Toronto Graffiti

The human behind the wall

Yvette Farkas

What readers are saying about Toronto Graffiti:

The best book I've bought in years.
This is a historical landmark for the culture of graffiti art in Canada.
Toronto Graffiti brings you closer than you might expect to an insider's perspective.

Forward

The book you now hold in your hands represents 11 years of research, and many more in passion, appreciation, and curiosity. It is a powerful book documenting the history of graffiti in Toronto, Canada, dating back to the early 1980s.

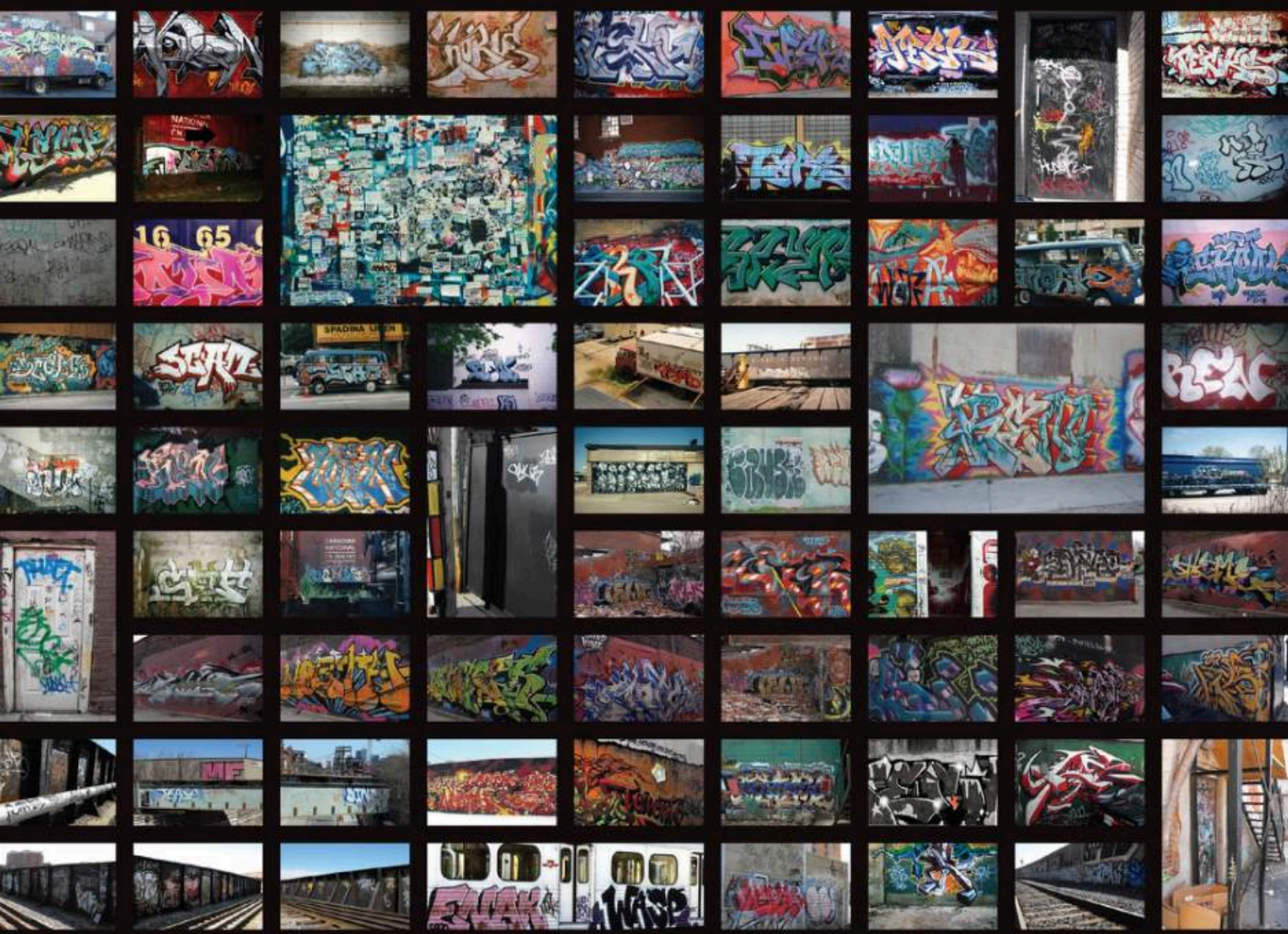
Toronto Graffiti: The human behind the wall has been featured in the Globe and Mail twice, CBC radio, and local, national, and international media outlets. It is used as reference material by the City of Toronto, was sold at Chapters, the York University bookstore, and picked up by professors at the University of Toronto, Ryerson Polytechnic University, and show cased at Centennial College. The Toronto Public Library purchased several books to add to their collections. Toronto Graffiti is also a part of The National Library of Canada.

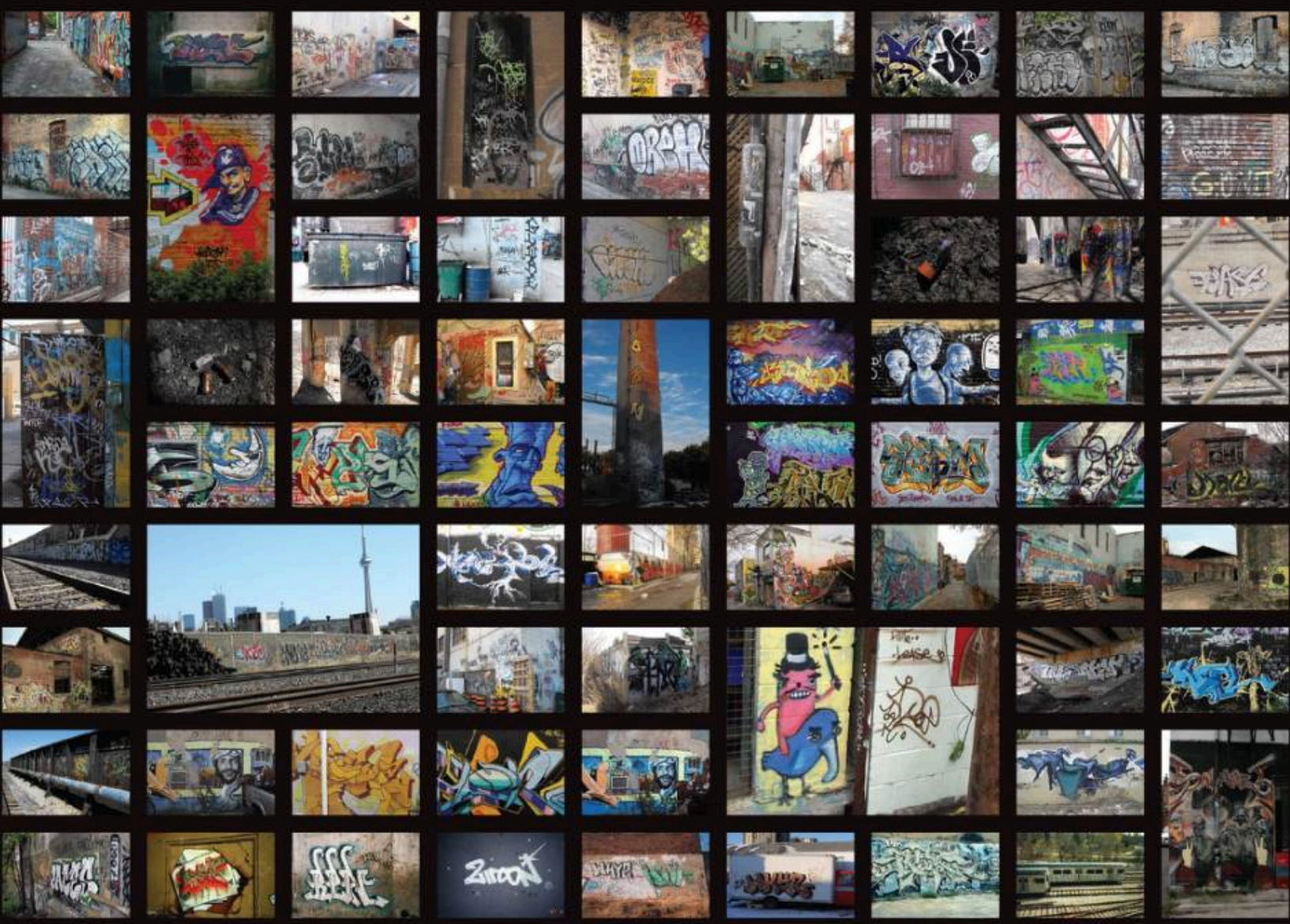
It has become known as a deeply insightful, authentic work with significant sociopolitical, anthropological, legal, and historical perspectives, including 20 precedent-setting interviews with the original pioneers of the popular art form. Their anecdotes give a deeper understanding of a rich and vibrant culture that has touched millions of hearts and souls. 1,000+ full colour photos, maps, timelines, definitions, and opinion pieces round out the collection.

The testimonies represent the artists' own words, experiences, and processes. You are afforded a peek into their private photo collections, sketches, and history.

They provide an in-depth look into their background and art, the legal and safety implications, their personal lives, views on graffiti, and many other interesting topics. Artists interviewed include Ren, Bomba, Hope, Daser, Sec, Graffiti Knights, Kid-C, Kane, Skam, Case, Teck, Duro3, Insight, Soy, Sader, Wysper, Junction Joe, Mediah, Elicser, and Cola. The artists speak for themselves and share relevant information about graffiti and the topics directly impacted and intimately intertwined with it. Readers derive insight into graffiti's long-standing debates while engaging curiosity and appreciation for this incredibly complex and little understood genre.

1. Hope
2. Hope
3. Hope
4. Hope
5. Teck
6. Teck
7. Mediah
8. Sight
9. Wysper
10. Mediah
11. Sight
12. Wysper
13. Mediah
14. Hope
15. Kane
16. Sec
17. Sec
18. Sec
19. Sec
20. Sec
21. Hope
22 & 23. Kane





Artist Profiles

Ren
Daser
Graffiti Knights
Kid-C
Sec
Bomba
Hope
Kane
Skam
Case

Teck
Duro3
Insight
Soy
Sader
Wysper
Junction Joe
Mediah
Elicser
Cola


DOHSA...



Name: Ren

From: Parkdale

Crews: TCM, DOH

Yvette: Do you remember the first time you saw graffiti?

Ren: In 1980 I went to New York to visit a childhood friend. It made an impression on me. That was actually what got me into it. I was already kind of interested in graffiti, but after that trip as soon as I got back to Toronto I started doing graffiti.

So from 1981 – 1983 I did it fairly consistently. Then it just became kind of pointless because no one else was doing it so I stopped for a while. It was around 1986 when I saw someone in Toronto other than me doing more than just a few tags. That was Kid-C. Almost right away…I went to a hardware store, bought a can of paint and then at night I went out and did it again! Then I noticed he started talking to me and it just kept going.

Yvette: …through the walls?

Ren: Yeah. That was around 1986.

Yvette: Who else did you notice in the eighties?

Ren: I remember being downtown and seeing this guy AO1. I'd see his stuff around. He used to do these really cool, quickly drawn T.V sets and things on the wall. He'd get them around right downtown on major corners and then he'd sign it – AO1. It was a triangle with a square and a rectangle.

I didn't meet him until about 1989. I was around Spadina one night, and I walked into a doorway to do a tag when I noticed the doorbell had AO1 on top of it.

It was way too late to ring it so I came back the next day at six or seven o'clock to ring it and this guy comes down the stairs. I introduced myself, "I'm so and so and I do graffiti and I noticed your tag…" Right away he was like, "come on up!" So we hung out at his studio and talked for hours which was kind of neat. He did graffiti from around 1983 – 86', maybe a little longer – and then he stopped. He got caught a few times and moved on to other things I guess.

In 1984 I noticed the work of a writer named Trax around the alleys near Queen and Dufferin behind an old club called The Bedrock. It wasn't until the late eighties that I realized he was a pioneer of graff from Scarborough, and had artwork still on the RT line.

Yvette: So you've been doing this fairly consistently for nearly 30 years?

Ren: Yeah. It's been a while. There'd been a gap between 83'-86' because I was mainly being a punk rocker, occasionally I did some graffiti but not really that seriously. I think graffiti for me was a way to find my own social scene. School was horrible for me, I was not popular. Even the punk scene I thought was too conformist. It wasn't my thing after a while, it was other people's, it was really clique. So I think graffiti was a way to make my own scene. I guess I succeeded in doing that.

Yvette: I think you definitely succeeded.

Ren: Not to take credit for what's out there now, but all the vocational graff from the 80's to the early 90's I definitely was a moving force for it for sure.

Yvette: You laid quite the foundation. And you're still doing it. That's longevity.

Ren: When you really enjoy something, you just keep going. Time can fly by. Though there were times I would doubt myself.

Yvette: Really?

Ren: Yeah. I can clearly remember a few times on long tag runs thinking, "where am I going with this?" So many of my original graff partners have stopped or slowed down, yet, I just keep doing it. It was just so strange.

Yvette: What was it that drew you to it? The process, finding a wall, connecting to people….?

Ren: I think all of those things. I think the thing that really made me different than many writers – and I'm finding this out now – is that I took it so seriously that I developed a method to doing it really well. I just know how to do it. I know how to read the situation. I know how to get away… probably because of bad experiences. I learned from those experiences how to read a situation well.

Yvette: I heard from another artist that you are a master of "flow." Traffic flow, people flow…it's like you have a sixth sense "ah crap there's someone coming by in two minutes…!"

Ren: Yeah, it is like that. You've got to be able to climb really well. The only drawback is that after years of that it's definitely taken its toll on my body. I had to give up climbing in 2003 because my legs are getting all really messed up. I would literally jump off two stories, and climb the craziest things you could imagine. I'd hide from people for hours in the most uncomfortable positions!

It's kind of fun though. It's like an adventure. It's also that I just like being out late at night. That was a part of it and graffiti gave me something to do on long walks.

Yvette: What's your favourite surface to paint?

Ren: It's not about the surface; it's being an active force in an environmental aesthetic. A participant in an ever changing urban landscape.

Yvette: Do you have any favourite colours?

Ren: I like all colours. I like contrast, that's mainly what I'm after but I can pretty much work with anything if I have to. Kinds of paint I tend to like are rust paint like Rusto or Painter's touch. I kind of like some of the new Montana's but I do miss the days of just getting commercial paint and just trying to work with it. Sometimes I like markers more. Especially for tagging. There's just something about them that I like. I like how they're small and compact. You can get rid of them if you have to.

Yvette: What do you write besides Ren?

Ren: I've had a number of aliases but Ren is my overall thing. In the early days the tag that I took all city was Swirls. I actually got caught doing that so then I decided I needed something a little shorter. Ren just sort of came to my mind. It was a name I never heard of but it sounded cool, it was only three letters so I started doing that.

Yvette: How'd you think of it?

Ren: It just literally popped into my head. It almost has an Eastern philosophy sound to it. Kind of like Zen – Ren.

Yvette: Does your graffiti background and fine art side intersect at all? Does one influence the other?

Ren: I think they do in some ways. Graffiti enabled me to really work with colour without much worry about wasting canvas and it was pretty carefree. I could work large and under crazy conditions like painting in the dark. So it's had an effect. I used to keep it away from the gallery. Especially in the early days because people just didn't seem to get it. They didn't take it very seriously. Hope told me that when he was in art school all his teachers ridiculed it and didn't want him to use it in his art projects. Then when he left school and it started to become popular they were calling him back to teach graffiti.

Yvette: Going into the future, do you see yourself doing more of the fine art?

Ren: Yeah. I'll never stop. I've been doing it just as long as the graffiti so it's not something new to me.

Yvette: Did you have training in that or is it something you picked up on your own?

Ren: I'm self taught. I've learned from people around me, particularly my parents who are artists. I never had the resources to go to school, I just dove into it.

Yvette: When you go to a wall do you have a preconceived notion of what you're going to do?

Ren: It's fifty fifty. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't. In the early days it was always planned but as I got better at it I started getting into free styling where you just make it up on the spot. In some ways that's better because then

It's definitely taken its toll on my body.







you're working with the environment you're in. It matches the wall more than trying to impose something on it. For example, if there is a steep hill you can make the letters look like they're rolling down the hill, you know what I mean? It isn't so rigid. Usually with a sketch, it never comes out the same anyway. You end up adding stuff. It's just the way it is I guess. But everyone's got their own way of doing it. I think it's a mix of some formal rules and no rules. I think a lot of art's like that.

Yvette: You have to know the rules before you can break them.

Ren: Exactly.

Yvette: Would you pre-pick a location before you went out or did you always have something with you in case you were walking by and you thought "that would be a great spot…?"

Ren: Again, it could be a bit of both because during the daytime you're always looking out for things, keeping a look out for them. It also depends on the situation, sometimes a wall is a little sketchy so you might want to go back at night just to check it out - without anything on you – because you're going to climb and trespass and get a good look at it and suss it out. That's what I did sometimes. But sometimes you go out, go on a run and just hit as you go. Usually that is good with one other person or a couple of people.

I think over time, I started to realize I was actually better on my own. Other people are a liability. Especially if the cops break you up and your stories don't match. So I got into the thing



of…having a reason for being in every spot I am. Having a story for it. When I look at a spot, I would look at the whole area. What if something happens, what are the ways out? What are things to watch out for? Are there dogs in the yards? I check everything out. Sometimes I'd even go so far as to set up a tripwire if the escape route was a little sketchy. Or noise traps in spots to let me know if anyone's coming if there was a weird blind spot in the area.

Yvette: That is impressive forethought!

Ren: Usually with other people it's harder to do all that. It's harder to get consensus. Except with Daser. We did the story thing once and it saved our asses really well. Cops got us, they separated us but our stories were so airtight they were just like, "alright, see ya later." They didn't really have anything on us. They knew we were in a certain area with some cans. We had a story for the cans, we had a story for why we went through that area…for everything, really, so they just let us go. Then for a couple of months we never went into that area just in case.

Yvette: Tell me about TCM. How'd it get started?

Ren: A friend of mine, Cyber initiated the idea in 1988. Together we started a crew (The Crime Messiahs) that in those early days included the likes of Kid-C, Dino, Vertex and Blaze. By 1993 I was the only original left standing, so I reformed the crew. The second formation included Hope, Kane, Sec, Recka and Daser. This was a good diverse mix of talent and a lot of good times.

Other definitions for TCM are; Trans-continental Mayhem, Taking Control Massively, The Chaos Masters and Therapeutic Creative Mischief.

Yvette: When you first started off, did you ever imagine that the scene would become what it is today?

Ren: I never thought it would get like this in Toronto.

Up until about 1993 it seemed like there were just a half dozen of us who were really doing it. The rest of the people weren't as prolific. If you happened to see their stuff it was like, "wow, he actually did another one!" No, I did not think it would be like it is now. There were times when it seemed that if I stopped it then it would all stop. Now it's a totally different scene I almost have nothing to do with. That's what it feels like now. I don't even know half the people anymore. I'm so out of the loop. I don't know what the crew names mean… nothing. Which is good, I guess.

Yvette: You stay out of politics that way, right?

Ren: Yes. Exactly. I don't need to know all that stuff .

Yvette: What do you say to people who are very hardcore and think it's selling out if you make money doing graff?

Ren: I had that view for a while too, but then I got to the point where I was like, "well, why not make money off of it…it's my thing?!" I've got to eat.

Yvette: What would you want people to take away from the graff when they see it on the streets?

Ren: I'd like it to make their day. To wonder what it is and who did it. To put a smile on their face. Simple entertainment. When I first started doing it I thought everyone was going to like it. I guess I was partly right, but I learned very quickly that a lot of people didn't like it. Either through word of mouth or somebody sees you doing it and they're like, "hey! What the fuck are you doing?!"

Yvette: What have you sacrificed for graffiti and art in general, since you do both graff and fine art?

Ren: I sacrificed a conventional life. That's for sure. I put a lot of time into certain things when I maybe should have gone back to school. I think thoughts like that sometimes



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