

225 Forest shows Hurley's commitment to lowbrow art

Retail and street art go forward together at 225 Forest, where Hurley and others brands are secondary to the subculture.



BRAND LEADERS: Hurley bosses Roger Wyatt, left, and Bob Hurley commissioned the two-story Dalek painting that is the centerpiece of 225 Forest. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

By Caroline Ryder

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Another day, another concept store -- except that 225 Forest, a new Laguna Beach youth lifestyle boutique carrying Hurley, Nike ID and Converse wares, feels more like a street artist's workshop than a retail space.

The muted facade, devoid of any obvious signage, barely hints at what the space might be that houses this collaboration by the three brands. Step inside and, yes, there's merchandise, but it plays second fiddle to art and the making of art. The store's top floor is dominated by sophisticated screen-printing machinery where patrons can decorate their swimwear with motifs by well-known street artists. Walls are covered with wheat-pasted, cartoony icons by Jason Maloney, Hurley's in-house art ambassador. You can design your own Nike ID or Converse shoes at the store. And then there's the immense centerpiece, a 22-foot-high painting by skater/fine artist James Marshall, aka Dalek, a former assistant to Takashi Murakami who has deep roots in the lowbrow art movement. His painting -- a kaleidoscopic abstract comprising meticulously rendered shards of color -- cascades from skylight to floor. It is the largest free-standing piece of Dalek's career and, without doubt, the focal point of 225 Forest -- more so than the actual merchandise, perhaps.

Even Dalek is impressed. "They weren't joking when they said the whole store is basically built around the painting," comments the artist. And that's exactly what top brass at Hurley, who commissioned the Dalek piece, had in mind. "The art component of this whole experience is really important," explains Hurley Chief Executive Roger Wyatt. "It represents who we really are."

For those who assumed Hurley began and ended at board shorts, the company's connection with the art community -- specifically the street and lowbrow art worlds -- may come as something of a revelation. Greg Escalante, co-founder and curator of lowbrow art bible Juxtapoz Art & Culture Magazine, emphasizes the heavy overlap between the surf and art worlds -- something that other surf-skate brands such as RVCA (closely associated with the Beautiful Losers art crew) and Vans have also tapped into. "A lot of surfers make art, and if they don't make it, they appreciate it," he says. In the same way that pro skateboarders and surfers traditionally have been sponsored by brands, these days so are the artists connected with the scene, via apparel and sneaker collaborations, in-store commissions and such. The underlying message is evident: In alternative sports, art is way cooler than advertising.

The last 15 years have seen popular graffiti and lowbrow artists flit back and forth among brands in a tidal wave of corporate teamings (KAWS has paired with Nike, Vans and Comme Des Garcons, among others; Futura 2000 with Nike, North Face and Levi's; Neckface with Vans, Stussy and Altamont Apparel, and the list goes on) -- to the point of overkill, some say. Louis Vuitton's most recent Stephen Sprouse collection -- featuring an \$8,250 skateboard adorned with the late Sprouse's graffiti-inspired lettering -- was jeered by many in the skateboarding community who felt the luxury brand's flimsy ties with their world cheapened the entire venture. Scour the comments section of street wear blogs like High Snobiety and Hypebeast and the sentiment is clear -- there's nothing less cool than a luxury brand obviously milking a subculture for street cred.

We Are Supervision, a Chicago-based artist and media agency, has been connecting major brands with underground and graffiti artists since 2002 -- right when the trend for brand-artist collaborations was exploding. Much of it was and continues to be corporate bandwagonism, says creative director Jordan Nickel. "We've been doing this for a long time and it makes you really jaded, to be totally honest," he says. "There has been a serious history of people coming in and just being culture vultures and trying to get artists in the cheapest, quickest way possible. Those campaigns aren't really effective at reaching the demographic in a long-term, meaningful way -- because people can see right through them."

Authentic collaboration, Nickel says, is about companies "putting in the effort to respect the art form," which means paying the artists enough for their work, looking beyond one-off product collaborations and demonstrating a long-haul commitment to supporting the culture with which they are aligning. Those brands that follow a more authentic path will "stand apart," says Nickel. Those that don't, and continue to cut corners, will "fail miserably" in their attempts to connect with cutting-edge teens and young adults.

So now the emphasis is on choosing the right kind of corporate collaboration and pursuing partnerships that feel organic. Hurley, despite

being only a decade old, is working hard to prove itself "authentically committed" to the scene, according to Escalante. It helps that Hurley's founder, Bob Hurley, is often friends with the artists, skaters, surfers and pop-punk bands (Blink-182, most notably) who over the years have become integral to the brand's image.

Bob Hurley, a former board shaper and lifelong surfer, got his start in retail as the U.S. licensee for the Australian surf apparel company Billabong. When his contract with Billabong expired, he launched Hurley International, a surf sports lifestyle apparel company that hit shelves in 1998, targeting a growing teen market by encompassing music, skateboarding and alternative sports. In 2002, Hurley was bought by sportswear giant Nike Inc. (which also owns Converse). With the backing of Nike's chief executive, Mark Parker, one of the lowbrow world's most committed patrons, Hurley has seriously amped up its affiliation with the art scene.

Titans of the punk, lowbrow and street art realms such as Ron English, Winston Smith, Robert Williams, Alex Pardee, Todd Schorr, and rock photographer Lisa Johnson have all recently partnered with the brand for limited-edition T-shirt collections. Last summer Hurley (the company) underwrote "In the Land of Retinal Delights: The Juxtapoz Factor," a massive group show at the Laguna Art Museum that presented the work of 150 lowbrow artists who have been championed by the magazine, acknowledging and tracing a movement that the mainstream gallery scene has so often shunned. Underwriting the show was "ambitious and costly," says Escalante, and highlighted the company's commitment to lowbrow. "This show wasn't even surf-related," Escalante points out. "They were simply supporting a school of art that embodies their spirit."

Last year the company brought in pop surrealist Maloney to focus on, among other things, artist outreach. "We're not just picking cool artists for the sake of having cool artists on board," Maloney says. "They're generally people who I've met or shown with in the past. There's generally some connection." For last month's U.S. Open of Surfing and AGENDA trade show, Hurley invited edgy artists Jason Filipow and Richard Colman, respectively, to create murals in front of a live crowd. In fact, there's so much art going on at Hurley these days, you might overlook the clothes.

Adrian Nyman, who was made senior vice president of brand image at the company last year, says the art flurry at Hurley reflects "some really great, real stuff . . . this is not just some marketing push." Before joining the company last year, Nyman had worked with Levi Strauss, spearheading the company's high-profile collaborations with the Warhol Foundation and Damien Hirst. "I was coming from an intensive art/product collaboration point in my life," Nyman says. "And I was feeling like, well, maybe there's something to be said for speaking softly."

Building brand authenticity in 2009, it seems, involves a two-pronged approach; picking the right kind of artist collaboration -- and then not making too much of a fuss about it. Hurley currently doesn't have an in-house public-relations department, and Nyman isn't sure they need one -- even for things like the new 225 Forest store which, it is hoped, will become a word-of-mouth hit. "I feel like the days of trying to create hype on top of hype are over -- people are burned out from that kind of model of artist collaboration," he says. "With Hurley I said, 'You know what, there are some great things happening here already. Just communicate it to the world -- gently.'"

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