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Reader Services

Still keeping it real on L.E.S.: Chico's message is indelible

By Lucas Mann

Believe it or not, one of New York's most prolific and influential visual artists works for the New York City Housing Authority. On a sweltering August afternoon, Antonio "Chico" Garcia, wearing a paint-splattered blue T-shirt with "Lower East Side" written on it in white letters, sneakers and dark blue painter's pants, was not sitting in an air-conditioned studio studying a canvas. Instead, he was taking a cigarette break outside the Nathan Strauss Houses Community Center on E. 27th St., which, for the moment, is his studio.

"The place looks dead, you know, so they've got me over here trying to lighten it up," said Garcia. "Look, you can see the difference already. I made it look colorful, look nice."

The transformative graffiti that Garcia was making on the side of the center displayed the distinct style that he has cultivated over 30 years.

"Let's see, I lose count, but all over the city I've probably done about 7,000 pieces," Garcia said with a smile, noticing the gaping mouths of his listeners. "Well, for a while I was out there every day, making a new piece. I didn't have this job for a long time, so that was how I lived. People would see me out there doing one guy's wall and then, it's, 'Yo, Chico, can I get that too?'"

His constant productivity has made Garcia's murals a fixture in his neighborhood, a presence without name or face attached. If you have ever walked through the Lower East Side, you've met with Chico's art. The neighborhood is, in Garcia's own words, his "gallery," but the man himself remains a mystery.

"They call me the Messenger, the Ghost," Garcia said. "I'm here for the community, to give back, to give a message. I like to paint and then, poof, I'm gone. I'm not really a good-looking-enough guy to be in the news, anyways."

Still, despite his reclusive ways, his work gets attention. The movie "Beat Street" featured Chico's work. The iconic lettering for the title of the cult movie "The Warriors"? Garcia made it. He has been all over the world teaching graffiti art, has been recognized as a pioneer in the world of graffiti murals and has even — as all good artists should — garnered some controversy.

"Before the war started, I put up that mural of the pope, and then I added Saddam and the president right next to him," Garcia recounted. "It was a message for peace. Two days later I get a call from Herman, the guy who owns the building, screaming, 'Chico, the F.B.I. just called, you gotta take your mural down!'"

And still, the Ghost rarely emerges to accept his attention. He still lives quietly with his family in the Lillian Wald Houses on E. Sixth St.

"People think I got a lot of money, but I don't," he said. "I gotta make a living, but the stuff I do, I do for the neighborhood."

It's a neighborhood that has, in Garcia's 44 years, seen a lot of change. While he rose to fame through murals commemorating young people lost through violence, and his art was one that developed to respond to bleak surroundings, the Lower East Side has suddenly become not so intimidating.

"Well, there's more bars and people coming into the community to see my work, so that's nice," he granted. "But all my murals are gone, practically. The owners of the buildings are getting \$1,000 a month to put up advertising billboards. All I really have now is Avenue C. Now, most of what I do is



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not only a messenger, but a teacher in his community.

"There's so many kids out there getting in trouble, when they could be learning from me," Garcia said, eyes flashing. "There is so much talent in our neighborhood, but kids are out there vandalizing things and getting arrested, so it's going to waste. I've been there. Right now I'm waiting for N.Y.C. Housing to give me a location so I can have these kids work on it. Give Chico 3 or 4 grand and watch me work with these kids."

Juan Santiago, manager of NYCHA's Creative Arts Unit for Citywide Programs and Garcia's boss, sees Chico's potential influence.

"Look what he's doing outside," Santiago said, referring to the graffiti mural of theater masks Garcia had just painted by the Strauss Community Center's entrance. "Before, this looked like a deserted place, and now — with the front painted so prominently — it tells the community there's something here. Now we're trying to get a Graffiti-As-Art program off the ground, to channel vandalism into a positive realm. Kids can say, 'Look, Chico makes a living out of this.' I want Chico to manage the whole program, bring in other artists he knows as instructors."

Such recognition from the city is something Garcia has managed to miss out on for years. In fact, before working in Santiago's division, a job he's only had for a year, the Messenger worked for the Housing Authority as a janitor. Now, Santiago looks at him as a "resident artist."

Still, in his own neighborhood, and the graffiti community, Garcia sees a lot of things as signs of disrespect.

"Graffiti is so hot today. It's everywhere," he said. "They should use the real guys, the originals, like me, like Lady Pink, to work with the city and make it a real, respected form. I was the first to do murals, man. It was me, nobody was doing that before I got out there."

He laughs at how the art that he pioneered is so entrenched in popular culture, from high fashion to rich kids, while he sits quietly on the side.

"Who is Ecko?" Garcia asked indignantly of the popular, graffiti-style fashion designer Marc Ecko. "I don't know Ecko, I don't see him on the walls out here. Oh, but he's a graffiti artist and he's got a cool video game? Why not make a game about beautifying the community?"

Garcia also eagerly flew into an impression of what he called "hip-hopped-out" white kids from Long Island who approached him on the block by his house to ask him where to find drugs. That's not at all what Garcia is about, though. He is tired of graffiti that glorifies drugs and violence, and even made the personal decision some years back to stop doing the neighborhood mural memorials to those lost to violence that launched his career.

"If I see a negative message or mural, I go up to that person and say we need to change something," he said emphatically. "You never see me draw guns. I want to make the neighborhood something nice to look at. Listen, man, you always wanna be in the dark?"

Chico straddles an interesting line between the renegade form that he loves and his status as, well, a completely family-friendly figure. How many "taggers" sport the positive relationship that Garcia has with the police and how many would want to? Garcia makes the distinction between graffiti and graffiti art, and fits himself into the latter category, a painter who happens to use spray paint for his palate and brick walls for his canvas.

Rosie Mendez, city councilmember for District 2, plans to honor Garcia's work at this September's annual block party put on by the Lower East Side Hispanic Committee.

"He's been in this neighborhood through the tough times and he's still here," said Mendez. "His graffiti is art and he's gotten other kids to view it that way. I think he has helped raise consciousness among the youth in our community. His murals have reflected our history."

Garcia sees limitless potential in his art form.

"Graffiti art is different because it can jump into any style. You can make it into anything," he said.

“In Egypt, they marked those walls and that’s how we remember, so it hurts when they cover up my murals.”

No matter how much of his work is covered, Chico is not going anywhere, and the next time a mural message pops into his head — they usually do in dreams — he will bring it to the streets. And he still has big goals.

“I tell you what I want,” he said with a smile. “One day, I want there to be an Avenue Chico in the Lower East Side.”



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