost fanatically preoccupied with the possibility of being busted by the police for 43 instances of vandalism. When they agreed to meet an SF Weekly reporter at the bell in Dolores Park, they insisted he wear a red string on his sleeve. A compromise was reached to simply wear a red shirt.

The Strangers have never been busted and would like to keep it that way. Graffiti damage up to \$400 is punishable by up to a year in jail, a \$10,000 fine, or both, and graffiti damages exceeding \$400 can be a felony offense and carry penalties of three years in state prison and a fine of up to \$50,000.

With that in mind, more street artists are turning to stencil art's speed, efficiency, and neatness as a means of expression. All it takes is a piece of cardboard, an X-Acto knife, and a can of spray paint to pose an idea or tell a story with the potential to change the gait of pedestrians and make them stop and think.

"Part of what we find really interesting about it is it connects people to public space and gets them walking around the neighborhood and interacting with other people," says the Short Dark Stranger.

The Mission and Haight-Ashbury neighborhoods lead San Francisco's stencil scene with dozens of artists contributing their work to the galleries of the streets. In the Lower Haight, an artist has stenciled images of a "gas tank" with an Army-tank base and a fuel-pump-nozzle head. Another anonymous stencil in the neighborhood reads: *"Hipster tee: \$71. Hipster jeans: \$199. Gentrification: Priceless."*

Not all stencils have profound or political messages. One artist, who signs her (or his) work E.Clair, sometimes E. Clairacuda, has about 15 different stencils up and down Haight Street that are no more than cutesy cartoonish girls. But the lack of a message makes no difference to Russell Howze, a connoisseur of stencil art. *"Someone went out of their way to cut a stencil and break the law,"* Howze says. *"I give them props."*

While most people examine their surroundings at eye level, Howze keeps his eyes on the ground. He carries a digital camera and takes different paths when walking around the city in search of stencils. Even when he's overseas, his eyes are on the sidewalks, utility boxes, and sides of newsstands. *"Most people do tourist stuff. What do I do when I go on vacation? I wander around looking for stencils,"* says Howze, 37, who has documented stencils since 1997.

To date, he's collected 7,000 images of stencil graffiti from all over the world on his Web site, www.StencilArchive.org. He's currently in the early stages of his book, *Stencil Nation*, to be completed next year for Manic D Press.

According to Howze, a self-proclaimed *"certified stencil geek,"* street stencils emerged as a counterculture movement in 1960s Paris through the Situationist movement. Artists in major cities worldwide began following suit, using stencils as a means to convey political messages. The art form's origins in San Francisco are a little murky. Stencil artist Scott Williams credits punk band the Fuck Ups as among the first to stencil their logo on San Francisco streets from 1979 through the early '80s. Williams, a local art legend who won the 2005 Adaline Kent Award from the San Francisco Art Institute, began applying stencils to various media in the 1980s on everything from canvas to cars.

Slowly, the number of stencils increased as graffiti became a part of American pop culture.

"There are stencils on every building. It's temporary, it's anonymous, whimsical, humorous, ironic. It's really an unsung art form," says Ray Morrone, curator of the Space Gallery.

On June 22, the venue was packed for the Stickers and Stencils show. Artists, 73 to be exact, sprayed their artwork directly on the gallery walls. Morrone hopes to unify local stencil artists and help bring more into the gallery atmosphere.

Not everyone in town, though, is a fan of stencilers. Peter Bray is a volunteer in the city's Graffiti Watch program. Every morning before the sun rises, the 48-year-old spends two hours walking through the Mission and painting over graffiti and scraping stickers. This has been his morning ritual for the last two years.

"It's my contribution to improve the morale of the people of my neighborhood," says Bray, who has lived in San Francisco for 27 years. *"I'm walking in the Mission 10 times a day and when I'm not barraged by graffiti, I have a much lighter gait in my step."*

But Bray doesn't waste his time with sidewalk graffiti. *"People walking down the street aren't generally looking at the sidewalk ... the most effective improvement would be to improve the field of vision from a walker's perspective."*

That's good news for the creators of *"She Loves the Moon."* Maybe their handiwork will still be around by the time you read this.

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Artworks preview :

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