

THE NEW NEW YORKERS

# For artist, the city is his muse

■ Almost by accident, Alan Streets has made a nice living painting pictures of areas throughout boroughs

BY SARAH GARLAND

Alan Streets emerged from the subway on a sweaty summer Saturday, covered in fierce tattoos and dragging two large black bundles on carts. Lurching down the street, he glanced quickly from side to side, his shoulders hunched in a warning to steer clear. Then he stopped and grinned. He began to unpack, scooting as close to the curb as possible without tumbling into the trash-strewn street.

First his easel. Jerking it open, he set it up in less than a minute. Then, reaching into a torn, paint-spattered bag, he chose a smallish blank canvas. He extracted a set of delicate brushes, each tiner than the next. A well-worn wooden palette smeared with layers of brown, brick red, gold and dots of royal blue and lime green. Two tool boxes full of acrylic paint tubes. A paint-encrusted mug where he poured a dash of water.

## Paint preferences

"People have compared me to Van Gogh," Streets said in a Cockney accent as thick as the paint he started mixing onto his brush. Allowing his menacing frown to relax into a meek smile, he explained that he shuns watered-down paint in favor of thick globs because he likes the effect.

With quick, deft strokes, the scene in front of him began to emerge: the old theater leaning in over the street, a clock tower careening off to the side, red and yellow flecks recognizable as the R & S Strauss store, swirling blue and gray as the darkening sky.



NEWSDAY PHOTO / MOISES SAMAN

Artist Alan Streets works on a painting yesterday afternoon at Washington Square Park as bystanders look on.

Streets, a pseudonym he said he chose because his real name is too long, had never been to this intersection of 175th Street and Broadway before, but he had been to Washington Heights. The 36-year-old painter has also been to every other neighborhood in the city since moving to New York from London in 2000, always lugging his easel and paints with him.

But he didn't move here with a mission to paint every neighborhood in New York City. It just happened that way.

"I ran out of money, I was going to be homeless. I just went out and started painting on the street, and I started selling my paintings," he said.

He has thrived. Citing graffiti and Salvador Dali as his main influences despite the resemblances between his work and Van Gogh's, he now sells enough paintings to spend \$18,000 a year on paint and rent a studio in Harlem. Most

of his work he sells through his Web site [www.alanstreets.com](http://www.alanstreets.com) and at Davidé Fur, a fur coat store that displays his work in the fashion district. After seeing him painting on a corner, the owner offered to make room among the coats for a few canvasses, and Streets said yes.

His art is also being showcased at Monster Gallery in Brooklyn.

"I had nothing to lose," Streets said. The store has since sold 150 of Streets' paintings, which start at \$200 and go up to \$2,000.

He loves his job, but it can be dangerous. He got the tattoos and cultivated the menacing frown to scare away strangers who bother him while he paints.

## A dangerous encounter

"One night someone tried to kill me. He tried to mess with me and I hit him with my palette, the paint went all over

him, and he attacked me with a trash can," Streets said. Thanks to his training in kung fu — he's been learning for seven years — Streets said he was able to fend off the attacker. Recently he also took up boxing.

Still, Streets sells a third of his paintings on the street and said that most people he encounters are nice — his best friend is a German taxi driver he met while painting.

## Some fans, some not

"Not everyone is horrible. They like what I'm doing. They say nice things," he said. "I like the ghetto areas, because people are less pretentious. People appreciate the art more, because they don't see it every day, whereas downtown they expect it. I hardly ever get grief in the ghettos."

He didn't pay much attention to the chatter of the crowds that gathered behind him as he painted in Washington

Heights. Mothers held up their children to watch. Delivery boys whizzing by braked suddenly. Old men sidled up.

"It's beautiful. It's Impressionism."

"It's crooked."

"Look, mom, it's the theater across the street."

"Not everyone would understand that. I think it's pretty."

"Yo, that's hot."

He kept his shoulders hunched up, muttering thanks to a few of the most insistent admirers. Then, after the last dab of gold and red, he painted "Alan" in the corner, "Broadway W. 175th Street" on the back, packed the canvas, brushes and the toolboxes full of paint back into the black duffels, scraped the palette and poured the thick water from the crusty mug into the gutter, and lurching off toward the subway station.

Sarah Garland is a freelance writer.