That’s your shadow on the wall, you know?

Bengtsen, Peter

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“That’s your shadow on the wall, you know?”

By Peter Bengtsen

In 2006, I had the pleasure of returning to the Andalusian city of Granada, where I had been living a few years prior. Although Granada is not a large city, it is a bit of a mecca for underground culture, including graffiti and street art. On a walk around the city’s old Moorish quarter, Albaicín, I came across a street artwork that caught my attention (Figure 1). Placed on a stone post in a small plaza with a view to the Alhambra, the artwork combined freehand spray painting and stencilling in red, black and white to create an image of a brain in an emergency box. The depth of the box was produced with quite crude spray painted black perspective lines while semi-translucent clouds of white spray paint created the illusion of a reflective glass window upon which the words “Usar en caso de emergencia” – use in case of emergency – had been stencilled. Underneath this sentence, a single word had been added: “SAM3”.

Figure 1: Sam3 stencil painting in Granada, Spain (2006).
At the time, I had no idea that “Sam3” was the pseudonym of the Spanish artist who had created the painting. I also did not know that he would soon abandon the stencil technique and go on to become famous within the street art world for his large-scale monochromatic silhouette paintings on walls in the street. With these paintings, Sam3 has established himself alongside artists like the Italians Blu and Ericailcane as a forerunner in what can perhaps best be described as a new street art muralism movement that has emerged and become increasingly prolific during the last decade.

From the vantage point of 2014, it is clear that the stencil painting in Granada was something of a rarity. Although other early street works by Sam3 – some of which are featured in the 2009 book Sombras – also contain stencilled elements, it is a technique the artist seems to have abandoned fairly early on, as he discovered and developed a more personal style which has made his street artwork instantly recognisable.

Figure 2: Sam3 mural in Lisbon, Portugal (2013).
A large part of Sam3’s street work consists of large monochromatic silhouette paintings, often of people and animals interacting with the surrounding environment (see for example Figure 2). There are exceptions, however, to this style of work. One notable case is an intervention from 2008 where the artist painted a white skeleton on the black frame of a Toro de Osborne near Madrid. Originally created as billboard advertisements for the Osborne brand of sherry, the silhouette of the tall black bull has become a ubiquitous symbol of Spain. Visually reducing the proud and strong bull to bare bones (or, as in a second intervention from 2009, using blue paint to reduce the frame of the bull to that of a more humble goat) can be seen as a way of addressing the economic hardship and diminished living conditions in Spain during the global financial crisis. Such social issues are frequently touched upon in Sam3’s work, although often in a quite understated way. A good example of this is a project from 2010 in which the artist partly painted over with black paint 12 dilapidated commercial billboards in Murcia. On its own, each billboard intervention made no sense, but put together (as the artist did with photographs on his website), the billboards spelled out the title of the artwork: Subliminal. A title which references the way advertising permeates public space and affects those who move in it.

In his studio work, Sam3 often creates artworks that in terms of style and subject matter come across as small-scale extensions of his street work. This is obviously not a one-way process, as the studio works sometimes read as sketches for future murals. Drawing seems to be at the heart of Sam3’s oeuvre, but over the years he has proven to be a very versatile and adept artist who enjoys experimenting in the studio with different techniques: apart from drawings on paper, he has tried his hand at among other things etching, woodcutting, photo-etching, and ceramics. Animation is another form of expression the artist has explored with fascinating results. In one video from 2008 entitled Water Kiss, a stop-motion sequence featuring two human beings that meet in a kiss is created solely by photographing water being poured on a hot asphalt surface that causes the liquid to evaporate.

Irrespective of the particular technique employed in a certain artwork (in the street or the studio), and regardless of whether the subject matter be recurring themes like politics, romance or Man’s place in the ecosystem or in the Universe, there is a pervasive sense of poetry and subtle humour.
in Sam3’s work which reveals not just a certain nostalgic disposition and sense of wonder at the world around us, but also an undercurrent of quiet desperation at human behaviour.

In October 2014, Sam3 is showing a range of new works at Wunderkammern gallery in Rome, in an exhibition entitled Monumental. As the title suggests, a central theme in the body of work – which includes a new set of ceramics in the artist’s characteristic monochrome palette, graphite and ink works on paper, paintings on canvas and a new video animation – is the relationship between the individual and the monuments that we build our society around. This is clearly seen in the drawings entitled Torre de Babel and Caballero. In these works, Sam3’s characteristic dark silhouettes of human beings cluster together, their bodies making up respectively the structural supports for the Tower of Babel and the horse of a king (or another power holder) on a pedestal. In Caballero, the subordinate position of those who maintain the power holder in his place is particularly evident. Another comment on power relations can also be observed in a third drawing entitled Templo, in which the human bodies support – and are simultaneously restricted by – the pillars and roof of an ancient temple. These works can be seen to deal with the monument as a representation of the structures of our society and the role we play in maintaining these structures that often ultimately have a subjugating function. In some of the other works presented in Monumental, Sam3 seems to suggest that there may be a way for the individual to escape the oppressing societal order. The ceramic plate Árbol can be read as a suggestion that one might find some kind of liberty through a closer affinity to nature, while the plate Hombre perhaps proposes that the way to emancipation from a life of blindly following the masses and reproducing societal norms goes through introspection and reflection on our own individual place in the world.

We may each be but a mere shadow on the walls that make up the monumental structures of society. But we must not forget that it is still our shadow on the wall.

Peter Bengtsen is an art historian and sociologist. He has been writing about street art since 2006 and recently published the book The Street Art World.

http://lu.academia.edu/PeterBengtsen