

Pet project: Adam Knapper and Guler Altunbas transform North Fitzroy nook with "Fight or Flight"

June 7, 2015

Clare Barry



Street artists Guler Altunbas and Adam Knapper and their North Fitzroy mural "Fight or Flight". Photo: Jesse Marlow

Adam Knapper and Guler Altunbas transformed an oft-tagged nook of North Fitzroy with their breezy street art project *Fight or Flight*. They spoke to Clare Barry.

Paper planes have a simple, whimsical quality to them and that's something we like to have in our work. People can make what they like of the mural, but there's a playfulness that we hope comes through, a childlike feel.

We did the mural over three weekends, and the locals really got involved as we were painting, telling us about how the wall had changed over time. It had had graffiti on it since the 70s and then later on started getting tagged a lot. When it was finished, people played around with the images, cupping their hands to "hold" the paper planes or doing shoulder stands with them.



A detail of a paper plane on the "Fight or Flight" mural. *Photo: Jesse Marlow*

It appeals to 7- or 8-year-olds all the way up to 70-year-olds. We've had friends with parents in nursing homes and they've taken them out for a drive and gone past it and they love it because they imagine graffiti or street art as tags or something ugly and when they see the mural they think it's fantastic.

The work's been up for just over two years now and it's virtually been untouched by tags; it's really respected. There are rules that people go by, if you have a mural up these days, you don't go over it with a tag. Some pieces can last 20 years, then again a piece could go up and not survive overnight, be gone over, tagged, it's just the ephemeral nature of it. Street art should be in the elements, fade away and have its natural lifespan, become part of the environment rather than being touched up.

(Guler) It was very much a joint project, the main design is Adam's and the smaller design next to it is mine. Within diversity friendship springs. We have different skill sets. For this I did a lot of the negotiating, the organising. But we painted it together, and filmed it. I edited it into a multimedia piece for a 25-year retrospective Adam had coming up. We discuss our work as we're painting, and the wall was no different. You have to stand back, and each of us has a different perspective.

Walls look like big canvases to us. We keep an eye out when we're driving around. What makes a nice wall? Location for a start, you want it to have visibility and impact. Height's a factor too, accessibility. Will you need a ladder or a cherry picker? As for surface, a nice flat wall works best, bricks are harder. If we're interested, we just knock on the door. People are quite open, keen to have a look at what we do.

We just came back from Benalla in country Victoria. There's a big scene there now,. They commissioned a whole lot of artists to do big murals on public buildings around the town and they're wonderful, different styles, from graffiti to indigenous designs to realism. You might think people there would be a little conservative but, from what we heard, the locals have taken to it; it's quite a talking point for the community. We hope to be part of the next set of art that goes up. Not everyone goes to galleries, so street art is important. It brings art to people and communities closer to the artist. People walk or drive past it and they can enjoy it, it becomes part of their everyday lives. That's really what art is about.

(Adam) My first commission of a legal mural was in 1989, through the local council in Dandenong. Then I photographed Melbourne graffiti art in the 80s and 90s and saw it evolve. But fine art is really our thing. We both exhibit and do canvas work, cross over into design and other elements. I was a picture framer for many years, you have to be versatile and across most things, whatever job comes up. Art is a viable way to make a living. We work hard, we make it work for ourselves. And we met through art, at a studio in Malvern, we've been together for five years now.



Adam Knapper's original canvas "Fight or flight". Photo: Supplied

(Guler) Communicating with words takes longer but when someone draws an image, it cuts through a lot of inhibitions. At the moment, I'm facilitating art-making for people recovering from illness, giving them the physical tools to do it and helping them find their style. I love it, seeing people engaged with their artwork and doing something positive, that sense of wellbeing and purpose and belonging. That's what art is about. Plus it's a whole lot of fun. That's the main thing.



Guler Altunbas' original canvas "Within diversity friendship springs". Photo: Supplied