



Art in the alleyways

TORONTO IS A LOVELY CANADIAN CITY, COURTEOUS AND CALM. YET ITS SERENE SIDE IS OFFSET BY A PENCHANT FOR FLAMBOYANT STREET ART. THE MEEK AND THE MILD MEET THE DRAMATIC AND WILD

WORDS & IMAGE | GISELLE WHITEAKER

The late Sir Peter Ustinov once described Toronto, Canada as “New York run by the Swiss.” The cool, composed city is so neat that there’s a Canadian joke suggesting movie-makers from the US bring their own rubbish into the city to make it look more American. Walking down the well-tended sidewalks, the multicultural population flowing past at a leisurely pace, Toronto exudes a quietly-clean buzz. There’s plenty going on in the city of tolerance, but it’s politely excusing itself as it goes, doffing its hat and smiling broadly at the oh-so-well-mannered onlookers as it gets set to put on a show.

Strolling down broad tree-lined avenues, the spindly CN Tower pointing to the heavens in the distance, the pleasant sun-dappled city stamps its mark on the consciousness. But it is down its vibrant alleyways that the beating undercurrent of Toronto truly comes to life.

Urban art is prolific in this city. It is impossible to miss and even harder not to look at. Splashes of colour turn grey passages into ephemeral works of art, evolving, shifting and changing by day and by night. Follow in the footsteps of Canadian comedian Rick Mercer and you will find yourself in Rush Lane, immersed in graffiti art. Mercer records his rants for popular television show *The Rick Mercer Report* here, in this kilometre-

long passage running parallel to bohemian-cool Queen Street West, Toronto’s trendiest shopping district. Mercer is often seen purposefully striding along this alley berating local politics as the scene behind him explodes with riotously riveting graffiti-art in a rainbow of colour and creativity.

On a quiet morning in the alley, photographers stroll past, shutters whirring furiously, documenting the works for posterity as if they will be whitewashed into oblivion any minute. Cartoon characters greet political figures on the walls, a zoological collection of animals crawling across one façade. An offshoot – an alley from an alley – lies quiet in monochrome, an occasional burst of effervescent red capturing the eye. All the while, cryptic messages crawl across the memory: “I’m just walking my dog, singing my song.”

Around one corner, a portrait of a young woman is stunning in its beauty. Her eyes gaze across the alley, framed by two windows, her auburn hair falling in silken locks around her face, swathed in textured green. The arresting figure is so life-like that the bricks of her composition are easy to ignore.

The street-art fest doesn’t end here. Art adorns neighbourhoods such as Kensington Market

and Chinatown like cultural exposés. Colourful storefronts and murals tell stories of ethnic heritage, while in hip Ossington Avenue’s alley of creativity the street-art community has tuned in to legitimate city-art, spraying garage doors with fantastic scenes transforming the laneway into an urban art gallery, blushing with colour.

Some say Toronto is one of the best street-art cities on Earth. Even Banksy has contributed to the invigorating urban art scene. But what makes it art and not vandalism? StreetARToronto (StART) has the answer. The proactive programme promotes legal street art to add character to the cityscape. Creativity is encouraged with the motto: “Inspiring neighbourhoods one wall at a time.”

Sitting on the subway on a journey on the Bloor-Danforth Line, a sudden punctuation pierces the darkness of the underground. The train emerges into bright daylight between Dundas West Station and Keele Station, its commuters blinking in sudden luminosity. If this unexpected apparition is not visual feast enough, look south to see a cornucopia of street art painted onto the backs of a block of shops. Here, underground transport meets underground art; an encounter of visible brilliance. 📍