

recession rebbs

While finance companies plea for government bailouts across the globe, starving artists are simply vying to survive in a shrinking art market and credit crunch.

But despite the dire status quo, a handful of New Yorkers are embracing the recession as a catalyst, rather than constraint, to their creativity. Taking advantage of New York City's streets, these guys are turning garbage into real works of art. And, better yet, unlike the architects of this global mess, these artistic luminaries are actually expanding their careers – and selling more than ever.

Take a leaf out of their book. Get creative.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY **FAITH-ANN YOUNG**



Nate Hill

The lanky, eccentric artist Nate Hill became infamous in the NY art scene last year for his eerie 'urban taxidermy', in which he sewed together dried, dead animal body parts found in Chinatown garbage piles with a leather needle and carpet thread, in order to craft mystical, fantasy creatures. The grand oeuvre of this project was a life-size pair of humans, A.D.A.M. and E.V.E. Except in Mr. Hill's world, instead of being made of Adam's elbow, E.V.E. was made of fifteen animal species including bird, buffalo, cat, cow, coyote, dog, fish, guinea hen, lobster, octopus, ox, pig, rabbit, shrimp and squirrel.

This year, in reaction to the economy, and

in juxtaposition to his more sinister man-o-carcasses, Hill started a brand-new art-comedy project called Club Animals. Hill and five or six artist friends don Disneyland-esque, plush animal costumes and frolic through the streets in an effort to brighten people's moods. Why? "Obama said that now is the time to put off childish things, but we could not disagree more."

Thus far, Club Animals has hosted a human petting zoo in a taxidermy-filled Lower East Side bar, where they welcomed guests to gently pet and tickle them. The furry crew also did a mini marathon where they raced Union Square in NYC four times in full mascot gear. Then there's the

'Free Bouncy Ride' services they offer on New York City subways, in which they urge passengers to sit on the plush animals' laps and be bounced up and down like three-year-olds on grandma's knee. "In these times of job loss, government bailouts and even a potential Depression, Club Animals has turned from adult concerns of money and finances and concentrated our minds on to those of children," explains Hill.

As for the fiscal implications of the project, there are none. Price of bouncy ride from Grand Central to Wall Street: \$0. >

www.clubanimalsnyc.blogspot.com



Sarah Bereza

Brooklyn-based painter Sarah Bereza specialises in whimsical oil portraits of women painted in warm pastel hues, often posed in positions of jest or sexual innuendo. Her painted subjects seem to stare out from their ornate frames like modern nymphs, half-mocking and half-seducing.

Bereza's work has been featured at numerous solo and group shows from London's Fulham Art Gallery to Brooklyn's Jack the Pelican Presents, and even earned critic's choice from Saatchi Gallery during the New York Pulse Fair in 2008.

Inspired by the recent financial meltdown, Bereza has since begun a new type of portrait series. This time, rather than painting women

in seductive poses, she drew distressed i-banker wives or debutants – shocked, anxious and possibly penniless. "I am interested in the feelings of the wives who have to learn how to live with less money from their banker husbands, of women trying to find a love+money connection without success," explains Sarah.

And her process is just as recession-conscious as her subject matter. Aside from the oil paints, her materials come from the lumberyard. Instead of buying expensive wood frames, she makes her own decadent-looking ones from a concoction of Styrofoam, fibreglass, urethane and epoxy. "Our way of life in the US certainly wasn't sustainable.

It is a wonderful feeling that we have a new president who can make some major changes to help bring our country into a new era of global consciousness."

Despite her dramatised portraiture of recession-ruffled society women, Bereza is largely excited about the changes that the recession is spawning: "The farmers' market is always packed now, and there is this renegade group of people in Brooklyn who are throwing seed bombs all over. Plants and flowers are popping up everywhere in abandoned lots and buildings."

www.sarahbereza.com



Justin Gignac

Twenty-eight-year-old Justin Gignac crafts the most literal 'recession art' of our recession rebels. A natural entrepreneur with a crafty sense of humour, Gignac combines a determined work ethic with a typically Socratic mindset. While interning during university, he entered a heated debate with a co-worker over packaging and marketing. The co-worker argued package design wasn't important. Gignac strongly disagreed and decided to prove his point through an experimental project: "I figured the only way to prove them wrong would be to package something that absolutely nobody would ever want to buy."

Gignac began plucking odd ends from New

York City trash bins and arranging them in clean, gift-friendly square cubes, while working as an art director to support himself post-graduation. These cubes of 'Original New York City Garbage' initially cost \$10, but Gignac had to raise the price because he couldn't keep up with the orders.

Today, his 'Original New York City Garbage' boxes are \$50 and limited-edition cubes, with collections from special occasions, like the last game at Yankee Stadium, going for \$100. Like the packaging myth he has since debunked, Gignac is sceptical about the media's portrayal of the recession: "It's just fear perpetuating fear. Things kinda sucked a little to start with and then everyone

gets scared and the suckage snowballs." Meanwhile, his business continues to progress: "I've been really fortunate that my ideas still cut through in spite of this economy. In the past few weeks I've actually received more orders than usual. I'd like to expand my garbage empire at some point and have about fifty emails in my inbox from people all over the world interested in franchising my idea."

When asked why garbage is selling so well, he responds with wit: "Who knows. Maybe, in comparison to everything else going on, it's a damn good investment.">

www.nycgarbage.com



China Morbosa

The word 'Morbid' is etched in dainty swirls of cursive on China Morbosa's neck. The label 'Lawless' is displayed prominently on her collarbone.

Like her tattoos, Morbosa's art is a deliberate mix of gritty and delicate. In May, the twenty-six-year-old hosted an exhibition, *Putting the Recess Back in Recession*, at the hip street art gallery Alphabeta in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in which she spray-painted a city skyline on the wall and hung from the ceiling antique doors and broken window panes that she found off the street. Like the exhibition's title, each painting was playful yet paradoxical: a cartoon-esque drawing of a chiselled, gun-toting man, graceful birds in flight,

and tugboats (christened 'Tug-of-war') chugging merrily over misty glass panes.

The autonomous, free-wheeling nature of Morbosa's artwork can be traced back to her childhood. Having grown up in an agrarian family in New Mexico, her family "instilled a strong belief in questioning authority, stemming from being completely immersed in the direct effects of capitalism on the agricultural system."

During her teenage years, rather than being formally trained, Morbosa honed her artistic style on the street, experimenting with graffiti to vent her frustration. "I began using graffiti and street art as a rebellion against the feelings of powerlessness

I had as an individual," she says. "My street art roots became the foundation of the style and ideas currently reflected in my work."

Perhaps it has something to do with her namesake, China (her real name, by the way), but Morbosa's artistic career is growing exponentially these days. She participated in an art party in Brooklyn in late May, and is currently designing a guitar in collaboration with talented guitar ingénue Kaki King. Widely lauded for her exhibitions in NYC, she's also planning on infiltrating the LA art scene this summer. >

www.chinamorbosa.com



Ellis G

On a dark Brooklyn night in 2005, Ellis Gallagher (aka Ellis G) was mugged on his doorstep. Though only \$82 were stolen, he remained haunted by the dark. Then, enticed by the shadow of a fire hydrant some days after, the former graffiti tagger knelt down and traced the silhouette with a piece of chalk from his pocket.

"The darkness of the shadow looked like a graffiti fill-in where you outline it with a contrasting colour. So I outlined the dark shadow in white." From then on, he began to trace the outlines of shadows cast by commonplace street objects all over Brooklyn: telephone poles, fire hydrants, bikes, fences. "I went bananas on the Brooklyn streets from there."

His chosen medium, chalk, is a pretty unbeatable recession tool since it is cheap, biodegradable and fun to use. At a time when many are being forced to reflect upon their life choices, Ellis' street shadow art causes spectators – who may not go to museums or see art often – to do a double-take and look outside the norm. "There is a free museum on the streets that is constantly rotating the works," he says. "Street art is everywhere, you just have to look."

A bubbly character, Gallagher is a master of self-promotion, diligently signing each piece with his tag '© Ellis G 2009', and inviting the media to chronicle his street statements every other night. The result? He's lectured at Brooklyn Museum and

has been featured by everyone from *The New York Times* to *Der Spiegel*.

The cops have also taken notice and tried to incriminate his art as graffiti. After spending seventeen hours in jail for chalk drawing, a brief trial ensued in which the judge found that chalk did not fit the definition of New York graffiti as "etching, painting, covering, drawing upon or otherwise placing of a mark upon public or private property with intent to damage such property." In other words, Gallagher is back, with chalk-in-hand, going bananas on sidewalks all over town. **1**

www.myspace.com/ellis_gee