

'We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars.'

-Oscar Wilde

Marquis Lewis, known by his internationally-recognized tag RETNA, accesses spaces between typographic, text-based imagery and abstract esoteric states using a singular, mysterious script.

Each block of text is a sophisticated system of hieroglyphs, calligraphy and illuminated lettering. With influences extracted from Arabic, Egyptian, Hebrew, Anglo-Saxon (or Old English) and Native American mythologies, RETNA's unique vocabulary communicates a personal form of poetry; one that reflects the harsh realities of urban life, while granting itself access to metaphysical considerations. RETNA employs ancient totemic symbologies as a baseline, overlaid with rhythms from the urban jungle. These are sourced from his youth in Los Angeles, born from Pipil (western indigenous El Salvadorian), Cherokee, Spaniard and African-American bloodlines. These subcultures factor into the physical product of his labors, often accompanied in the studio or on the street by a stream of sounds (whether it be music, ambient city noises or anonymous passers-by). It is this multimedia experience that is laid onto the painted surface for RETNA: auditory and visual content manifested in real-time.

As the dynamic of street art within the gentrified urban structure become increasingly blurred and complex, their foundational beliefs and symbols will take on new meanings. RETNA's work reflects these changes with every successive project. Whether staging an international traveling exhibition appealing to the perpetually anonymous, high-roller commercial collector or showing alongside artists such as Keith Haring, Os Gêmeos, and Barry McGee on the famed East Village Houston-Bowery wall, RETNA's ultimate aim is carefully concealed. One certainty, however, is his dedication to an artistic practice rather than abandoning principle for principal.

RETNA's language is markedly softer in tone and appearance than more traditional forms of street graffiti: the elegant swoops of ink-like letters and the poetic statements themselves seemingly adhere to messages of intellectual contemplation and restraint. RETNA's use of a feather-tipped paintbrush owes to the airy movement of the characters. According to the artist, this conscious choice of material is also a nod to the Spirit of the Falcon, an ancient Egyptian totemic emblem signifying success and victory. A steady stream of references to victory and transcendence of worldly hardships reside in his work, perhaps in and of itself a collective plea from the depths of the streets to the canopy of fame and fortune. At the risk of delving too deeply into new-age philosophy or potentially alienating a base audience rooted specifically in urban environments, RETNA's messages are masked in ciphers: words and meanings that are never immediately revealed nor capable of being accurately translated. Even those closest to him have only inklings of his gleanings in concrete form, as he continues to develop a dedicated language straddling the aesthetic borders of street art and academic-grade contemporary art.

Apart from the letters being physically graceful and the content of his messages profound, RETNA's practice has grown beyond letters and words. His letters have been shaped into three-dimensional sculptures (similar to Robert Indiana's stacked messages), they have graced the bodies of fashion models as body paint, and have served as textbook-like illuminations in conjunction with figurative images from longtime collaborator El Mac. Whether he will pursue strictly abstract permutations of his signature style remains to be seen. For the moment, even if the content of RETNA's language evades the typical viewer, the instant connection to the mystique of Antiquity is potent. The messages, themselves, are not meant to be overly cryptic.

What RETNA asks of his audience is a heightened sense of aesthetic perception. Beyond the object on its own, RETNA's work is meant (like any well-executed painting) to evoke immersive contemplation. Narratives are present, but they are not immediately visible. The artist's sensibilities and personal tastes are not immediately discernible in the work, which owes to a professionalism in distancing an artistic life from a private persona.

RETNA's studio practice retains the forcefulness found in the processes of making street-based art. Sensations of conflict, loss and the shadow of law enforcement are all cited as RETNA's motivations

in creating work both on the streets and in the studio. All the while, his focus is set on contributing to the full spectrum (from academic to commercial) of contemporary art; a field that, in and of itself, requires swift adaptation to ensure survival and longevity. RETNA notes that his most common media formats are based in painting: acrylic, enamel, aerosols and oils.

With the work anchored in typographic forms, the tools and methodologies of the painter are key. The biography in RETNA's work lies in the persistence of the medium transposed to an arena outside of the closed gallery space. While the 'white cube' atmosphere is certainly an appropriate venue for the artist's oeuvre, it is neither prioritized nor preferred.

Like other influential street artists such as Banksy, Shepard Fairey, Basquiat and Keith Haring, RETNA maintains a devotion to an aesthetic reaching further than the gallery or institution. The source, the spring for RETNA, is the city. He possesses a keen understanding of the contemporary art world, while maintaining a measured independence as a practicing, and continuously developing, artist.

-Shana Beth Mason

Shana Beth Mason is a contemporary art critic based in Brooklyn. She received her M.A. in the History of Art & Connoisseurship (Modern & Contemporary Art) from Christie's Education London. She contributes to publications and media outlets including ArtVoices Los Angeles, The Brooklyn Rail, Kunstforum.as (Oslo), The Miami Rail, San Francisco Arts Quarterly, thisistomorrow.info (London), Whitehot Magazine, and Live From Midori House for Monocle 24 Radio. She has lectured at The University of Arizona's College of Fine Art Professionalism & Art Lecture Series, Florida International University's Contemporary Art and Theory MFA Program in the Visual Arts, and Christie's Education London: From Passion to Profession Alumni Lecture Series.