

Divorced, Los Angeles, 2011.

When I was a kid I thought that only thugs did graffiti. That is to say that they “did” graffiti in much the same vague way that they “did” drugs.

At the hardware store I saw cases of spray paint, kept in little tiny jails, padlocked and protected from the clutches of sinister teenagers with Mohawks and switchblades and piercings that had little chains connecting their nose to their ears. The first time I saw real graffiti was when I moved to New York City. I was 18, fresh off the bus from Iowa, to attend college at The School of Visual Arts as a screenwriting major. At the time, I responded to it in much the same way as the first time a friend showed me a *Playboy* magazine; stifled awe and a feigned cavalier shrug as if to say: “Oh that? Yeah—that’s no

big deal. I’m totally comfortable with all that. Still, let’s study it for a few hours just ‘cause.”

As fascinated as I was, my untrained suburban eyes couldn’t make out the words or their meaning, and in truth, I didn’t really understand what the point was. No matter how punk I tried to be, the idea of destruction for the sake of destruction or the giddy thrill of petty rebellion didn’t appeal to me and the idea of trucking around an ego so large that one’s goal is simply to scrawl your name on every conceivable object seemed exhausting. Anthropological motives notwithstanding, I

**I PUT
THAT
THERE**

MORLEY



Justified Existence, Los Angeles, 2012.

still didn't quite get what it added beyond an urban aesthetic and an anti-authority statement, but I suppose that was good enough for me. My perspective changed when my more cosmopolitan art school peers introduced me to what at the time was being redefined from "vandalism" to "street art." This wasn't just tagging a wall or carving curse words on the stall doors of a public bathroom; this was an actual message. This was art for the sole purpose of offering a gift to anyone who ran across it. As a screenwriting major, this was a revelation. No longer were there a million filters to your audience, a million approvals required before you were able to begin telling your story, and it wasn't a flyer to come to see your band play; it WAS your band playing. The ability to reach the end of an artistic journey in which you create something for a purpose and

then actually get to see it live out that purpose was intoxicating. Another appealing aspect was that it wasn't as much about celebrating the artist, but rather the art itself. Instead of a just seeing a name in bubble letters, it was an image that interacted with the environment; it asked the passerby to approach, to touch, to consider the statement it was making without conditions or setting intellectual standards. This was art by and for the people. It didn't have to be crafted in a studio by an artist deemed professional by the hallowed white walls of a sterile, disinfected gallery or a restrictive museum keeping you 6 feet from the work at all times; it could come from anyone with something to say and the balls to say it. Maybe, I thought, even some wide-eyed kid from Iowa.

Street artist Morley is known for displaying messages of hope and humor, with slogans such as "Let's fall in love like both our parents aren't divorced." You can often see Morley himself—or, a drawing of him—drawing these messages around L.A. His work appears on the streets and can be viewed at www.IAmMorley.com



Unchased, Los Angeles, 2013.

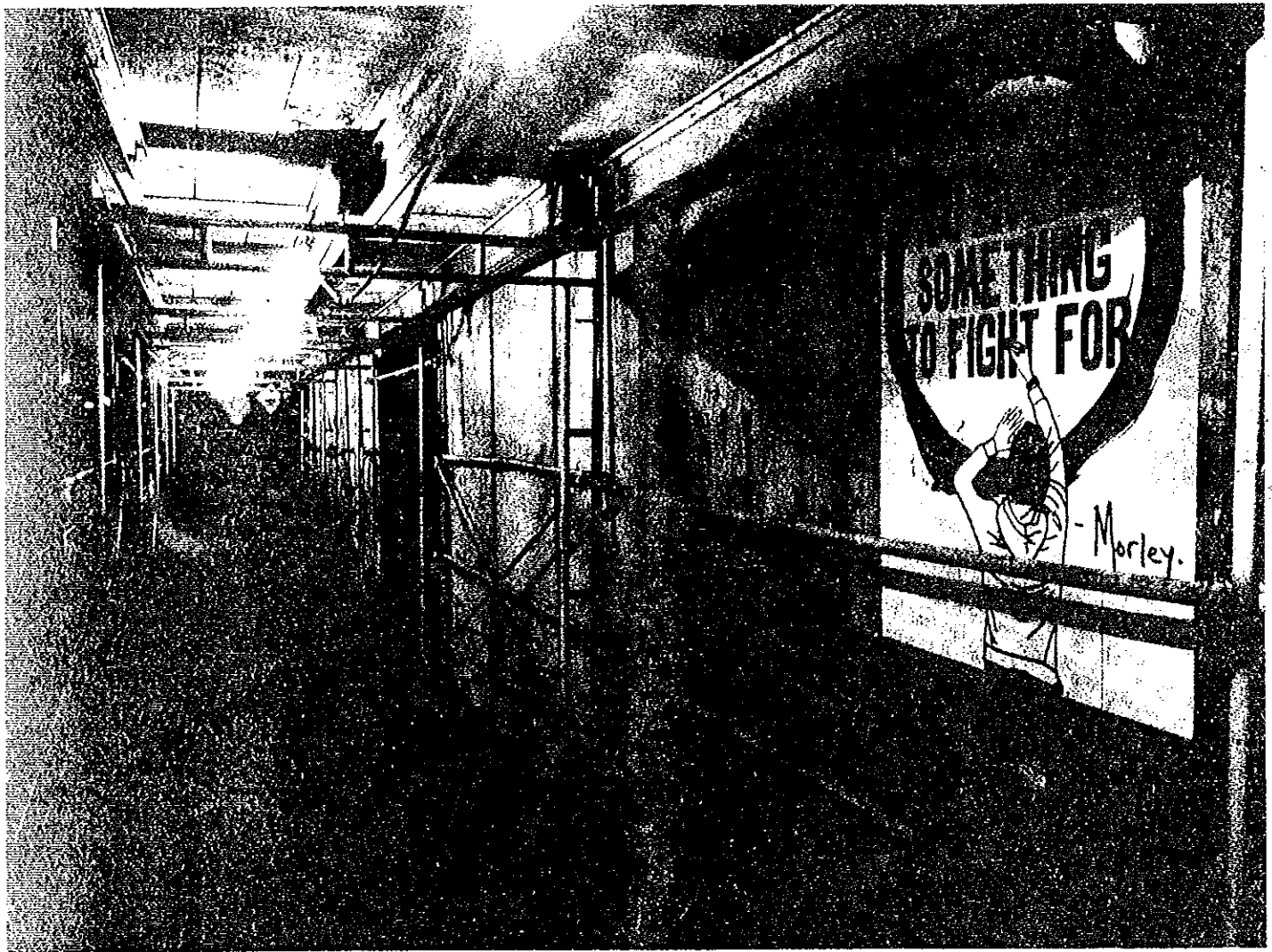
Seeing a few kind words in a harsh and normally indifferent public environment

I started small—silk screening phrases I would later identify as “slogans” onto contact paper. I would then cut these up and stick them around the subways as I would traverse the city. I loved imagining who might see them and what kind of reaction they would have. Just the possibility that my little stickers could have an impact on someone was enough to make me feel gratified and productive—two rare phenomena for the average student at an art school. The best part of all was that I didn’t need permission from anyone, so there was very little risk of rejection or disparagement. If I assumed the best possible response, there was no proof of the contrary. The stickers themselves were benign enough, inoffensive to the more conservative citizen and easy to peel off, they would be the training wheels for what lay ahead for me.

When I moved to Los Angeles, I discovered an entirely different emotional environment. It seemed as though I was surrounded on all sides by either disenfranchised dreamers or marginalized immigrants and the families they struggled to support. We mingled in the streets among the wealthy populous of the world beyond the velvet rope and created a fascinating social concoction. Perhaps this was a myopic way of looking at the city, but after graduating from college and joining the ranks of the wage slaves, it became clearer what I wanted to say and whom I wanted to say it to. I quickly discovered that the majority of L.A.’s inhabitants neglect public transportation, so I decided my artwork needed to be bigger in order to be visible from a passing car or a speeding bike. Additionally, it was then that I decided I wanted to give a name and a face

to the voice. I wanted to create the comfort of familiarity and recognition. I wanted the people to know who it was that was writing to them. To me, using myself as the model was the only choice; it was an attempt to bring more humanity and personal investment to each poster. I wanted to stand by the words in a literal way, instead of just a figurative one. With no experience to speak of with a spray can or a stencil, I opted for the wheatpaste method most associated in recent days with Shepard Fairey’s Obey campaign. This involved a cheap paste made with white flour, shellacked over a poster printed at any local copy shop.

When I began the postering, it hadn’t occurred to me that it could be anything more than a hobby. Something to satiate my desire to create and express myself artistically



Something To Fight For, Los Angeles, 2012.

ive the words a much more useful purpose.

While continuing to pursue my screenwriting ambition and work whatever day job was paying my bills. It hadn't been my goal to make a name for myself as a street artist, to be embraced by street art aficionados, or to figure out a way to monetize the work itself. I really just wanted to encourage people like me with humor, hope, and confessional anecdotes. In some ways I thought my work would be almost protected from becoming commercialized because the true value of the statements themselves are so easy to transport. You can describe something visual, but you'll never truly be able to verbalize the image itself. With my work, you can easily just remember the phrase and draw it up whenever you want to. You don't have to remember a shade of yellow in a sunflower or the expressive subtleties of

a smile. For me, the only true value I could imagine in my work was the setting. Seeing a few kind words in a harsh and normally indifferent public environment gave the words a much more useful purpose. The first time someone offered to buy my work on canvas, I wasn't sure how I should explain that my originals were just pieces of 8.5 x 11-inch paper that I'd drawn on with a Sharpie. I'd never painted anything on canvas in my life. Thus far I've been hesitantly navigating through the shallow end of the art world waters with the subdued fear of being recognized as an interloper and called out like when I used to wear my T-shirt into the public pool to hide my pre-teen chubbiness. "They'll all look at me and laugh once they realize I'm here by collective mistake!" I find relief from this skipping

record by continually returning to the streets themselves. Putting up a poster reminds me why I started doing what I do and where its value actually lies. Not in how much I can sell, but how much I can give away and how many people I can offer a positive sentiment to.

My work may not change the world, but if it helps someone summon the strength to face just one more day, maybe that's worth the gallon of paint it takes the city to cover it up. I'd like to think so. ■