



Wall graffiti to light up Chennai lanes

Joeanna Rebello, TNN | Jan 24, 2015, 06:46AM IST

CHENNAI: Public art is to a city what a private collection is to a home. Shorthand for the owners' cultural and political preferences. Chennai, whose public art has thus far been monopolised by the political and film posters, would lead to the assumption, not incorrect, that these are the city's two primary pulses. This is set to change with Goethe-Institut Chennai launching its street art festival on a massive scale, roping in street artists from across the world and India to confer upon Chennai new art and imagination.

'Conquer The Concrete', the 18-day intervention — with support from Chennai corporation and Southern Railways among other collaborators — will create wall murals across pre-determined sites, including railway stations like Egmore, Greenways Road, Kastuiba MRTS and Park Town, cinemas like Casino Theatre and Satyam, five Corporation schools and YMCA College of Physical Education. The project will also coopt the community, via workshops at schools and colleges, and partnerships with painters of cinema hoardings, the original street artists of the city.

Introducing the project, Helmut Schippert, director of Goethe-Institut, pointed out that street art tends to be viewed by the city administration with some scepticism, seeing in public wall art more risk than reward. "But what harm can art do," he questions. What it can do, he states, is animate a city, make it culturally and intellectually resonant, and newly interpret old spaces. "Artists can respond through art, to the challenges and questions that arrive on the back of rapid urbanization," he adds.

Balchand Parayath, of Chennai City Connect, hopes that as people see more street art in Chennai, they'll come to embrace it and participate in it. "Street art makes a city more livable," he holds.

Street art, which goes back to graffiti, typically involves surreptitious paint jobs at night, usually without permission of local officials or property owners. This project has all the go-aheads. While officials did want to know what the artists would be painting, they were assured there would be no breach of social codes and nothing to give offence, although a mockup couldn't possibly be handed to them.

Georg Zolchow, an artist from Berlin and the project's curator, says the foreign artists (from America, Spain and Germany), aware of the scant street art culture here, are keen to take on India's walls, to collaborate with Indian artists and create a visual discourse.

Among the seasoned street artists on the field, whose works compass comic art, abstraction and figuration, is M P Dhakshna, a hoarding painter who sees through this collaboration, his own art taking a new turn. "I used to think art was something you depicted literally; now I know it to be a personal expression that can even be abstract," he says.

Shilo Shiv Suleman, another participant is a Bangalore-based artist associated with Fearless Collective, a troupe of artists, photographers, videographers and others who campaign for the reclamation of public spaces — by both women, and art. "I'll be exploring the idea of gender and consent in Tamil cinema, questioning those narratives we see on the screen of the woman being chased by a man and ultimately caving in," she says. The project, they all promise, will bring about a change of scene.

For a complete list of venues and participating artists look up www.streetartchennai.com