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## UP and OUT at the National Gallery

TOPIC: Arts & Culture

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*Fairbanks prison art, main artist Cindy Hair*

*The importance of street art as a means of communication in contemporary society*

*Street art has been defined as the voice of the streets. It began as a medium for the disenfranchised, a way for those on the fringes of society to have their voices heard, and has grown to become a powerful art form capable of regenerating communities, challenging and entertaining people for a positive social purpose, and forming common bonds among conflicting facets of a society. It is an age-old cultural phenomenon, found in every city in the world, and brings art into public space, however temporarily. Jessica Wallace, education and outreach coordinator with the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands, reports.*

The National Gallery of the Cayman Islands is eager to present for the first time an eclectic variety of contemporary street art by emerging local artists. Although Street Art is fast becoming recognised as the defining art movement of the 21st Century, it was originally born out of graffiti writing which started in the ghettos of New York and San Francisco in the 1960s and 1970s.

It is important to note, however, that street art is very different to graffiti, with which it is commonly confused. Graffiti is scratching, scrawling and painting of lettering on walls, and is often considered unsightly and illegal. Two things differentiate street art from its graffiti predecessor: the self-consciousness in its conversation with a community and its lack of aggression and violence. Many people are beginning to understand that street art is not about vandalism; rather it raises important issues about the need to reclaim our public space, the need for us to affirm and access artistic existence within concrete jungles, the need and importance of spontaneous acts of creativity to make communities more liveable, the need to acknowledge the existence of deprived and unhappy segments of the population, and the need to do something about it! Street Art can stimulate discussion, motivate

people to reconsider their role in society, and reshape the lifeless urban horror that humans so often construct for ourselves in the dubious name of progress.

Street Art emphasises the sorrow and beauty within a community which is often ignored or forgotten if one gets too caught up in the challenges that a busy life presents. Street Art has the power to create change in a community by questioning what people take for granted. It subscribes to an artistic alternative that is more open, non-exclusive, and strives to be honest about the human costs of a modern society.

In fact, the goals of Street Art often echo the grassroots intention of all National Gallery Outreach Programmes: to connect awareness, appreciation, and accessibility of the visual arts to all members of our community; to share the healing power of imaginative creation with those who need it most.

The murals created by our Outreach participants are painted on large wooden plates whose edges aren't aligned perfectly, suggesting a humanity and vulnerability that creates a halo of jagged innocence around the art. There is a beauty in understanding that these naïve yet edgy ephemeral compositions metaphorically create and destroy themselves, while simultaneously mimic the defacing yet beautifying tension surrounding street art. The artists haven't leashed their sharp imaginations, preferring instead to manufacture a stimulating visual space where you fall under the illusion that anything can happen.

Street art is a powerful platform for reaching the public, and many of the pieces in UP and OUT address topics concerning social justice and activism. The universal theme in most, if not all street art, is that adapting visual artwork into a format which utilises public space, allows artists who may otherwise feel disenfranchised, to reach a much broader audience than traditional artwork and galleries normally allow. These individual art pieces and murals offer a means of communication and self-expression for members of socially marginalized communities, providing an effective tool for establishing dialog and addressing positive change.

The NGCI hopes that in producing a show of this type in a public non-profit gallery and through our planned programme of talks, events and educational activities, the public will see how this kind of art can affect our community for the better. To be a part of a team that wants to better the community, to make a positive difference by raising awareness, to use one's own talents to help others is a rare phenomenon and should be celebrated and taught as an inspiration to not just artists but all people. Consider the UP and OUT Street Art Exhibition created by the NGCI Outreach participants a lens, which can filter your view, move your heart, and change your perspective. This exhibition can help us realise that art has the power to move not just our hearts, but our community consciousness as well.