

CALENDAR

Graffiti Chronicler's Video Delves Into Urban Scrawl

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Like many people around Los Angeles, film maker Gary Glaser had grown puzzled by the hieroglyphics and cryptic drawings scrawled on sides of buses, commercial buildings, apartment houses and just about any available blank—or partially blank—surface. Just who was responsible for the graffiti spreading like a contagious disease across the city?

Glaser decided to find out, setting out with camera and microphone to document the search.

He presented the culmination of his odyssey—"Bombing L.A.," a fast-paced, 48-minute video documentary of the subculture surrounding graffiti writers—a little over a week ago to a packed house and emerged from the screening to find a wall outside the theater freshly defaced with colorful scrawled monikers.

"I was disappointed," Glaser said. "I was surprised to see it. But the program was made to spark some dialogue between graffiti writers and the community at large so I think that it was successful in doing that."

A few days later, the 39-year-old film maker returned to the site of the screening and spent a sweaty afternoon painting over the almost-calligraphic red, blue and black "tags" of the graffiti outlaws,



THOMAS KERSLEY / Los Angeles Times

Gary Glaser paints over "tags" that appeared on a wall after a screening of his documentary "Bombing L.A." on graffiti writers.

his happiness over a successful reception to his documentary tempered with hesitation. Glaser—who has produced documentaries on gangs and disabled artists and won an Emmy for his chronicling of a failed homeless encampment in downtown Los Angeles—now fears that this sort of vandalism could happen again and hamper his efforts to find a venue for future screenings.

"My concern is that it would be perceived that the film causes graffiti," Glaser said. "It's an explo-

had spread to graffiti artists and artist "wannabes," and many promised Glaser that they would attend to see themselves and their cohorts on screen.

The graffiti artists were clearly the stars of Glaser's documentary. The youths featured came from all over Southern California and from various socioeconomic levels and ethnic backgrounds. Many were well-spoken, thoughtful and intelligent, dashing the stereotype that graffiti artists are vandals and violence-crazed gang members.

Indeed, the characteristic spray-painted block letters once confined to ghettos and barrios can now be found in the most upscale areas.

The film revealed that those in search of the perfect "tabula rasa" upon which to scribble words and pictures do it mostly to express themselves, to make their mark and be noticed, set apart from the anonymous mass of youths in a city that leaves many feeling alienated and disenfranchised.

"I just started tagging to try and make myself known," said a guy who identified himself as "Miner."

"Most people don't understand the subculture," Glaser said. In fact, of the millions spent last year, virtually none was spent to channel the creative urges of graffiti artists into other more socially acceptable pursuits. Most was spent simply to clean up.

Explored in the film were the whys and whos—in addition to the wheres and whats—of graffiti.

"I have sort of a moral code

about graffiti," said "Plex," a youth from the San Fernando Valley. "I don't write on people's houses, I don't write on schools and I don't write on churches... 'cause that's people's stuff," but he explained that he had no such scruples about defacing "bus benches, mailboxes, light poles, city-owned stuff."

Glaser argues that the documentary was intended not only as an exploration of a subculture, but to encourage more positive endeavors—such as making murals, called "piecing" (for masterpiece.)

Said a teen-ager who called himself "Reim": "In about eighth grade, I started writing on everything, got into a lot of trouble... then I started seeing the art aspect of it... I bought paint, started piecing... That seemed a lot more creative than just writing on everything."

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