

# PATRICIA SWEETOW GALLERY

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By Michael O'Sullivan

## Hip-Hop Artists Take Center Stage

Could there be any better indication that the once stodgy museum world has now fully embraced pop culture than the appearance of graffiti on the walls of the National Portrait Gallery? Well, that and the portrait of Stephen Colbert that hangs outside a second-floor bathroom.

The Colbert portrait is a joke -- placed on short-term display in response to a recent tongue-in-cheek lobbying campaign by the Comedy Central star -- but the spray-painted murals are dead serious. Part of "Recognize! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture," they belong here because as "tags," or signatures, of the artists who made them (Tim "Con" Conlon of Washington and David "Arek" Hupp of Baltimore), they're a kind of streetwise self-portraiture.

They're also billboards for the show's central point. That is, that hip-hop culture, which includes rap music, break dancing, urban graffiti and street fashion, is now thoroughly mainstream, despite lingering misgivings among some about the music's violent and misogynistic imagery. "The negative stereotypes are very real," says Frank Goodyear, the museum's assistant curator of photographs and one of three curators for the show. "But there's nothing marginal about it. This show is trying to re-center hip-hop as one of the larger cultural achievements of the last 20 years."

Just don't expect a crash course in hip-hop history. Or even, as Goodyear says, a "snapshot of hip-hop today." Rather, he explains, it's a small-scale, artist-driven show, spotlighting a handful of artists whose work "grapples with issues of race, representation and identity," while still qualifying as portraiture.

Like Conlon and Hupp, the Brooklyn-based Shinique Smith, a former graffitist, works right on the wall. Except that her mixed-media installation, "No Thief to Blame," isn't so much a self-portrait as a pantheon of the hip-hop departed: Photos of rappers Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, of singer Aaliyah and artist Keith Haring appear amid an explosive swirl of found objects and abstract calligraphy. Accompanying Smith's work is a poem by Nikki Giovanni, an icon of African American literature. Printed on the wall, and recited in a looped recording by Giovanni herself, the poem is a kind of "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (or Woman)."

"You are/Just/If there is any/Justice/Trying to find a way of not/Just surviving but living," she reads, in what could apply to any struggling, aspiring rapper, tagger or fashion designer trying to escape the streets.

David Scheinbaum, who began photographing rappers after chaperoning his then-13-year-old son to a concert by Del tha Funkee Homosapien several years ago by, has built up an extensive body of work. Represented here by 26 portraits, the series documents some of the leading names in hip-hop: Talib Kweli, Nas, Chuck D, Pharrell Williams and KRS-One, to name a few. If the wild patterns and kinetic angles of Conlon, Hupp or Smith seem out of place in a museum,

Scheinbaum's rich black-and-white prints don't. They evoke the classic cool of Roy DeCarava's portraits of John Coltrane and other jazz greats.

**Washington artist Jefferson Pinder's three video self-portraits are the show's most political works, probing issues of African American identity and the civil rights struggle through role-playing. "Mule" features the artist, dressed in a suit and tie while chained to a large piece of wood he drags up and down the street. Set in what looks like a basement under a cluster of bare light bulbs, "Invisible Man" takes its title from the Ralph Ellison novel. As one light after another slowly comes on, the glare briefly illuminates, then obscures, the artist's face.**

**If all it asked were "Who am I?," that would be one thing, and a question well in keeping with an exhibition titled "Recognize!" But its considerable power lies in Pinder's ability to make us wonder not just that, but also "Who are we?"**

Recognize! Hip Hop and Contemporary Portraiture Through Oct. 26 at the National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and F streets NW (Metro: Gallery Place-Chinatown) Hours: Open daily 11:30 to 7. Info:202-633-1000 (TDD: 202-633-5285). <http://www.npg.si.edu>. Admission: Free.