

Hello and Welcome to Leeds

Last week we caught up with Nathan Evans, illustrator and muralist and who specialises in lettering and hand drawn typography, just after the completion of his Leeds BID mural. Fresh from the final brushstroke he has his overalls rolled down by his waist and hands caked with dried paint, clearly not afraid to get his hands dirty. As well as mural work he's been painting for 12 years, first starting when he tried to get into breakdancing, only to realise it wasn't his true calling in life as it required a bit more upkeep and dedication than anticipated. What went naturally with the scene - graffiti and urban art, took his fancy instead, suiting his skills far more.

Words by Nathan Evans | Photography by David Lindsay

He has a huge back catalogue of paintings, from years of regular work, mainly in "places that no one cares about... to brighten them up a little bit". During university came the realisation that his work could be a career and not just a hobby, his graphic design course helping to make this dream feasible. He argues against the commonly protested idea of selling out, but we agree that if it comes down to doing something you love and also being able to put food on the table, there is no contest.

After uni came a few smaller commissions here and there in illustration and some murals and eventually his work spread in recognition, earning him larger and more frequent jobs each time. Nathan's work isn't just local to Leeds though. He's travelled even as far as St Petersburg for work ("I don't speak Russian"), and touring places like Outlook Festival in Croatia, which many artists have begun to make their bread and butter, "Although it's a very fast paced environment for me, even though I like the music!"

The Leeds BID mural occurred when one of what Nathan calls jokingly his 'ambassadors' or 'agents' (basically friends and fans of his work who often make suggestions for opportunities and openings that suit his work) had pointed it out as a cool opportunity for his style "If I had to cut everyone in on it I'd be broke". Applying via the open call, Nathan's proposal was accepted and the ball was rolling.

In terms of the theme for the piece there were key things that contributed: Nathan took the opportunity to merge his lettering work with the mural work, which doesn't always necessarily see much crossover. The slogan 'Hello and Welcome to Leeds' is a simple one but with subtle and conscientious method behind it; the 'Hello' placed precisely where the National Express coaches roll into the station, and the 'colours vibrant. The geometric shapes also reflect the similar shapes in the emerging John Lewis architecture. In short, Nathan's work merges old school traditional sign painting found in the likes of Kirkgate Market with a more contemporary and lively colour palette but we can't obviously forget the many faces incorporated into the mural, representing the various characters milling in and out of the City, hinting at many faces but providing a universal appeal: "I am always aware that murals can have an expiry date on them if they don't have enough engagement".

Nathan describes the trials and tribulations presented by the weather at the time of painting, working amongst some of the rainiest days Leeds has seen. "Special shout out to Tim Smith aka 3-Digits here who helped paint three walls with masonry paint (a sort of under layer to smooth out an uneven surface) with the downpour eventually completely wiping away one of the walls' paint completely; it wasn't a great day that, but great to have someone there suffering with me". Ultimately though, the perseverance through the pretty undesirable weather conditions paid off, and Nathan has since received much valid praise for his work. "It's been very positive on the whole! Over the course of painting alone there was maybe around a hundred people passing comments here and there. It's meant quite a lot to some people too which has quite surprised me, but it's been really touching - it's got quite emotional at times I'm not gonna lie". Nathan explained one of his favourite comments, and his appreciation when someone of an older generation actually engages with his work, as opposed to a younger crowd who more readily accept murals and graffiti art: "An old fella said it was a credit to me...and then said I'm going put you forward for a knighthood!" "I tweeted that..."

Nathan told us how he likes the nature of freelance jobs, being a fly on the wall of various environments and here for example observing the inner-workings of a market, with all its usual characters and routines. When I ask "What now?" he's already set his sights on an even bigger painting, having acquired the taste for the larger dimensions.

Speaking more about the project he said:

"It's been a great opportunity for me though, working alongside other creatives who I admire. I also commissioned a film to be created alongside the mural painting by Bokehgo, basically a process film that will provide a visual summary of the project and really parcel it up; and then one of my favourite Leeds based producers HashFinger, who's made a beat to soundtrack the film; plus all the paint that I bought came from Artofficial, which is down on Kirkgate, literally a stone's throw away from where I was painting. I've been buying paint from them pretty much since I started. Finally I had my overalls printed by No Brand who are screen printers

based in Byron Street Studios. I'm calling them all my creative partners so there's another shout out for you!"

This collaborative effort typifies the kind of project that Leeds BID is encouraging and one that everyone can reap the benefit of. You can check Nathan's top work out down by Kirkgate Market on George Street! Or you can check out more of his work at n-evans.com.



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