

Lost Prophets

Thomas Vigil



Thomas Vigil, *Bennie Badass*, mixed media, 24" x 18".

Thomas Vigil's studio in La Mesilla, about 40 minutes north of Santa Fe, is a study in contrasts. From an ordinary backyard shed comes extraordinary art that marries traditional imagery to decidedly modern tools and techniques in an innovative graphic style.

A small table holds an orderly array of spray paints arranged for Vigil's current work in progress. The walls and a few tables are piled with objects of inspiration—posters, photographs, stickers. One wall has clearly been used as a test canvas for designs and color schemes. Hung in a corner are award ribbons from art fairs and markets, including Contemporary Spanish Market. On the floor sits a stack of stencil cutouts ready to be used to create as many as twelve painted layers on the scavenged road and construction signs that are Vigil's preferred backgrounds.

In his solo exhibition *Lost Prophets*, Española native Vigil explores the idea that within every individual, well known or not, is a powerful voice. "The idea behind this show was that I was going to photograph local people from my hometown and place them in a setting where they look like religious icons," he says. "In my head, I saw images of everyday people that might mean something—a great deal to me, but maybe nothing to anybody else. I pictured saints, and how those saints are depicted, and thought I could do the same thing with local people, but maybe with a halo or something that makes them feel more iconic, even though they're everyday figures. Because I'm big on the fact that nobody's above anybody else in this world. I don't care if you're the CEO of a company—that doesn't give you the right to belittle other people."

Of the dozen portraits in the exhibition, some are of recognizable celebrities, such as musicians Kurt Cobain and Chris Cornell. Others are friends, family, or otherwise anonymous or overlooked individuals Vigil has photographed on the streets. Most have faced or are facing challenges with homelessness, mental health, and addiction.

"For example, I saw Benny at a gas station picking off pieces of lint from a brimmed hat very meticulously. Benny is originally from Belén—he worked in construction and as a bouncer in Florida. He ended up hurting his back and got addicted to opioids. After that, he started dealing prescription drugs because he needed a way to pay for his addiction. One of his customers shot him a bunch of times and shattered his leg, so he had to come home. When I spoke with him, he said that he had been off opioids for, like, three months or something, and he was trying to wean himself off alcohol as well. That's where the quote came from on the piece: 'Drugs took me to a dark place. I realized I didn't want to live there anymore.'"

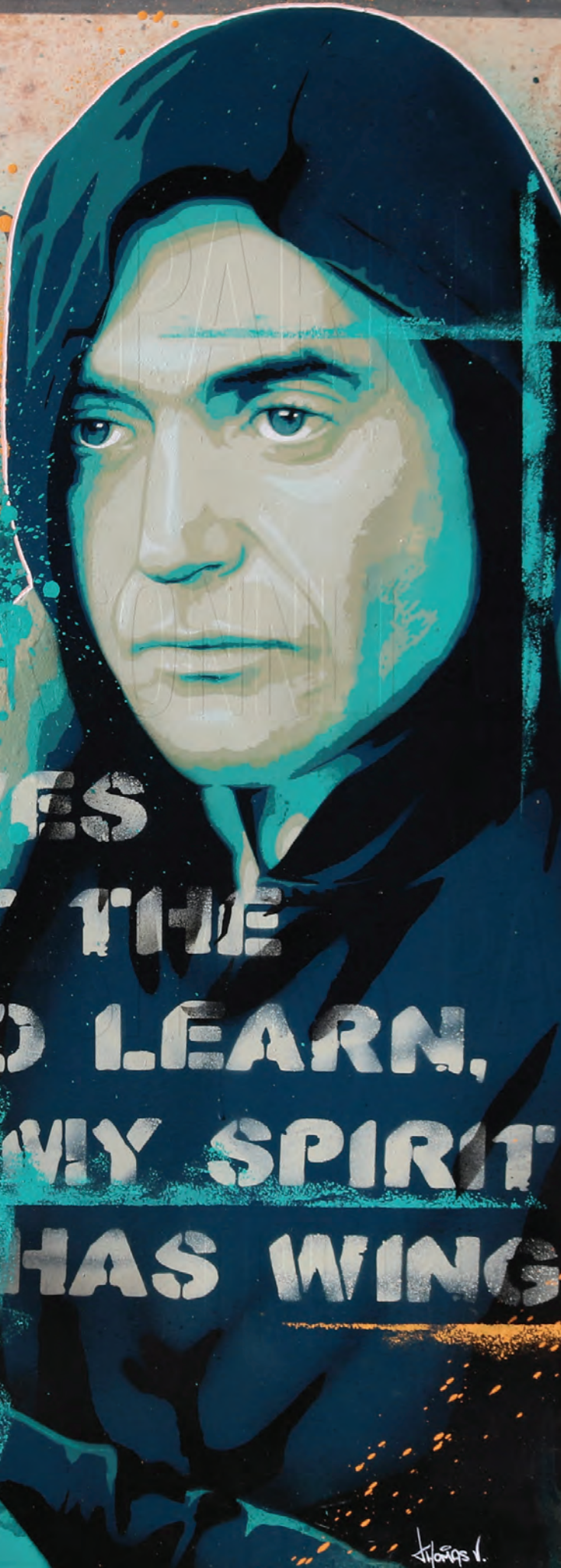
Vigil combines a penetrating photographic image with the subject's provocative words into an archetypal painted vignette. "By using an iconic image and putting words behind it, it gets people to question their assumptions and beliefs," he says. "I try to use my images to get people to question what they're looking at. And I don't care if it pisses you off or excites you. The whole concept is provoking something and an emotional reaction, period. I've always been rebellious that way, because I was raised so strict. I push the limits, because what's important to me is being different and

Opposite page: Thomas Vigil, *Vincent the Performer*, mixed media, 36" x 36".

RESTRICTED

UNAUTHORIZED

GOD GIVES
MY SPIRIT THE
ABILITY TO LEARN,
AND MY SPIRIT
HAS WINGS



questioning things. You can't believe everything your teachers tell you, or what the news is saying, or what political figures say."

Using and adapting religious and iconic imagery is not new to Vigil's work. He credits his childhood growing up in the Spanish Colonial and Roman Catholic culture of northern New Mexico for the focus, in his early paintings, on landscapes and saints. "I am drawn to those images. They hold power."

Interested in sketching, painting, and design at an early age, Vigil attended Northern New Mexico College, in Española, studying graphic design and art history, and earning an associate degree in applied science in visual communications. Though he then thought what people wanted were paintings of religious images, churches, and local landscapes, he says today that those genres were never true to his artistry or his rebellious nature. "I didn't want to be like everybody else, to just get by. I was trying to express myself, be my own person, be my own artist. I realized right away that I was forcing myself to create things I was not enjoying."

In his teens, a visit with his older brother in California had exposed Vigil to a street-art culture that has since bubbled to the surface of his creativity. "I started incorporating spray paint because graffiti was the artwork that I really loved and enjoyed. I said, 'Okay, no more landscapes, no more acrylics, no more paintbrushes. I'm going to do things my way.' That's when things took off. My artwork improved, because people saw that I was showing more of myself, and they related to that."

Vigil's paintings include stickers, stencils, and wheat-paste illustrations, graffiti elements that also speak to his desire for originality and nonconformity. On top of this he then builds an image, all of it layered over the splashed, graffiti-esque background.

Graffiti's fragility, impermanence, and, ultimately, freshness also appeal to Vigil. "I can argue that graffiti artists are pure artists because they create for the sake of creating, because they *have* to create. Somebody takes the time to create something that they know will disappear in a week. And they know that this is a means to an end and that this thing's going to disappear. But they still have to make it." His hybrid style and technique make Vigil's paintings

relatable in a way that much traditional religious or religious-influenced work is not—it's chaotic, messy, and visceral. He credits such graphic artists as Shepard Fairey and Banksy in shaping both his methods and the media he uses, in addition to the graffiti artists he met in California and those he follows on social media. Vigil has incorporated Fairey's use of iconic figures to spread his own message and philosophy and to draw people in by use of familiar images.

"I've grown dramatically over the last 10 years, and my message has changed as well," he comments. "I feel like what we [artists] do matters. It's about evoking that response—it's about being original and doing what I want to do the way I want to do it, without the influence of outside people. I love being a part of the artist community, but at the same time, I'm not going to conform anymore. That is definitely growth—not caring anymore what people think about the way I express myself. It's a huge step."

—Kelly Koepke



Thomas Vigil, *Know Truth, Know Hope, Know Light*, mixed media, 30" x30".



Thomas Vigil, Mad Max, mixed media, 36" x30".