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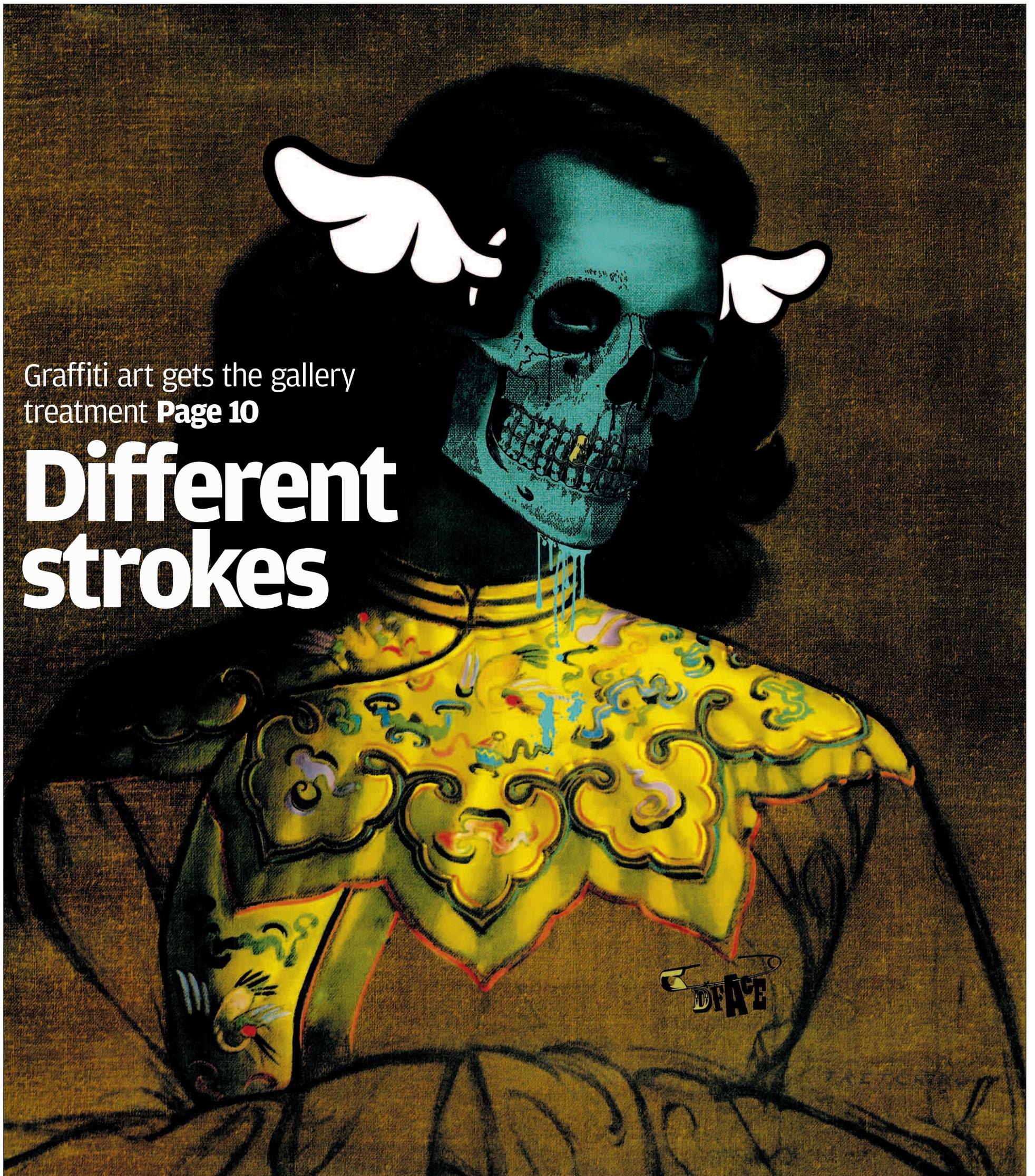
TOFF BREAK
Matthew Goode
on being
typecast **P8**



SUNDAY MORNING POST NOVEMBER 23, 2008

Graffiti art gets the gallery
treatment **Page 10**

Different strokes



BIRD ON THE WING Ladyhawke's career takes flight **Sight&Sound P4**

DOLLARS AND SENSE The bankable, breezy novels of Jill Mansell **Books P13**

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An exhibition by urban artists is giving graffiti a voice, writes **Kristina Perez**

Tag and release

Hong Kong has been “bombed” by a group of Britain’s foremost urban artists. It’s 3am, the shops are closed and Causeway Bay is still – except for the rats. And the street artists. Working meticulously with spray paint and stencils brought from London, Hong Kong’s first Diesel-sponsored art wall begins to take shape and a riff on the classic Coca-Cola bottle appears with the slogan, “Only the brave ... riot.”

If you’ve been riding the Mid-Levels escalator this week you may have noticed an invasion of the D-Dog, a slightly vicious-looking Pac-Man with wings. D-Dog is the signature character and alter ego of D*Face, a prolific London street artist who most recently populated his capital with massive, 1-tonne sculptures of spray cans. His name is now being mentioned in the same breath as the elusive Banksy, and he counts pop star Christina Aguilera among his collectors.

D*Face grew up in London during the 1980s when graffiti art, or tagging, was exploding onto the scene for the first time. “As a kid I was really interested in graffiti. My Mum

The overall theme of my work is that it’s about satirising imagery, taking it over, becoming part of it

D*Face, urban artist

bought me the books *Subway Art* and *Spraycan Art* and they’re pretty much the seminal graffiti books from the 80s,” says D*Face. “The styles and the colours, the look and feel – that was completely fresh to this little kid growing up in London.”

Although graffiti art and later skateboarding culture had a big impact on D*Face, he doesn’t call himself a graffiti artist. “I’ve never really created my work in that way. I’ve never painted trains, I’ve never painted letter styles.”

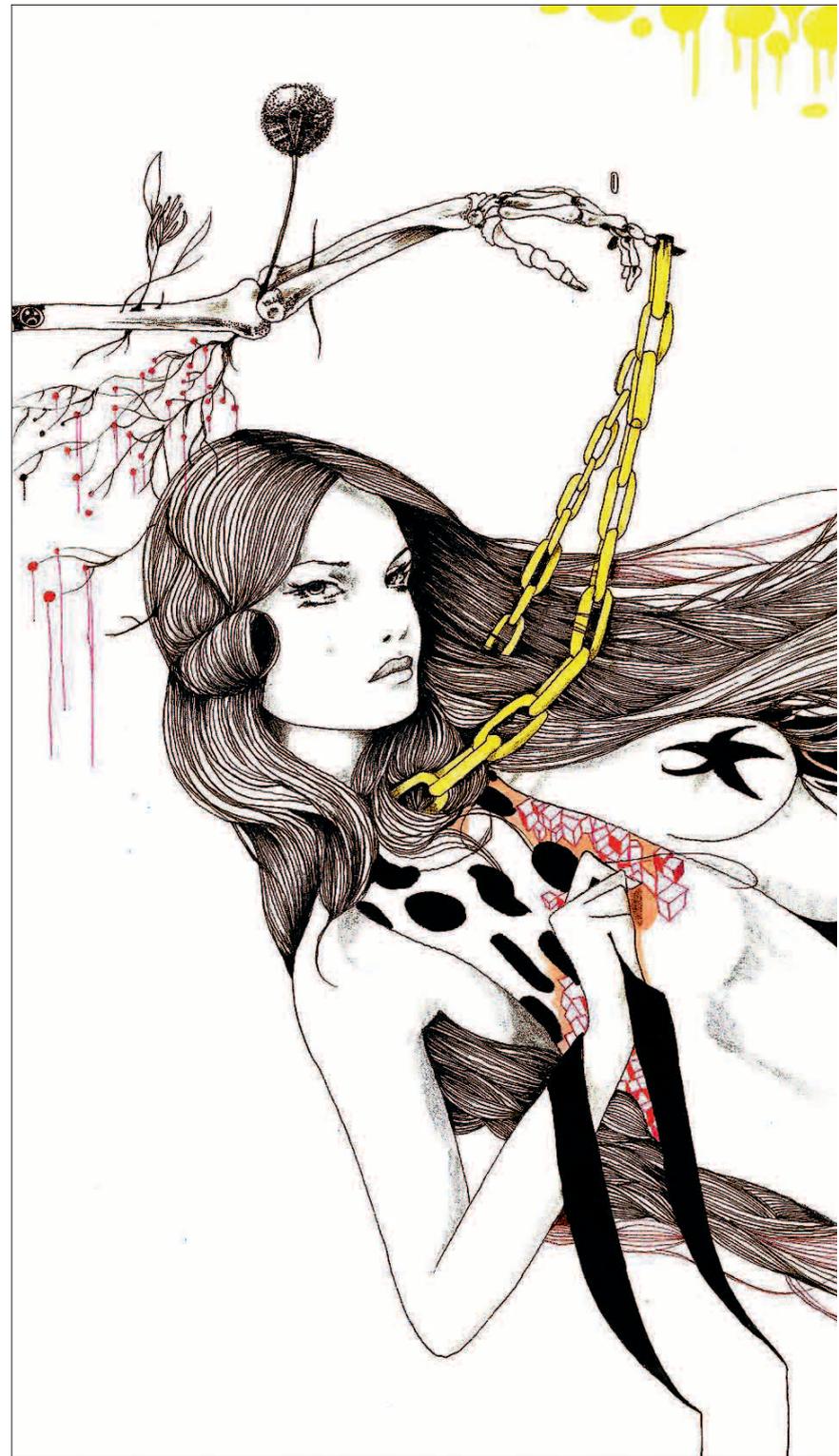
“What it did teach me was to look at the city differently. So when I was travelling around, what might be a regular wall would essentially become a blank canvas.”

D*Face began “bombing” his hometown 10 years ago when there was no such thing as street art. “It wasn’t something I thought of as a movement or genre. I was creating posters and stickers just for my own amusement. I was sticking them up as an idle form of release.”

By 2002 people were beginning to take notice, he says. “The past three years have been monumental in terms of where it’s come from and where it’s going.”

Like the court jester, D*Face sees his role as subverting the images and icons of the body politic. “The overall theme of my work is that it’s about satirising imagery, taking it over, becoming part of it,” he says. The most emblematic example is his depiction of Queen Elizabeth as a D-Dog, sticking out her tongue. “It was questioning the monarchy,” says D*Face. “How important is it to us as a nation? How important to me as an individual?”

Whether his work is on the street or in a gallery, D*Face wants his viewers to question their relationship to images with which we are bombarded every day. “My work is to get people to question their relationship to them.”



Whereas Banksy has remained anonymous, D*Face has put a face to his tag as Dean Stockton, and even founded the Stolenspace gallery in London’s East End to nurture other urban artists.

“I’m not going to hide behind this person who works in the night and lurks around,” says D*Face. “I think the work needs justification, I think it’s important that it can be represented.”

Several of these artists have come to Hong Kong with D*Face this week to launch their new exhibition, Attention Spam, at the Schoeni Art Gallery.

As you walk up Old Bailey Street towards the gallery you will see a tongue-in-cheek Spider-Man mural and a D-Dog looming on the skyline. Gallery director Nicole Schoeni says their collaboration with Adapta Gallery in London to mount the exhibition does not indicate they are moving away from Chinese contemporary art. “One of my gallery’s main guiding principles includes broadening the experience of our audience in terms of what they perceive art to be. And as an urban child, born in the 1980s, the street and graffiti art have played a big part in my life.”

Word To Mother, aka Tom, is the youngest artist in the exhibition – D*Face’s protégé of sorts – although

his style is entirely different. Hailing from Hastings on the southeast coast of England, Tom grew up by the sea, a recurring motif in his work. He especially likes to paint on driftwood.

“The wood for me says so many things. It’s about recycling, it’s about being aware of your surroundings ... I really like that it’s had a previous history, a life somewhere else.”

Urban art has come a long way from the days of tagging to include illustrators such as David Bray among their ranks. His work shows an academic obsession with nudity and its relationship with violence. Bray says he tries to make the nudes as elegiac as possible and that he is the object of their gaze.

“In making them goddesses, it’s kind of like worship. Women are in charge. I’m just a dumb man. I think women are pretty much in control.”

Vesna is the only female artist included in Attention Spam, a reflection of the “boys being boys” attitude associated with the graffiti art scene.

“I think it was a guy’s thing,” says Vesna. “And, of course, for girls to get into this it used to be a lot more difficult. But I think now it’s getting a lot more open ... people are experimenting a lot.”

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Singer for all seasons

Preston Jones

This year has proved to be exceptionally busy for Sarah Brightman: the release of two albums, *Symphony* and the holiday-themed *A Winter Symphony*; a cameo in the Beijing Olympics opening ceremonies; a role in director Darren Lynn Bousman's peculiar rock musical *Repo! The Genetic Opera* and a world tour promoting *Symphony*.

"I do have a real passion for what I do, and I love to make it as complete as possible," the 48-year-old British vocalist says. "It's hard at times because my career is often a whirlwind. But I actually do feel extremely privileged with what I do because, in a way, it's my hobby."

You'd be forgiven if you picked up a copy of *Symphony*, Brightman's first album of new material in five years, and thought you'd grabbed an Evanescence album by mistake. The artwork, much like the music, reflects a darker, more Gothic tone. For that matter, *A Winter Symphony* may be one of the chilliest Christmas albums in recent memory.

But art does not always reflect life. Brightman says the more austere tone stems from having the luxury of time; about four years were dedicated, off and on, to *Symphony*.

"It was interesting to see my tastes and what I wanted to do for the album change completely during that time," Brightman says. "Taking time is a good experience. So *Symphony* ended up being a much more interesting album than [it would have been] had I completed it in a year. Everything about it is a much richer piece."

While *Symphony* was afforded a breathing room, Brightman had to hustle to wedge the recording of her first-ever holiday album into her often hectic schedule.

"I'd always wanted to make a Christmas album because I love that time of year," Brightman says. "We never really got it

Award-winning vocalist Sarah Brightman

together because ... it was a timing issue. I finally got to the point where I said, 'I don't care anymore - I've got to make a Christmas album.' What I didn't expect was how I would feel trying to make a Christmas album during the summer months in Europe."

Brightman's summer wasn't exclusively devoted to sonically evoking the dead of winter - she also took time out to travel to Beijing in August and perform *You and Me* (in both Putonghua and English) with Chinese vocalist Liu Huan. It marked the second time the singer has appeared at the Olympics: in 1992, she and Jose Carreras performed the soaring *Amigos Para Siempre* at the closing ceremonies in Barcelona, Spain.

Despite more than 30 years in the music business and her versatility and stunning vocal prowess, she is one of the very few singing stars who isn't on a first-name basis with the public. Yet her fervent fan base, considerable artistic clout and an estimated 26 million records sold provide some measure of comfort, a safety net that has allowed her to make unconventional choices and push the boundaries of blending pop music and steadfastly traditional opera.

"I think that has come from just having a very long career," Brightman says.

"Obviously, I've moved during that time into many styles of music - some I've actually moved into myself, others have come by default - [and some] helped you decide on certain other areas you wouldn't have even thought of going into. You take a lot on board during a long period of time in music."

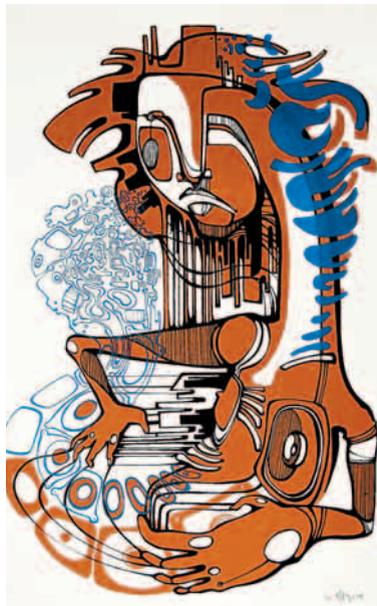
But nothing brings as much warmth to Brightman's voice as talking about her fans. The conviction she brings to her craft belies her otherwise genteel nature.

"I want [audiences] to enjoy the music," Brightman says. "That's what we're there for as artists: to enjoy ourselves and to create wonderful, entertaining situations for people to enjoy, be sad about [or experience] whatever emotions they want to get out of it." *McClatchy-Tribune*



ment on a bombing run in Hong - they played the tourist and talked their way out of it - that these late-night antics no longer the focus of their work. An art is beginning to make its way home in the gallery and the street. The Tate Modern in London recently invited six international street artists to cover the building with their murals. In the Democratic campaign for president-elect, Barack Obama commissioned a portrait of the candidate by influential street artist Shepard Fairey.

The danger now, according to critics, is that street art runs the risk of becoming too mainstream. For those who are friends with Fairey, the poster is "a real case of anti-establishment becoming establishment". It's happened with every cultural movement in history, "Skateboarding is now the sport. Punk is no longer a subculture? Everybody appreciates it. What was once considered shocking is no longer shocking." D*Face says he gets commissions from big brands such as Ford all the time but that he doesn't make his art a product. The tension from anti-establishment artist towards corporate sponsorship seems to be moving with



Urban artists: David Bray's *River Becomes a Stream* (top); D*Face's *United State of America* (bottom left); Vesna's *Soundmorph* (above right) and Tom's *Out of Work Jerks* (above left)

its own velocity, however. "It's inevitable," says D*Face. "But what's important to me is that I don't make the inevitable happen."

Attention Spam, the five UK-Based Urban Artists' Exhibition, is a collaboration between Schoeni Art Gallery Hong Kong and UK Adapta, London. Until Dec 10, Schoeni Art Gallery, Main Gallery, 21-31 Old Bailey St, Central

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