

INTERVIEW WITH OMAR HOPKINSON

May 2023

By Glodeane Brown, Public Art Coordinator - Town of Halton Hills



Omar "Oms" Hopkinson is a Milton based culture contributor, multi-disciplinary artist, educator, moderator, and facilitator. He creates, mentors, and advises individuals and organizations in the areas of art, leadership, and life skills. Oms reimagines what art means today, painting on all surfaces from canvas to walls and various structures with a clear understanding of colour and its ability to evoke emotion. It's through his medium he intends to inspire, building on his substance and leaving a positive impact. In May 2023 he was awarded the 2023 Mississauga Arts Council's MARTY Award for Public Art. The Mississauga Arts Awards (MARTYS) are the annual award celebration honouring outstanding individual and organizational contributions to the arts and cultural activity in the city.

How did you get involved in public art?

I got involved in public art out of necessity. I went to Ontario College of Art and Design. At that point in time, I thought art was drawing or painting something and then finding a way to sell it or hang it on a gallery wall. A lot of us didn't have access to those galleries because of race, culture, whatever the case was. I realized that there was just a specific group of folks who were able to be in this art world and you obviously had to build your acumen to get there. I decided instead of me trying to chase the art world, I would bring the art world to the streets, to the clubs. I started out as a live painter on the Toronto scene in the late 90s. I was painting in clubs, we were popping up on Queen Street and putting out canvases, just giving people a visual aspect. That started turning into festivals and large events, and over time as people saw us in these spaces they would ask if we could come to their spaces and do what we do on doors and walls.



Over the years I figured out how to network and approach businesses. Education was a big part of it for me, because people didn't know that they wanted or needed public art until they were educated about it. Often, people only do something when they see that someone else has been successful at it, not everybody's willing to lead the way.



As a public artist, what are some misconceptions that you've heard about public art or graffiti art?

That all art or tags or pictures on a wall is vandalism. That all street artists that you may see painting outside are starving artists that don't have jobs. That they are homeless. That they are mean spirited. That graffiti artists are out here to do harm. A lot of these are misconceptions. Yes, there are some people out there that just do things for attention, but I would say that until someone understands the history of graffiti writing and street art culture and why it came about, how it started and what it was meant to do, then there's no real reason for people to judge because they're only seeing the result right? They don't understand the process of how it was built. It's a systemic thing. It was built from people not having access and then those people just taking the access. Someone might hear "taking the access" and think that it sounds non permissive. That was part of it.



For anybody who doesn't know the history of graffiti or street art culture, besides talking to artists to hear their story, are there any resources you would suggest for further education on the topic?

Yes, speaking to artists is important.

Not everything online is true, but there's a lot of good information if you're willing to find it. Use the proper terminology when searching. Don't search for "spray painting" or "vandalism." Google movies or books on "graffiti culture" because it is an actual culture.

There are too many movies to name, but I'd suggest Wild Style, which followed the graffiti culture in New York and why it started. Exit Through The Gift Shop is great. Beat Street. Then there are the Hollywood versions that teach you about specific artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and how he became this popular artist. He started from needing to express himself.

Can you expand on the difference between graffiti art vs street art vs vandalism?

There is a whole range of street art that's not just painting. It's wheat pasting, sculpture, performance, etc.

Then there are muralists. A muralist is possibly trained, only works in large format, and can work indoors or outdoors and has technical skills. It doesn't necessarily need to be spray or aerosol, but it also could be brush. I use only brush. I use spray here and there, but mostly brush.

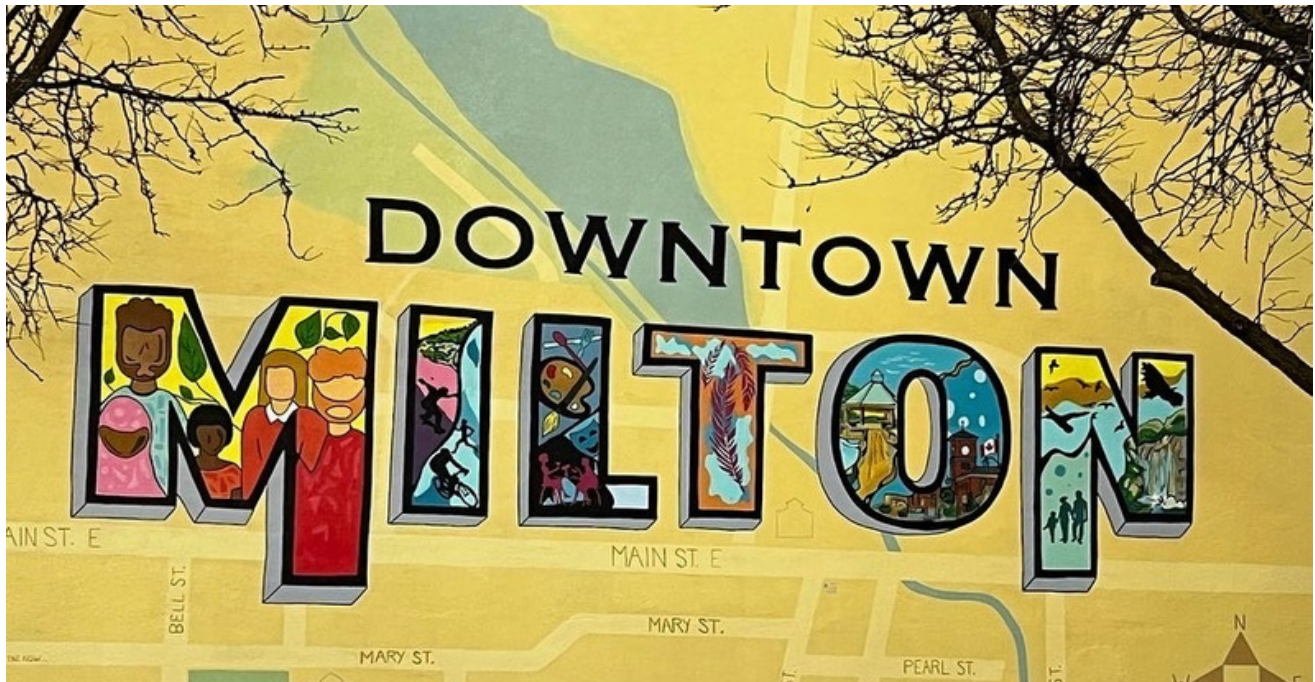
Graffiti writing started from tagging. What a lot of people see is little names written all over the place on mailboxes and different things. Tagging was related to gang culture and people sometimes only see that part of it, but it evolved as a way for people to speak about their neighborhood and who they were in their neighborhood as artists. What you would see in New York, for example, they would write their names on trains. The reason they chose trains is because a train isn't just a wall that sits there in one spot. When that train traveled, you would see the names of the different graffiti writers moving across the boroughs. The more your name showed up in different places, the more you became known, and it gave you a kind of opulence. Over time those writings turned into a different type of art, typography. Each artist had their own style.

Then there's throw-ups and burners, which are larger, more pictorial works which a lot of people refer to as murals. Murals is a general term these days, but a mural artist is not a street artist, and a street artist is not a graffiti artist. People think they're all the same.

Vandalism is what people think graffiti is. If you really look at the term, vandalism is to do something to disrespect a property or a space. I did a big mural in Milton. I went through the right channels and got the right permissions. It became a historical thing because I went over a 30-year-old mural. It's a good thing I protected it because about a week after I finished it someone went and wrote their name on it in big bubble letters. In graffiti culture, that's disrespectful because every artist who has a wall knows that that's this person's wall and you don't go over it.

There are differences between what was based out of culture and bringing people together, that became divisive in the streets but then became more divisive when it came to authoritative measures, because people then started covering their faces, going at night, going in dangerous spaces, hiding because they didn't have a place where they can access a gallery or paint on a wall.

The biggest key to prevention is providing space for people to express themselves. When people have space and access, they come out and they show up in a different way. You never know what talents you're missing. There's a whole system that comes from not providing access. When budgets are cut, the arts are cut. When the arts are cut, people get bored, and they go out and do things. Then economic development becomes more expensive because you have to clean, then people move out, new people move in, gentrification, etc.



Is there anything else you'd like to mention?

Community consultation is important. Not just with the general community, but also the artist community. Listen to them. We need artists from different groups to be in seats to advise those who are making decisions that affect everybody. It's one thing to do a Town hall to check a box, or to say I spoke to a Black artist or an Indigenous artist and check that box, but it's another thing to know when it's time to say I don't know, and I need to follow your lead. The arts community are also voters, and they will support candidates that support and believe in the arts. By laws are great but they need to be looked at to, as I say, inspect what we expect.

Speaking to the youth is important. There are a lot of adults who live their whole life trying to make change and break down barriers for others. When they don't have access and the youth see that, it doesn't empower them, and they end up trying to do it on their own. Also, younger generations need to understand what the older generations are seeing too, so it's not just a one-way conversation, because I think there's a lot of assumptions that are made about older generations or specific social classes that aren't necessarily always true.

Sustainability is important. It's one thing to put out some one-time funding and say there, we did it, vs finding a consistent way to fund a program and have trusted advisors manage it, trusting that those people will work in the best interests of a city or town and bring in people to see the art. When these conversations are happening, there should be more listening and looking for ways to say yes rather than no. Going back to the community piece, the public is always saying how refreshing it is to have public art and they are thankful for it. Community engagement is key for public art. Everybody knows what New York feels like, what Toronto feels like. People know in Toronto, there is a place called Graffiti Alley, where they allow, without arrest, all graffiti artists to work within their community and manage themselves. People come to Toronto just to see Graffiti Alley.

What I always think about is the business case. How do we create and make it easy or supportive for those who are lobbying for change? Our elected officials and business owners and the community all need to listen to each other. We can't expect to get something without investment, and everybody needs to invest in it.

We just have to start and that's the biggest thing.

