

## Review:

**Dir. Alex Luster (Director). Tony Reyes (Writer). *Stick 'Em Up*. (Shoot, Edit, Sleep and Stone Canyon Productions, 2011)**  
**<http://stickemupmovie.com>**

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To call *Stick 'Em Up* a quintessential Houston documentary is both a compliment and a critique. It represents praise because the film does what it sets out to do very well: document and celebrate the thriving wheatpaste street art movement in Houston, TX. On the other hand, it is a criticism because unlike its more popular predecessor *Exit Through the Gift Shop* (Paranoid Pictures 2010), *Stick 'Em Up* makes no attempt to connect the Houston street art scene to anything outside itself – commerce, politics, or the larger global street art movement. Instead, the film focuses so exclusively on the local that it obfuscates much of the revolutionary history and potential of street art, boiling it down to a series of choices made by individuals, apparently driven only by their craft.

And it is that individualizing of the process, product, and event of pasting that makes the film so indicative of the Houstonian mindset. Houston is a major oil city. It has

not suffered in the wake of our current recession to nearly the extent of the rest of the nation. On the surface, it seems as if there is no logic to Houston's largess, but I would argue that individualism and its hegemony *is* the underlying logic. It has both the most evangelical churches and the most strip clubs per square mile of any major U.S. city. It has a large diversity of immigrants, ethnicities, and languages. It has the first openly lesbian mayor, as well as the most powerful right-wing State School-board actively legislating today. There are eclectic neighborhoods, wealthy cultural elites, and areas of poverty that do not discriminate. Part of living in the city of Houston and the outlying areas is living and negotiating these contradictions daily.

In certain respects, the artists profiled in *Stick 'Em Up* become representative of those logics. For example, Eyesore, one of the film's most prolific artists, talks about his commitment to wheatpasting and stickers as a form of "pure self expression," one that does not require the recognition of others. However, his work is shown circulating throughout the upper class of Houston as fine art. And one collector who is interviewed discusses how Eyesore produced several limited-edition pieces to sell to high-end galleries and collectors. This contradiction between "art for art's sake" (albeit in a decidedly populist form) and the production of art for sale is one that has been engaged by many artists, operating within various historical formations. However, Eyesore does not comment on or engage with these contradictions. Instead, throughout the film, he maintains that his art is "pure."

Another artist profiled in the film is Give Up. According to one collector, Give Up is the one artist who is "angry and has a message." But throughout the film, that message is not clarified. Instead, we see him pasting up either text only, or sexually explicit images with his tag – 'Give Up.' While working, he discusses how he continues to paste in public even though he knows his images will often get torn down because, as an artist, that is his job. We also see him in his home preparing his images, mixing wheatpaste, and preparing several pieces to mail to buyers. He is the only artist who discusses his lack of money because of his chosen line of work, but he chalks it up to his carelessness with cash. He says, "Once I get money, I just spend it. I don't really care to have it around."

The film juxtaposes Give Up's practice with the filming of the art collector who lives in a well-appointed urban loft in Houston. Yet, the film does not comment, and neither do the wheatpaste artists, on the drastic difference between their living conditions and those of their collectors. Instead, the film chooses to follow the artists while they work and create. Each artist profiled discusses the artistic process as an individual drive that they cannot avoid, not as an attempt to change or disrupt prevailing notions of art, the cityscape, or dominant history.

The final section of the film shifts from the perspective of the artists to that of one individual woman who has been deeply affected by the work of Give Up. Yet her engagement with his art only occurs after his art has been "poached" by another artist (who is not featured in the film). The secondary artist finds Give Up's work and writes "Never" in flowery writing over his prints. The woman, a cancer survivor, describes how seeing "Never Give Up" on an abandoned building after a particularly devastating doctor's appointment changed her view on her treatment and her life. From then on, she was a convert and believer in street art. Not to belittle this Houstonian's experience, but the grounded example offered by *Stick 'Em Up* is one of individual rather than collective engagement. Just like the art collector, who claims he's not an expert, this woman is not an expert either – but she is a real woman who is engaged with the work of the street artists from an individual perspective. Again, individualism reigns.

The film's adherence to individual artistic inspiration is particularly confounding in *Stick 'Em Up* because it engages with wheatpasting and sticker art without ever delving into the aggressively *public* nature of its subject. As an art form, street art and graffiti are often posed as public forms of resistance to not only local city planning, but also to the history of art as an elitist and highbrow endeavor. In the case of street art in Houston, it could be said that the very impermanence of wheatpasting and sticker art engage with Houston's lack of commitment to historic preservation and its continual renewal through gentrification. Old buildings are razed so that new, modern ones can be put up in their place. Instead of holding onto history through restoration, Houston pushes forward to the future through demolition. It could be said that the art form of wheatpasting does

much the same. But this line of reasoning – quite different than the philosophy of street art that Banksy and company propose in *Exit Through the Gift Shop* – remains implicit in *Stick 'Em Up*.

I taught this film in an introductory writing course with a focus on Houston. And although it is flawed in the many ways I describe, it was a valuable film in a course where students were writing about the very city featured in the film. When placed against essays and other films which engage Houston's neoliberal and anti-historic commitments, the students were able to easily analyze the film in much the same way I have in this review. The students not only saw the film as a product of Houston, but they were left with many questions about the history of street art, the political nature of the work, and the economic disparities presented in the film. These questions led to productive discussions about how and why filmmakers choose their subjects, and what filmmakers might not even recognize as bias because of their own located experiences (the filmmaker is a Houston native).

So I return to my opening remark that *Stick 'Em Up* is a Houstonian film in every sense. It celebrates the individual, it occludes issues of inequality, and it fetishizes the new. Each artist and supporter within the film sees Houston's street art, not as a product of a larger global artistic movement, but instead as a means of individual inspiration and identification. The art on the street can inspire cancer patients, fund local graffiti galleries and summer camps, and be washed away just as soon as it is put in place only for the cycle to begin anew. As *Give Up* says, "Once [the art is taken down] you can just put up something new." In this regard, street art is the ideal medium for the zoning-free, neoliberal city.

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