

METRO

Graffiti Camp For Girls is empowering girls and women through street art

by Ellen Scott

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Photo courtesy of Graffiti Camp for Girls.

When you think of graffiti, you probably think of teenage boys in hoodies. When you take graffiti up a few levels and get into street art, you'll probably think of Banksy. Notice anything missing from those pictures? Oh, right. It's women. If you haven't noticed, the world of graffiti is dominated by boys and men, with hardly any girls getting to try the art form out for themselves. One artist, who goes by GIRL MOBB, is trying to change that. GIRL MOBB is the creator of Graffiti Camp for Girls, a scheme that provides week-long courses for girls to learn all about street art.

"The ideas of graffiti have catered to gender roles," GIRL MOBB tells metro.co.uk. "Graffiti is considered aggressive, 'dangerous,' daring and masculine. It hasn't fit in with the forced behavioral cultural model that girls have had to chew on since birth. There wasn't as many female names or mentors as there are now. But that world is changing. There is hella women out there doing it big and it's so inspiring to see."

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GIRL MOBB got into street art and graffiti in her teens, when she was growing up in rural Ohio. It gave her purpose, self-confidence, and a reason to look after herself. “I felt isolated,” she explains. “I was heavy into the downtown Cincinnati punk scene but felt it wasn’t enough. I found graffiti as an immediate outlet to vent my frustrations and break the monotony. It was something I felt was all mine. I lost interest in other things, specifically things that caused me actual harm, like my druggie friends and our growing habit. I dropped all that and fell heavily into art and how to put it out there as much as possible, which took all forms, from stickers, to characters, wheat pastes, letters, to rollers. The possibilities are endless.”

Some of the people she used to hang around with in her pre-graffiti days are dead or in jail. GIRL MOBB credits street art for giving her an alternative path – and she wants to give that to other young girls. She created Graffiti Camp for Girls after realising that the pool of women doing street art in the Bay Area, where she now lives, is still absolutely tiny. GIRL MOBB wanted to change things, and thought the best way to do that would be to create more support and encouragement for young girls, to provide them with something to be passionate about.

“I wanted to create a class that would make graffiti and mural art accessible for girls,” she explains. “I applied for the Southern Exposure grant to teach one week long graffiti/mural arts class and won it. There was such an outpouring of support it reinforced my conviction. Since then I’ve been figuring out ways to keep it going, keep it moving, first the bay, then other states, we even have dates for Cambodia in January. I’m down to keep spreading the word, because I know this project is bigger than me, it’s radical and can help empower women.”

The camp works like this. GIRL MOBB finds a business or gallery with a wall she can use for a week, and sets up her class, made up of between four and ten students – all girls aged 12 to 17 – and volunteers, who are emerging or established female writers and muralists. At first the girls learn the tools of street art, sketch out ideas, and practice painting letters on the walls. GIRL MOBB encourages the girls to watch a classic film like *Style Wars* to immerse them in the culture of street artists. After that, the group chats about the process of getting jobs creating murals in the city and talking to business owners, then it’s time to work on a design together. On the third day of the week-long course, the students and volunteers collaborate on coming up with a mural design for the business or gallery’s wall – then they get set on creating it.

“The most important thing they learn about is getting comfortable using spray paint,” GIRL MOBB explains. “Then over the next few days, I get to watch their confidence grow and grow! Just as importantly, they learn to paint their own unique concept while working together with their peers.”

At the end of the course, all the girls have worked together to create something they can be proud of – and they might have learned a skill that they’ll turn into a lifelong passion. Which is pretty cool.

“I’ve watched my students go from scared and shy to confident and gregarious,” GIRL MOBB tells us. “Just like anyone part of a subculture, they finally get to meet others who share the same interests and build ideas with them, and work them out together to create something big, real, and very public, in the form of a usually massive mural that folks will walk by in disbelief and be like ‘Who did this?!,’ and just be wowed it’s a small group of teenage girls. It’s really a boost of confidence and self esteem for them.”

Giving girls the chance to learn about street is powerful, says GIRL MOBB, because “it’s not encouraged. Because we need to balance the scales. Because girls need their voices heard. And this is a platform to do just that.”

If you’d like to support the camp and make sure girls keep having somewhere to discover a passion for street art, you can volunteer one of your walls for the students to paint, or you can donate money or paint to keep the camp running. If you’d like to join one of the courses or learn more about the camp, you can chat to GIRL MOBB through the Graffiti Camp for Girls website or her Instagram.

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