HAUTE LIVING

One-On-One With Tristan Eaton On His "The Gilded Lady" Mural On Fifth Avenue In NYC

ART, **CELEBRITIES**, **NEWS**, **ONE ON ONE**

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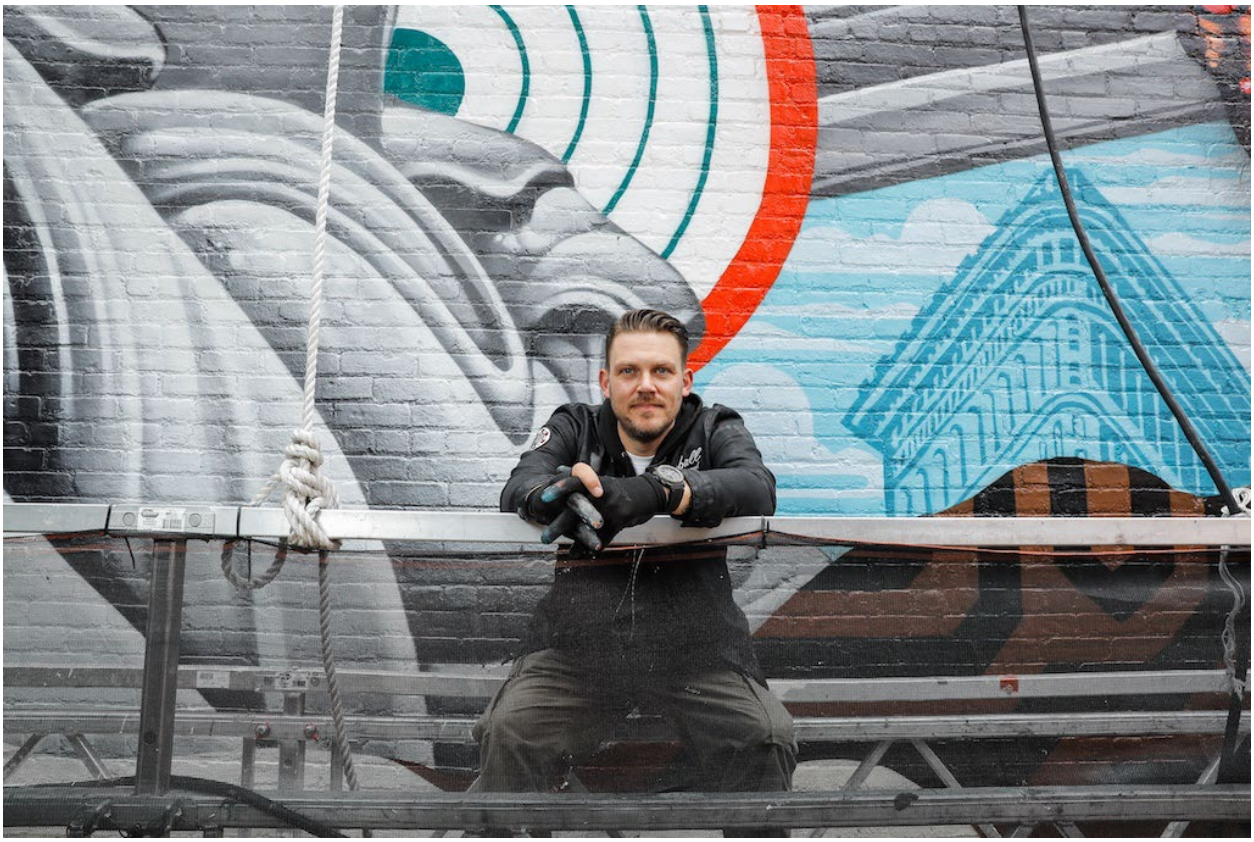
In the ever-so-popular world of street art, there are some names that have grown into household ones. One of these is Tristan Eaton. Born on the West Coast in California, the consistency he found through his child and teen-hood was his love of art, leading to him publicly painting within his local communities, on billboards, dumpsters and everything in between. He continued to follow his passion, which led him to working with some of the biggest brands in the world at a very young age, including Fisher-Price at the mere age of 18, where he designed his first toy, as well as Kidrobot, Pepsi, Nike and Versace, among others. Today, Tristan Eaton is one of the most renowned artists in the world, across all artistic disciplines, with some of his incredibly detailed, colorful and elaborate murals having been on display in some of the biggest cities on earth, including Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Miami and Berlin. His work can also be found in the permanent collection of New York's iconic Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). One of his latest projects, commissioned by the Kaufman Organization, was a large-scale mural, painted on the 236 Fifth Avenue building in Manhattan's NoMad neighborhood. Here, I sat down with Tristan to discuss that very mural, "The Gilded Lady," his creative process, his brand partnerships and even some of his favorite projects to date (spoiler alert: one of them is his work on President Barack Obama's presidential campaign).



Tristan sits in front of his mural, "The Gilded Lady" on Kaufman Organization's 236 Fifth Avenue building in NoMad, NY

Photo Credit: Tristan Eaton

DM: Tell me a little bit about your mural with Evelyn Nesbit in conjunction with the Kaufman Organization called 'The Gilded Lady,' in your own words.

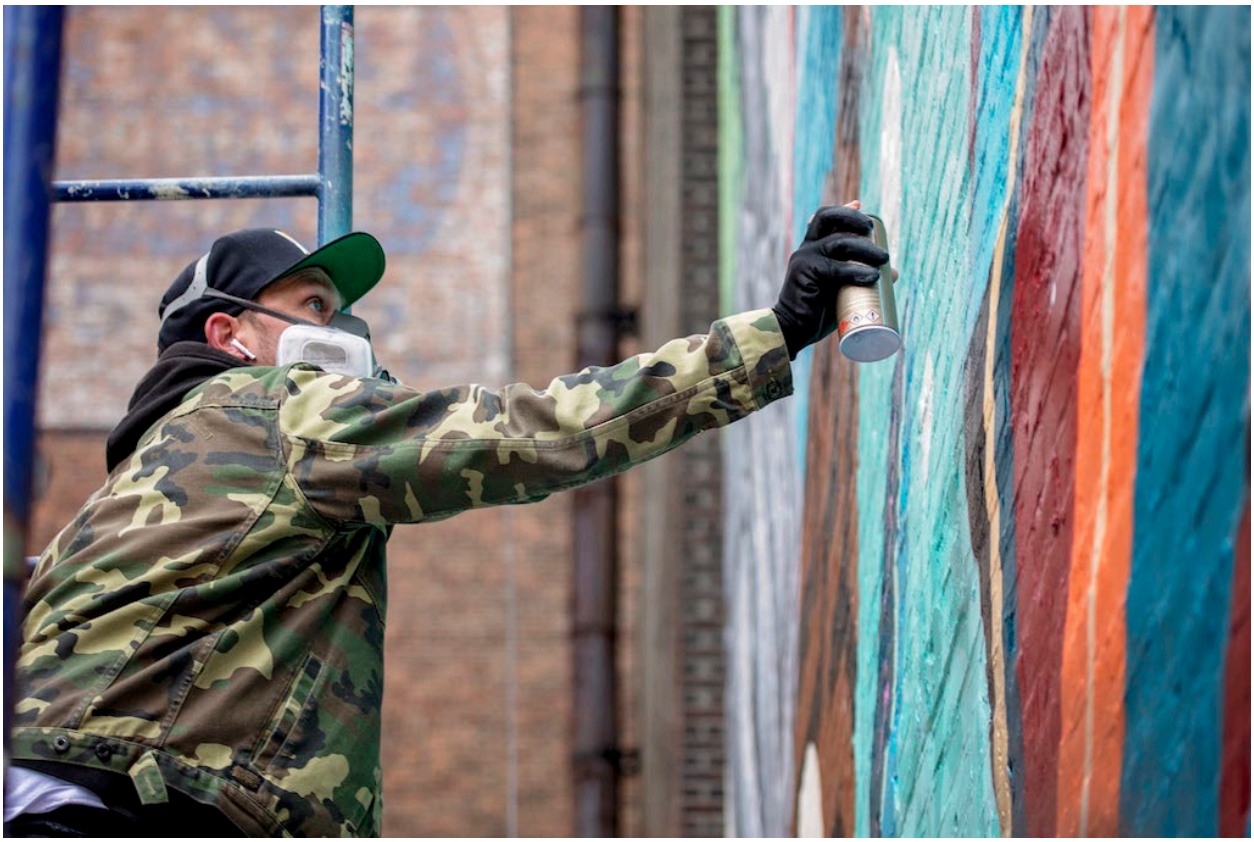
TE: Well, it was a surprise email out of the blue when the Kaufman Organization invited me to do this project, and I was happy to hear that they had a pretty clear idea of what they wanted. So when they came to me, they talked to me about how the NoMad area was kind of going through a renaissance or rebrand…they told me they really wanted to do something to the building that was unique. Not an advertisement, but something to represent the history of that community. So I was excited for the whole notion. I spent most of my life in New York City and I have a deep love affair for New York and its history, so I was excited to jump right in and figure out what to do. What was unique about this mural project—apart from the fact that it's huge on Fifth Avenue, right in the middle of Midtown, and how cool that is on its own—was that I had a historian to work with me, to research, and to go through all archives. So [the Kaufman Organization's] historians work for the library in the New York Historical Society and helped me dive really deep into all of the news clippings and vintage posters and stories of that age. That's how Evelyn Nesbit and Audrey Munson appeared as the natural stars of the mural project.

DM: Why did you choose Evelyn as your main subject for the mural to represent the NoMad area?

TE: With public murals, they have to work for someone who is driving by at 30 miles an hour and only seeing it for three seconds. It has to have an impact and resonate for that kind of engagement. However, there has to be a larger, greater, more meaningful story beyond that. So a lot of times when I work, I have large, visual symbols—either a silhouette or a main subject of the mural to bring you in closer. And a lot of times, that visual has to be something of beauty, something engaging. So of course we wanted a naturally beautiful icon to kind of bring people closer into the story. Now, the story we're telling with this mural, it is not just about Evelyn Nesbit or Audrey Munson; it is about the history of the gilded era, which was around 1880 to around 1920. And in that era, there was so much crazy history in New York, from the good, the bad, the ugly to you know, human stories, to stories of industry, stories of pain and crime and all this crazy stuff…Evelyn Nesbit was very much so an actual face of that era, so it was fitting for us to kind of use her to represent that era. And, when you read the stories, she does have kind of a

tragic story and didn't really get to tell it. So for me, I thought it was very fitting to give her a prideful moment later on in the life of the city she lived in and a platform that she deserves. So for us, we felt like she was the right person to invite people in to the history. And then going forward from that, Audrey Munson—who was another famous socialite of that era—was actually an artist muse and posed for sculptures of that era. So if you go to the Metropolitan Museum for instance, or to the fountain by the Plaza Hotel, those are all sculptures of Audrey Munson. So she was one of the most famous woman of her time and people would recognize her on the streets from sculptures—which is crazy—and really speaks of that era where someone is being recognized from a sculpture. So, to the average person walking through the streets of New York, these beautiful women who are like the faces of all this history, are an obvious way to pull people in closer.

DM: Why do you think that the Kaufman Organization selected you to create this incredible addition to its building in NoMad, among all of the amazing artists who are also in the street art space?
TE: Michael Kazmierski [Director of Acquisitions for the Kaufman Organization]—who was the main project manager of this project from the Kaufman Organization—said that he had been following my work and he loved it. They were looking for an artist that could tell a story, and I think it was pretty easy to see how in my work, you could tell there is a rich story within an image…I think that's why they gravitated towards my art…[because I was able to have one bold image that had many layers within it, so that you're not just telling one story, you're telling 20. That's a very typical function of [my art]: to tell these kind of layered stories and fitting images within one bold graphic; one bold silhouette carrying many stories within it.



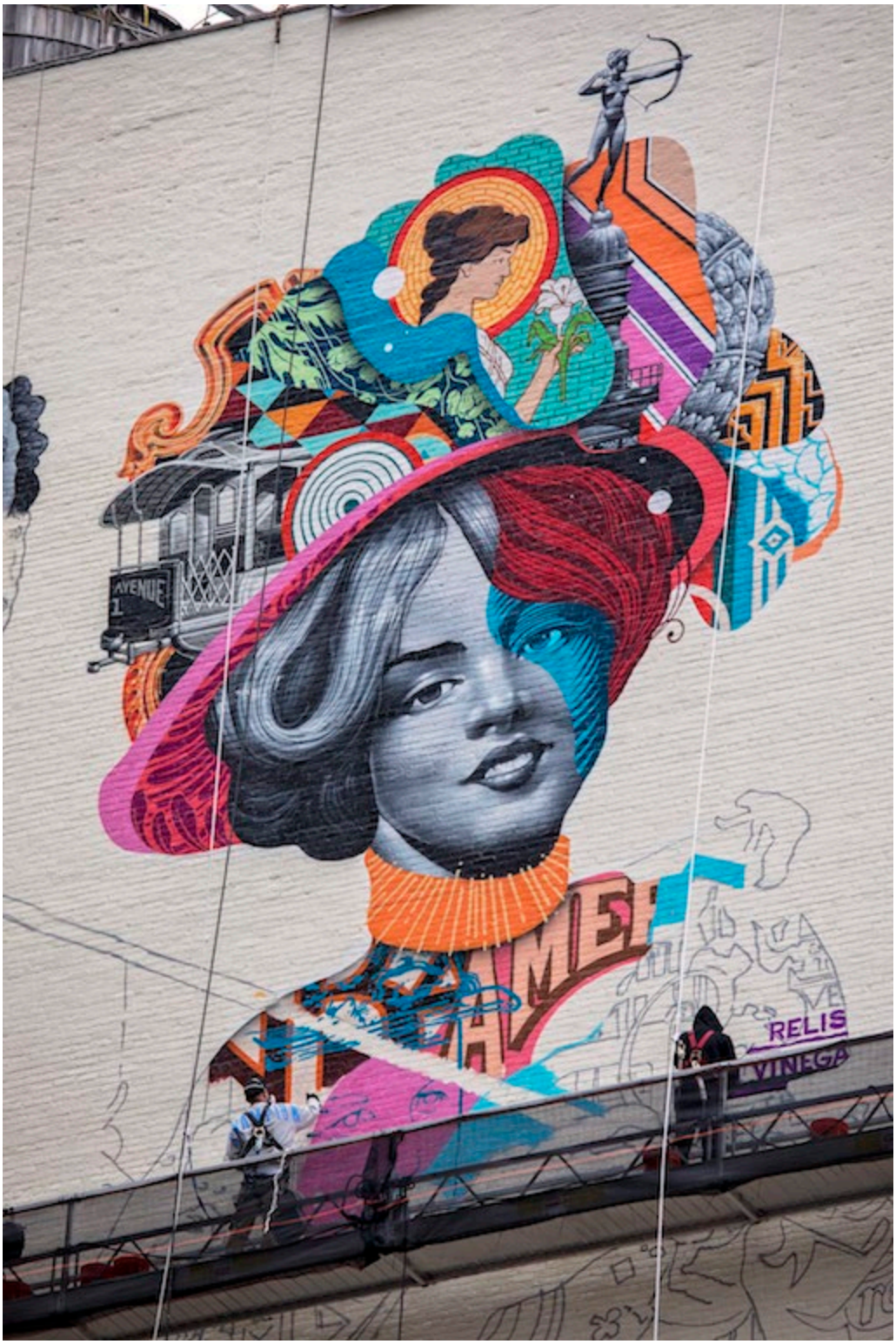
Tristan spray paints part of his "The Gilded Lady" mural
Photo Credit: John Domine

DM: What is it that you hope viewers take away from the mural when they're passing by or they stop to look at it? What do you hope that their sentiment is, and what do you hope they feel in its presence and when they view it?
TE: That is hard to say because I think everyone brings their own baggage, memories and experiences to art…so everyone will have a different experience with it. But what I think about a lot in New York City, is what I hope this mural will bring to people. Whenever I'm in New York City, there are times when I'm on a street corner and I think

about that street corner 50 years ago, 100 years ago, 150 years ago. I soak in the ghosts and the history and the beautiful stories. You can look at photos of Times Square in the '90s and look at Brooklyn in the '30s and the same street corners are still there. When you stand there and look up at that mural, the style of it, the visual elements designed to give you visual clues as to what it used to be like right there on that same street corner. There's something timeless about that, and even though it's historic, there's something about New York that's always giving people pride in their place in the world, because they're in New York, because they live in New York, because they're trying to make it in New York. They have this beautiful pride and history, and we're always living it, we're always living in New York's beautiful dreams. So that mural I think, kind of shows a timeline, and reminds us of the layers and layers of history that happened before us there. I like that aspect of the mural alone; there are historians who will enjoy it, tourists who will enjoy it on a surface level. But for me, I love that it is a time piece.

DM: Describe to me your creative process in general and how that lent itself to the creation of this mural specifically.

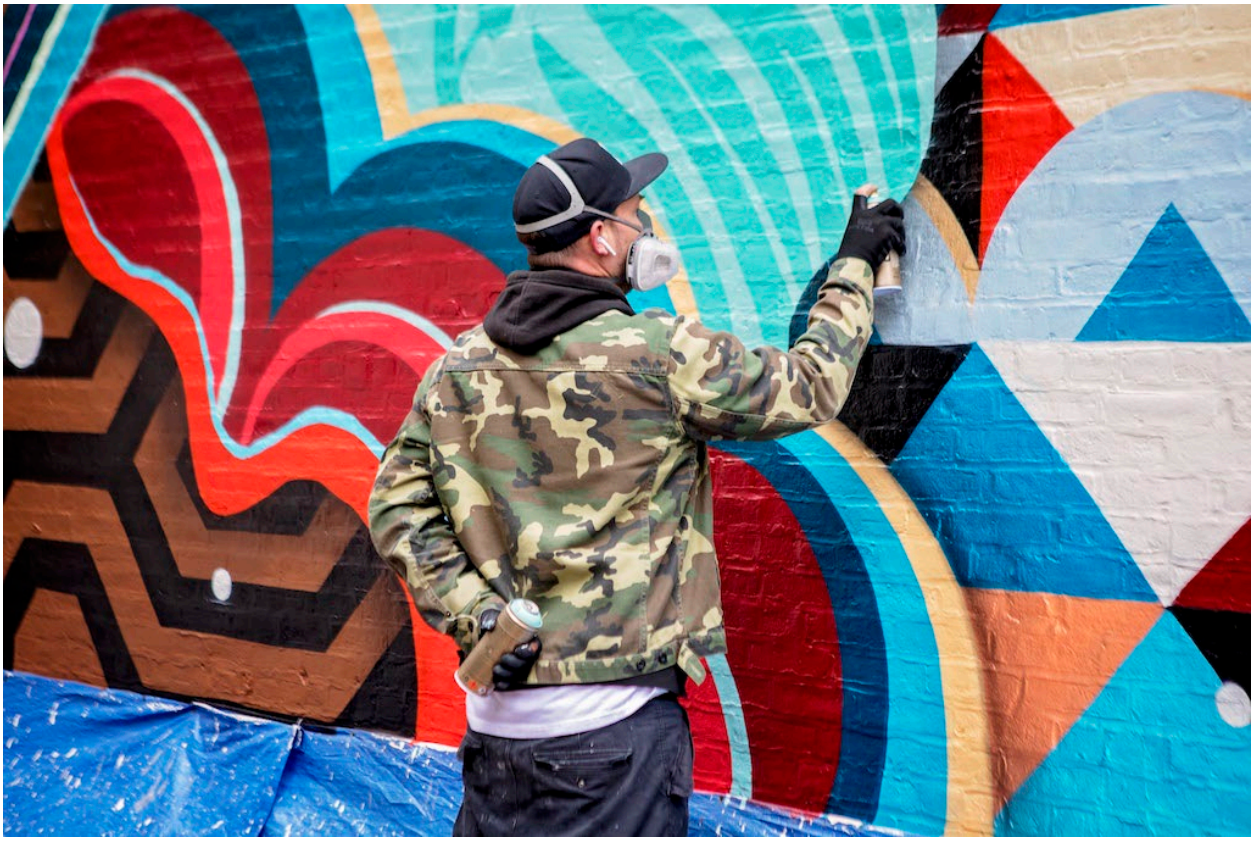
TE: For me, when I create images for public murals, it's a long process in design and sketches and digital design, where I basically seek out all the imagery that I can use…So my creative process for creating art starts with sketching and digital design work, and I basically seek out all the imagery I would like to use to tell a story or make a certain statement, and I start piecing it together, like it's a puzzle. And my work does function like a puzzle, so I know which pieces are right, which pieces are wrong, and sometimes, the pieces just fall right into place. So I have to figure out, out of all of the images, how they can come together in harmony from being so chaotic, and how it's going to look once all of the pieces are together. And sometimes, what I think will work, actually won't, and I have to find a new way to represent that part of the story. Sometimes it's not a portrait; sometimes it's a logo or a piece of design or a piece of typography instead of that photo of the building. There's a lot of back and forth with how it all fits together perfectly. But I've learned to trust myself as a designer because there are times when things happen accidentally, and on their own accord almost, where I'm actually doing the painting and there are some conscious actions that happen on their own, like when I go into autopilot. I get lucky and paint better than I think I can or paint things that resonate better than I thought they would. That happens in the design phase too, where I just plow through the puzzle together, knowing the pieces matter and the pieces tell the story…The design phase can be exhausting. But, coming out of it and finding a way the puzzle works is so satisfying—and having a historian working with me to help with that made it even better because I knew that every single one of these 40 images, tells a story that was meant to be told in this mural. So there was no filler, there were no elements that meant nothing; everything in that mural means something and that made it even better. So starting with that, I knew that I had put together all of the pieces that were relevant. But then of course you know, you had your design, the client approves it, and then you move forward to actually painting, and that's a whole other battle. In a lot of ways that's the scariest part because in the back of your head you're always thinking, 'Is this going be the mural that sucks?' Or, 'Am I going to be able to stand up to my previous works?' There's always the worry that you might hit the brick wall and you just can't paint as well as you want to. And spray paint is so unpredictable and difficult, and that's a very real reality. So actually executing the design in spray paint is a whole separate challenge from the design phase that can be very intimidating for me. Spray paint always scares the s*** out of me. This mural really pushed me to the limits of what I could do in terms of spray paint, and I like to do justice to the imagery and design. So it was one of the most rewarding projects I have ever done because there was such a high expectation; the quality, the actual execution, the quality of the storytelling and the audience is so heavy. It was kind of nerve wracking. But a few days in, I realized that I had total control of it and I ended up having a great time painting it. But the entire creative process from start to finish is a roller coaster.



The Gilded Lady
Photo Credit: John Domine

DM: There's so much going on in all of your work, with several intricacies and small details. How do you really know when a piece is finished, and you can just step away and think, 'I'm good?'
TE: That's a great question. Well, I don't really have the luxury of deciding that. Most of the time I have a flight to

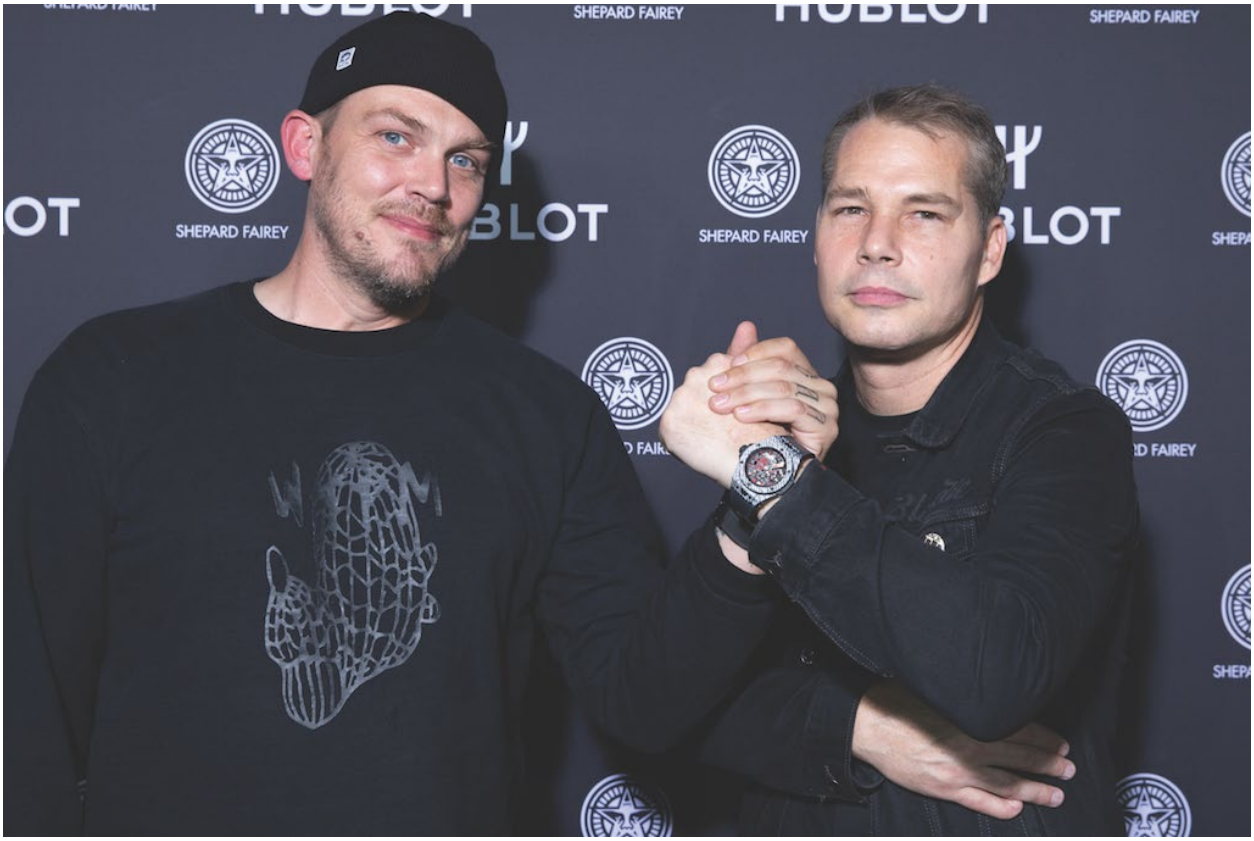
catch, so it's done 10 hours before the flight, so I can get a good night sleep, and get to the airport. Most of the time with public mural work, it's a race with the clock. Now, with this project and the project I did previously, which was for Universal Studios, it was a little different. [For Universal Studios,] I painted all of the famous movie posters for them. For that project, I knew the value for that specific mural project; I knew that the mural was going to be on Universal Studios permanently for the next 50-to-100 years, and if there was ever a time to give it my all, it was then. So I cleared my schedule in order to allow myself to paint the imagery as well as I could. And then, with 'The Gilded Lady' mural, we were actually very worried about weather, so we planned in a lot of extra time for rain days. We actually had an extra week of time where I actually could have painted more if I wanted to. So actually that mural took more time going back and forth, up and down and around the design, not because of quality issues or if it was good or not, but because of technical challenges. For instance, there are a lot of straight-angled lines in the piece that are like, three stories long; I don't use tape, I don't use stencils, I don't use any tricks like that. So, the umbrella pole is about 40 feet that goes from my ankle through the whole wall. When you are going up at the wall 12 stories high, it does not look straight; it looks like it curves like a snake because of the bumps on the wall and on the building. But then you go down to the street corner and it's as straight as an arrow. It is really difficult to figure out what looks good up close versus what looks good further away. So we luckily had the time to figure out some of those technical details so it looked good. The day we finished 'The Gilded Lady,' we felt so good because we all knew it was done. We knew I gave it my all and they were all very proud of me. The day we finished, we all knew it was completely done and that there was no more we needed to do. And that's a great feeling, walking away with nothing you regret.



Tristan continues working on his mural
Photo Credit: John Domine

DM: I know you have worked with some of the biggest brands in the world. What is most important when a brand approaches you, or the opportunity comes to you to work with a specific brand? What are the key components within different brands or organizations that you look for in determining whether or not you'll move forward in a partnership with them?
TE: Well there are a few opportunities that I write off the list immediately. I don't want to work with any fast food companies, I don't want to work with tobacco companies, oil companies, banks—companies that are doing horrible

things in our world are obviously companies that I don't want to work with. So that's obviously the first criteria. Past that, if I feel like there's a product that I genuinely love and use, then I am more open to a collaboration because it's authentic and real, and I'm not faking it. And when it comes to working with specific brands, there is an automatic assumption or risk of looking like you're selling out or being a hypocrite, when you come from a street background—an art culture that is so rebellious. Sometimes people don't want their favorite rebel to be doing t-shirts with Versace. Sometimes it doesn't make sense. But for me, I am a genuine lover of coffee and genuine lover and connoisseur of whiskey. I want to learn more about the art form of that product that I personally ingest, so I can speak honestly to it and I'm not compromising who I am in any way. So I think the best component first of all, is who you are as a person, and not be motivated by a paycheck; that could be transparent and people see right through it, which is not helpful to you or the brand. I've worked with a lot of brands, and a lot of times…I have had to leave it because my reputation. I'm very 'take it or leave it' with brands, and it has to be authentic, the way I want to do it. If not, I am happy to say 'no' because I can make more money making paintings at home a lot of the time. Something else to also consider is if the collaboration or partnership may bring you to a whole new audience, and that's an interesting angle. For a lot of artists, it's a delicate life of ups and downs, and for me, this feels like my third or fourth career. I am 41 years old and I started living as an artist when I was 18. I started a toy company, I started a design studio—I had a whole other career and I've done different things; doing crazy street art s*** when no one even knew it was me. I've seen success come and go so it's a…very big privilege to be able to say 'no' in the first place. When I'm approached by a big brand, I have to be appreciative that it is knocking in the first place. And you know, when you say 'no' to a project, you think, 'Aw man, I don't want people to stop knocking.'



Tristan with fellow street artist and Hublot brand ambassador Shepard Fairey at a Hublot event in Miami

Photo Credit: Omar Vega

DM: You mentioned exposure to a different and broader audience through different opportunities. How if at all, has social media impact on your career and on your art?

TE: Well, social media has been huge for my career and for my art, and I think you can't tell the story of graffiti without the internet. The way social media has affected this art form is insane. Before the internet, artists were making magazines and sharing photos by mail. That was exclusive to certain territories of the world and that's all

gone. People are instantly influenced by people in other sides of the globe now. So that's amazing to see how that's affected this art form. But then for each individual artist, it changed everything. I have direct access to my clients who buy paintings, I have direct access to my fans who love my art, seek out my art, wherever they go in the world. And, in a lot of ways, it's cut out the middle man and made a lot of galleries irrelevant—so I think a lot of galleries are freaking out a little bit, figuring out how to come back to a reality where the artists hold all of the cards. So, it's given a lot of power to the artists and I love to see that. It's really really amazing. You know, I've never really liked Facebook, I've never really liked Twitter, but Instagram was always fun for me and I don't really do anything on my Instagram that isn't natural and me. I'm very proud of my followers, I love my followers and I've gotten a lot of followers naturally. It's a huge global network of people who are lovers of this art form and it's an art form that young people care about more than anything, more than any other art form. Every museum that has a street art exhibition has record-breaking attendance and that's been happening for a while now. So it's pretty cool to be doing what I'm doing; there's just a powerhouse out there in the world for arts like these and it's a really amazing thing because there were times in my life when I didn't know how long I'd be able to continue or to get support. There were times where I had no idea how to get to where I am now, and a lot of the reason to why I am where I am now is because of social media.

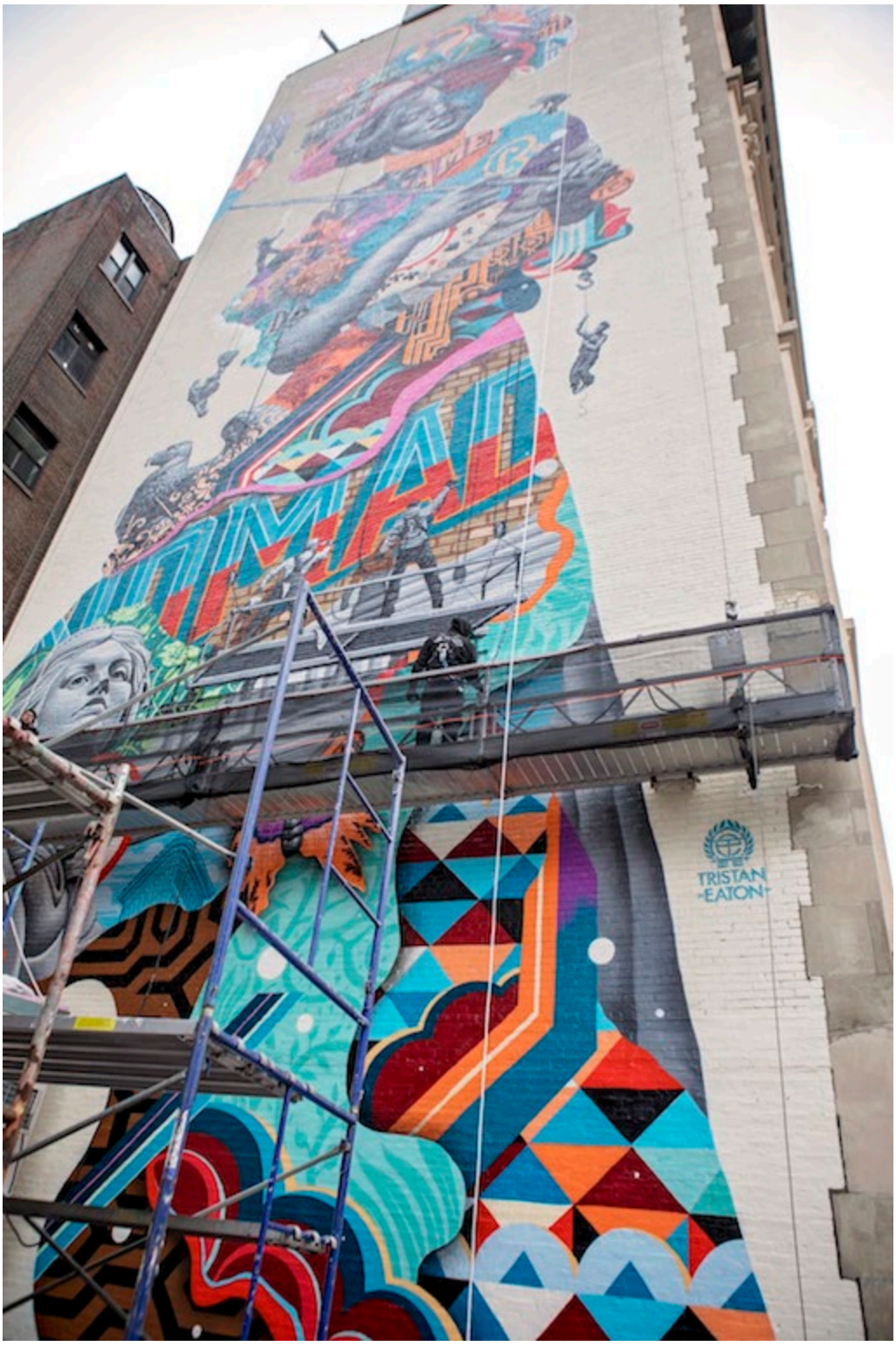
DM: I can't agree with you more. It's just amazing how street art has ignited an entirely new audience of young art consumers, which I think is so so important in our culture to have a youth that is involved in art and understands art and appreciates art to that extent, so that's great.
TE: Yes and if you think about it, Banksy came along at the perfect time. His work is always a one liner; pieces of art that are perfect for the Instagram generation. It's a perfect art to photograph, to share, and to get shared over and over and over. And would he have been as huge outside of the Instagram era? I'm not sure. But everyone in the world on their phones who loves street art will post and then it will get reposted, and then it goes off like a bonfire.

DM: What are your top three favorite projects that you've worked on, and why?
TE: Okay let's see, working on Barack Obama's first presidential campaign. So that's number one, that was the coolest thing that I've ever been able to do with my art and it got me in tune with American politics. I was able to go to Washington at the White House and dance right next to him and Michelle—that was one of the most historic, coolest things I've ever been able to do with my art. And then, even though it sounds crazy, the project I did with Starbucks is one of my favorites, and that was one of the most commercial projects I have ever done. But, I got to go to Indonesia [among other areas] and visit the actual coffee fields where their blends are made, and meet the young farmers and the family farmers that sell to Starbucks, direct at the origin…I loved that they lived by the client, they wanted their story to be told because it's such a big corporation. [Starbucks doesn't] get a lot of credit for how much love and support they give to these communities where their coffee is made, and I got to see that up close. And to give credit yeah, they build wells, they support families and farms, they do a lot of really positive stuff [in these communities] that no one hears about. When that project came out, it was accessible in every single city in the country, so everyone I knew all across the country was able to get it. When you make artwork that's exclusive, expensive, hard to get, and sells out in 30 seconds, people get tired of that. If they love your work, they want to have it, for God's sake. So that was really nice, because it was so accessible. And then let's see, Hublot has definitely been one of my favorite brand partnerships, especially because Jean-François [Sberro, President of Hublot North America] is such an easy going and understanding guy. He respects the creative process, and I kind of developed a family of people that are involved with Hublot and I definitely felt like I was part of the family. They invite you to events and dinners and send something to you for every birthday and every Christmas, which is nice. Universal Studios was one of my favorite projects I've done as well, because I'm such a monster movie nerd and I got to paint all of the movie monsters. But also, getting to go through its historical archives and dig through all the old posters and photos and secrets—not just monster movies, but like, all of the movies like *Back to the Future*. And then of course while we were painting the murals, we were able to let loose on the golf carts to explore behind-the-scenes. It was so amazing, it was so great. We got to just rampage everywhere and we were going through all the old New York City streets. You know, I have to pinch myself sometimes because as artists, we are so lucky to get to do what people let us do. There was a great quote, I think it was this old president or I forget who it was, but the quote was so amazing. It said, 'Beware of artists. They mix with all classes of society and are therefore most dangerous.' [We later discovered this was a quote from Queen Victoria.] There's something so true about that because on one night, I know I will be at some crazy event for the President, but then the next day, I'm painting in the craziest, scariest parts of the world. So, we have access to this elevator of cultural society and that's one of the greatest things. And I think a lot of times when I work with brands, that brand collaboration is sometimes a talisman for that higher level of culture. When someone who might be an actual billionaire doesn't trust you, but

they see that a specific brand trusted you, it opens a door, and you have access to another part of culture. So sometimes, that's a side effect bonus of doing brand work—that gives you access to the corners of the world.

DM: On your site, you are quoted as saying, "Public art has the ability to inspire and transform our communities." How do you hope that your art will inspire and transform the communities in which they live?

TE: Well, in some communities, a big mural is just a drop in the bucket, and won't make that much of a difference in a city like Paris. But, in a city like Detroit, where the entire community literally feels dark because their street lights don't work and their city doesn't have the money to troll the streets with police—if you paint a mural in that neighborhood, it will make its people feel alive and noticed. And if I could accurately tell you the value of what that does for a community, I'd be a billionaire already. But, it's very difficult to quantify the value of art in public, how that helps people, and communicate that in terms that a politician will understand. It's so subjective and it's so abstract that you can't put it in exact terms of one person. So it's a feeling, and it's a feeling that is different for everyone. But, I've seen it make people cry, I've seen it make people proud of who they are and where they come from, and I've seen it…change an entire neighborhood for the better. Now, when you think about the importance of public art and its impact, the truth is, if you have a city square and you paint every single building yellow, it makes you have a better mood…And there have been scientific studies where people have been documented in how their behavior changes in the absence or presence of different types of imagery. So, it has its benefits but it's just very hard to articulate. For me, I'm trying to push for my work to inspire people, especially other artists. I'm trying to change the world. Even on a local level, you can make your own surroundings better…I want people to be reminded of that when they see this gigantic effort by artists [in their community], who painted something so big and bold and crazy—well, why can't you do something big and bold and crazy too? I think that's the best outcome.



Putting the final touches on “The Gilded Lady”