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Film Review: *Street Heroines*—Women Artists Shattering the Glass Walls of Graffiti Culture

Reviewed by Aditi Magotra

Film Information:
Title: *Street Heroines*
Director: Alexandra Henry
Producer: Alexandra Henry, Jordan Noël Hawkes & Valiant Pictures
Release Year: 2021
Length in minutes: 71
Genre: Documentary
Original language: English, Spanish & Portuguese
Educational Distributor: GOOD DOCS

Alexandra Henry, Director of *Street Heroines*

*Photo Source: GOOD DOCS*

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Women as Graffiti Artists: Struggles and Stereotypes

Ending with Magna Carda’s rap song “The Root,” with its touching refrain, “Strong roots’ll make your tree grow old,” the documentary Street Heroines (2021), shot through the lens of director Alexandra Henry, stars fifty-seven women graffiti artists from North and South America. In this documentary, Henry has captured the essence of adventurous women graffiti artists whose narratives incorporate their day-to-day experiences of trials and tribulations. As the documentary unfolds, it delves deeper into these graffiti artist’s personal stories and artistic journeys, shedding light on the complexities, challenges, and triumphs that define their experiences in a profession dominated by men.

The initial frames of Street Heroines open with a compelling collage of mixed voices and provide viewers with a glimpse into the lives of the street heroines and their deep connection to graffiti art. The cities of exploration include the epicenter New York City followed by Ecuador, Mexico City, and Sao Paulo in Brazil, where the graffiti artists have made a name for themselves. These diverse voices collectively share insights into the intricacies of graffiti art and how it has become an integral part of their identities.

As the documentary progresses, it introduces us to the first featured female graffiti artist, TooFly, whose street name is a testament to her artistic aspirations. Originally from Ecuador and now residing in New York City, TooFly aspires to pursue graffiti art as a full-time profession. Despite her considerable progress in the field, she faces challenges due to the demands of a capitalist society where artists can’t sustain their work without recognition or a nine-to-six job to pay for spray paint and brushes to create graffiti. TooFly also points out the stark gender disparity
in the opportunities and compensation received by women graffiti artists compared to their men contemporaries. Despite that, the watershed moment in her journey was the unwavering support from her mother. This support becomes a significant part of her narrative, highlighting the role of family and personal values in her pursuit of artistic expression.

The documentary then shifts its focus to Lady Pink, another prominent figure in the world of graffiti art. Lady Pink is the first women graffiti artist to tag subway trains, abandoned walls, and trainyards which is a feat that catapulted her to fame. Her breakthrough came when her graffiti art was featured in the influential photographic collection titled *Subway Art* (1984), captured by the cameras of Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant. She emphasizes the constant moral scrutiny faced by women who defy societal norms. However, Lady Pink’s narrative shows that her frustration as a graffiti artist is largely due to the preconceived notion of gender roles. This is evident through her usage of colloquial metaphors and puns to describe unique challenges and absurd criticisms she encountered from her male peers during the initial phase of her career. One particularly amusing comment that she recalls is the disbelief expressed by some men artists that women are physically incapable of climbing ladders—a reflection of the entrenched gender stereotypes she had to confront. Moreover, this gender stereotyping included the constant threat of street violence, which was a by-product of the gang system in which graffiti artists were involved when this art form was in its nascent stage.

The narratives of TooFly and Lady Pink are followed by equally compelling stories by Lexi Bella, Claw, Danielle Mastrion, Alice Mizarchi, Swoon, and Lady Aiko. It is notable that graffiti artists take pseudonyms to hide their identity. This is a reflection of the fact that graffiti art emerged as a simple tagging activity of defacing public property, so the artists often took a pseudonym and wrote these pseudonyms in idiosyncratic font styles to show a form of informal presence along with freedom of expression. Later, graffiti art gained the limelight as an art form included in museum spaces and sponsored by governments, where it is now viewed as a means of sharing information in a visual conversation (Bloch).

While women have undeniably encountered numerous hostilities in tagging walls with graffiti, New York City has simultaneously provided a platform for women of diverse ethnicities to express themselves. This is exemplified in the experiences of Shiro and Lady Aiko, natives of Japan who settled in New York City. In this way, the sense of inclusivity demonstrated by graffiti artists has fostered a supportive cohort contributing to growth in artistic endeavors. As the documentary unfolds, statements from women graffiti artists sharing their street experiences stand out, revealing the sexist and misogynistic mindset of peers and passersby. For instance, Danielle Mastrion recalls that she faced teasing while drawing graffiti and was compelled to remark, “I am just trying to paint, not give you my phone number.” She has faced gender-based street harassment because of her profession, which can be a hindrance for many aspiring young women who want to pursue this career. Another graffiti artist, Alice Mizarchi, subtly states that great artists don’t come with gender or sex. The art form should be celebrated instead of emphasizing who drew it.

The documentary then shifts away from gender and focuses on the plight of graffiti artists from Ecuador who complain about the ignorance of government bodies who do not acknowledge graffiti as symbolic expression. The role of the city and the government can hinder the art’s flourishing, but it also acts as a catalyst for others. TooFly’s “Warmi Paint Festival” is organized annually in Ecuador to raise awareness about the importance of sisterhood and graffiti. Even then, it comes along with the baggage of the government’s inability to understand graffiti as a serious art form. Nevertheless, the artists assert that graffiti not only beautifies the city’s gray gradient but also serves as a powerful medium to depict poignant aspects of everyday life.
Recent trends in the development of graffiti art showcase it as more than a rebellious act; it has evolved into a means of making political statements and serving as a visual piece for public awareness. Graffiti, in this sense, functions as a tool for spreading mass awareness among the public. Although this shift has captured the attention of the masses, categorizing graffiti as a pertinent tool that deserves scrutiny and recognition, it comes with a different set of issues where, again, gender plays a major role. Graffiti artists like Fusca and Tysa from Mexico City have encountered the obstacles of gender bias, lack of support and poor funding from the government bodies. Fusca narrates her ordeal by complaining about the false promises she received from the government bodies to paint graffiti as part of government-funded projects. Although the projects generated profits, she was not paid what she deserved. Consequently, she distanced herself from such opportunists as the cost of the products (spray cans and brushes) and the time she dedicated seldom received acknowledgment in the form of deserved remuneration like her male contemporaries. An intriguing aspect of Fusca’s narrative is that she chooses not to show her face to the camera. According to her, her graffiti art is her face, as it symbolizes the face of every woman who has faced oppression due to her gender. A parallel situation is echoed by female graffiti artists from Sao Paulo in Brazil. Magrela, Nina Pandoolfo, Fefe Talavera, Simon Siss, and Dina So Mina also speak about their plight in a state that is, in the words of Magrela, “sexist, racist and homophobic.”

Breaking the Stereotypes: Women Graffiti Artists

Diehl and Dzubinski in their recent work Glass Walls (2023) present the reader with well-researched data along with personal anecdotes and solutions to the gender biases that women usually face in their professional lives. In the preface they rightly point out that “women must not change. It is the organizational culture” that must change. Gender biases are so prevalent in the professional world that they are easily brushed under the carpet. One evident reason is that male peers often see women as competition and find it unacceptable to have a woman colleague performing a similar job. This has often led to a huge pay disparity for women and hurdles like the non-cooperation of subordinates, leading to a visible yet unacknowledged marginalization. On a similar note, Sarahbeth George, the editor of Economic Times, states in a recent article that the concept of the gender pay gap is a prevalent global reality because most of the professions are dominated by men and the rules and regulations are passed by men in power. In contrast, women seldom have a role model to follow. This argument is supported in similar articles by Kelly Burke and Isaac Kaplan highlighting the disparity in salaries for female artists across the globe. The narratives of the female graffiti artists in the documentary follow the same trajectory, as stated by Lady Pink, TooFly, Fusca, and others, who face lower wages in a male-dominated graffiti culture. They also face widespread biases that it is improper or unimaginable for women to possess so-called masculine abilities—to carry heavy spray cans, climb ladders, and succeed in a supposedly male field.

At a time when there is a growing awareness of the rights of each human being to choose a profession according to an individual’s desire, talent, and expertise, it is a deplorable state of affairs that women (and people of other genders) are still tagged with limiting roles dictated by society that restrict their personality according to their gender. The importance of freedom of expression also resonates with the famous introductory words of Cixous’s essay, “The Laugh of Medusa,” where she writes that women should write about women and bring other women to write about themselves (875). Henry’s Street Heroine runs parallel to Cixous’s idea as an astute example of women celebrating women. The artists have taken this art form to a new-found terrain, popularly
known as hip-hop graffiti. In the hip-hop graffiti culture, as seen in the works of TooFly and others, the artists use creative techniques, such as pasting hand-made collages on walls, master strokes with paint brushes and spray cans, drawing elaborate art on the whole wall to depict a prevalent issue, and using stencils and miniature paintings as a point of reference. This documentary film highlights the numerous challenges women graffiti artists face in their day-to-day lives and shows the world an arena of artists who produce art in earnest. Under Henry’s direction, the documentary acts as a celebratory agency and a feminist protest by skillful graffiti artists who speak for their art and resist being marginalized based on their gender.

Conclusion

In an interview with GOOD DOCS, Henry states that Street Heroines “is a never-seen-before look at the collective outcry of women” (“Street Heroines”). Henry’s statement aligns with the graffiti artists who share their stories one-by-one, transforming the documentary into a cohesive moving graffiti. While the scholarly world may dispute gender-based social disparity, practical milestones remain uncharted. Gender roles are ingrained, perpetuating the belief that nurturing is solely a woman’s responsibility. Feminists have rightfully challenged these notions, yet completely dismantling such ideologies requires unlearning age-old norms and normalizing job roles regardless of gender. Additionally, the documentary challenges the prevalent presumption that female graffiti artists produce soft, non-provocative art. The passion and dedication of these artists promote a lifestyle of bravado, freedom, and independence, countering gender stereotypes. In essence, Street Heroines presents a counter-opinion through analogies from accomplished female graffiti artists who demonstrate that for graffiti art muscle power is helpful, but it doesn’t need to come from a man.
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References