



Wilderness vs. E-Space

... a journey into sadness

W i l d e r z o n . v s . S i g n i f i c a n c e

... a journal journey into sadness

by Mara Jevera Fulmer





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Book set in: Lucida Sans Typewriter, Quick Type Mono and P22 Typewriter

W i l d e r n e s s . v a s i f i e s i n k

... a journal journey into sadness

In the Fall of 1997, I began my first semester teaching Graphic Design classes at Mott Community College in Flint, Michigan. I had moved my family halfway around the world, torn away from their tropical home in Fiji, so that I could take on a job in another place where people seemed to be looking for a leg up on the economic development ladder.

In those early years, I met a whole new crop of college students, not all that different from the university students I'd left behind at the University of the South Pacific. And yet they were worlds apart in terms of understanding the greater world they lived in.

Among them was a young and eager student named Alex who, while eager to learn, was torn apart by other demands of

youthful hubris. I did not really get to know him well until he had spent a couple of semesters in and out of my classroom. At one point he disappeared for nearly a year only to come back and beg me to take him into my classroom again. "I know you'll be there to keep me on the straight

and narrow," he said, practically in tears. He

explained the "misunderstanding" that occurred when he "accidentally" ran his car into a police officer who was the liaison for the urban high school across the parking lot from the college's art center. As it turned out, the rumors I'd heard around the halls about one of our students selling drugs to high

school kids in the parking lot had led this officer to come upon Alex as he waited in




Central High School (view from the parking lot) in Flint, near the College Cultural Park area and across from the former location of Mott Community College's art department. March 2004.

his car to pick up his younger brother after school. The high school suffers the disdain of Flint's elite because of its urban, poorly funded facilities and

a reputation for "troublesome" kids. But they weren't troublesome, just trapped. And many of them chose to try and find a way out, some finding their way into my graphic design

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program at Mott. Alex was one of them, a kid who was trying to find a way to express himself, to escape the pain of childhood memories, and to find someone who would value him as a human being. As he told it, he just panicked when the officer came up to him and hit the gas pedal bouncing the officer off the side of his car. Whatever it was that happened to Alex after his conviction, during those four months


he spent in prison, it left him with such a gross anxiety and fear of law enforcement, that he said he would do anything not to return to prison. Apparently, he felt that somehow I could help him succeed. He showed up in class nearly every day, working hard on his design work, and was eager to participate.  Alex was not the first, nor the last of my graphic design students to have had brushes

with the legal system. I recall



a young woman who had spent a night in prison for DWI after a little too much celebration with her friend. Rather than heading home upon her release, she walked the few blocks from the city prison to the art center to attend my class. Apparently she feared my disappointment

in her behavior, attire, and lack of preparation for class less than she feared the wrath of her own mother.  But getting back to Alex's story, in January 2001 I announced that I had decided to take a group of students back to Fiji on an overseas study tour with some planned activities related to art and building cross-cultural understanding. My students were mostly

aware of my own background, and with my contacts back in Fiji, I had arranged for the students to have their own art exhibit at the Fiji National Museum. The students would "introduce" themselves with their conceptual self-portraits giving the people of Fiji as much of a chance to learn about the folks from Flint as the Mott students would learn from their Fiji hosts.  Alex was the

first to sign up for the trip, complete with his passport and first installment. His hand went up at the first mention and he continually showed his eagerness, being among the first to complete his artwork and statement. **U**here were 23 people traveling on this trip, about 19 of them from the college. The Mott students met with me nearly every week during the spring term before we left, each

meeting focusing on a different aspect of preparation, from language, cultural practices, food, first aid, dress, money, and getting ready for the long, long plane ride. There were many things to prepare for on this journey to the other side of the world.

Uwo days before we were to depart, many of the students were really beginning to get anxious. Most hadn't ever been on a plane

before, none of them on journey that would last them nearly 30 hours. There was that anxious wide-eyed look coming from many as they began to realize the trip was truly going to happen.



One of these anxious students was Alex. But he seemed a little more so than most. And he had mentioned a few

problems that had come up recently. His mom had left town and he had to find a place to live. His girlfriend had broken up with him. He was beginning to worry about whether or not he should really be going on a long voyage. Since we had developed a connection a while back after he returned to school from prison, I asked him to trust me. I called him the next day, less

than 24 hours before we were to fly out of Detroit, to see how he was feeling. We met for some tea and a chat, and he seemed to feel better about going and promised to be ready to leave the next morning. **W**hile the study tour went well for most of the students, Alex's mental meltdown had already begun. And his instability did not improve upon his return to Flint. With September 11th,

his mental state was further unbalanced despite his efforts to stay focused on school and his art. **U**he artwork that Alex created in 2001 in his graffiti sketchbook is included here and provides a visual diary of Alex's last eight months. **B**ut with that artwork are voices - his own, his teacher/mentor, and Zero-MSc, a fellow graffiti



artist who adds perspective to the story about a loose familial group where some survive and go on with their lives trying to find ways to contribute to their community. Others, like Alex, are consumed by the madness that drove them there. **U**he wider community holds graffiti art and artists in complete disdain. But through the story and voices shared here, it

is my aim to offer a different perspective of the role that graffiti plays as the voice of an alienated community that refuses to accept being ignored by the blind eye of society. They want respect. They want attention. They want you to know that they exist. They want to feel valued as human beings. **U**hese simple wishes that we all share, are mostly elusive to them. Some, like Zero-MSc, survive and

even are driven to succeed in fringe economies and business. And some, like Alex, find that the elusiveness of human value can prove fatal.

~ Mara Jevera Fulmer
Grand Blanc, MI
March 2004





“Out of body confusion
 Out of body confusion
 creates a union of
 graffiti art dillusion
 graffiti art dillusion
 Slick
 Slick



torn from the pages of his sketchbook...

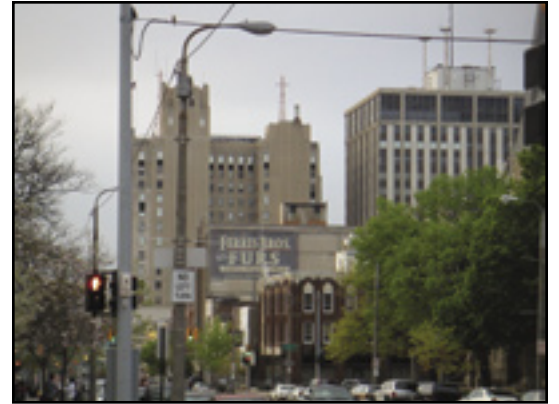
Alexander Earl White
 The Mind Matter Maze
 Pen and Ink. 15 3/4 x 12 1/4 inches
 c. May 2001. Exhibited at the
 Fiji Museum, Suva, Fiji Islands, July 2001.

*I chose the title "The Mind Matter Maze"
 because my perception of graffiti art is
 an expression of the mind and also an
 expression of freedom. For this reason
 this piece of art celebrates the human mind
 and soul through the use of shape and form.*
 ~Alex White, July 2001



Zero-MS: Graffiti artists are street artists. Tagging is a way of saying what you're doing. But (we) prefer to be called "street artists".

Alex grew up in Flint, going to Central High School and he spent a lot of time in downtown Flint which at the time that he was growing up, (same time as I was) and it still does, has culturally a really good music scene. Still sorta does. At the time there was a place called Beans & Leaves, before it was Melrose (so many different names I don't really know what the name was then) that was like an outlet for urban youth that wouldn't necessarily be... Like if you look at the definition of Hip-Hop, hip-hop would be like poetry, but music urban poetry, outlet for people who were into hip-hop not necessarily rap and thug gangs. But hip-hop was urban-based black community, more artistic-based.



Downtown Flint. Ferris Bros Furs advertisement is painted on the side of a building on Saginaw Street. Photo taken May 2003.

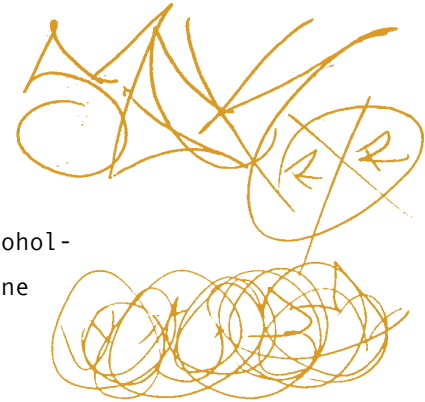
MJF: Not necessarily tied to race, then?



Zero: Hip-hop was urban-based black community, then became political poetry, then youth poetry based around music. That's rap. He was a fan of that and also came from a punk scene that was going on at Local 432. Now the Metropolis. Used to be located next to Beans & Leaves. Called the Local 432 - it's a band hall, a place for music without drugs or alcohol. It sort of has a positive view. Showing Flint's history as a union-based society of Flint and the power of that.

MJF: Was it originally a union hall?

Zero: No, it was just a bookstore. Metropolis was a club. Started out as a place called The Bookstore. (Local 432) a place to go for music like clubs in New York would have. It's a place for (where) people can go, bands can play, supports local music. The Local 432 also fed the fuel for straight-edged bands that were drug-free and alcohol-free based music that were very political. And it's still here today and now it's gone into the new music scene.





He spent a lot of time there and he was there since it really took off the ground. And, he spent a lot of time with me. He used to skateboard. He spent a lot of time skateboarding, he spent a lot of time with the punk music and art and street art. And he spent a lot of time at the little hip-hop club where he enjoyed hip-hop. That's where this type of graffiti comes from, the hip-hop culture (of Flint).

It's abstract. It's abstract art using words. And a lot of the graffiti you see sometimes would be a statement. And there's some abstract art that might go with it, where the graffiti would just flow into the words and

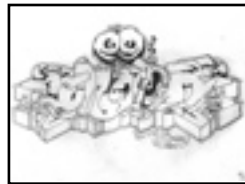


The Metropolis on Saginaw St.
now also shares its location
with Local 432 after the
"local's" building was condemned.





Titled: "Flint Original" and signed Wizdom eg, Dated March 5, 2001. Pen and gel pens.



turn into an abstract design. And then a lot of times the graffiti is just a name of the people that, you know, the other graffiti artists can recognize, you know, the other graffiti artist's art.

MJF: So were you a graffiti artist, too?

Zero: Yea, well, I was a graffiti artist before Alex even started doing it. I was in High School. Started around '95-96.

Behind the Metropolis and other Saginaw businesses, Zero says, is where he and his friends, including Alex, liked to hang out.





x x

Zero: I went to school in Grand Blanc.

MJF: How did you and Alex meet?

Zero: A girl named Mica that went to Grand Blanc started dating him and we all went to hang out at the Local. And some of his friends hung out there, too. And I used to see him at skating spots, too.

MJF: Did you know much about his childhood?

Zero: No...



Photo found in Alex's sketchbook, presumably of his graffiti, at a railroad underpass in Flint. "Slick" is on the far right.



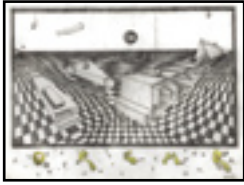
MJF: Did you know much about his father?

Zero: I know he had a hard childhood.

MJF: What I know of is that his father killed himself and, as the story goes, Alex was the one who found him. And that his mother, at the time that I finally talked to her, was on long-term mental health disability from General Motors, maybe as the result of the father's suicide. I heard that his father was mayor of Birch Run. If you just took the outline of the surface: you have mom who works at GM and dad is former mayor of Birch Run that everything looks good.



Along the Flint River is this concrete park, a popular hangout for skate-boarders and graffiti artists.
Photo taken March 2004.



Zero: Yea, but in actuality you'd be surprised. It's like my childhood's the same. You think that everything is...like you see the house and everything looks good, then you go inside...

MJF: You met him through the club, through Mica at the club?

Zero: Yea, I met him from the Local and skateboarding...

MJF: Would you say that he was somebody who would easily get into drugs? We're not going to try and disparage his character here.



A photo in Alex's sketchbook shows one of his graffiti artwork, a bridge abutment of a railroad underpass. The number "810" is the area code for the Flint region.



Titled: Earlz.
Marker pens.
Dated 3-15-01.



Zero: Yea, well, he spent a lot of time with his friends because of the homelife was hard...I don't think he was (on drugs) a lot... but I think he was doing pretty good from where he was coming from.

MJF: He had a name (an alias), didn't he? What was his?

Zero: I'm in one of these books... Graffiti, this is his... "Tonic 2001".

MJF: That was the year he died.

Zero: "SlickZ" is on a lot of them.

[lots of shuffling through sketchbooks.]



Portrait by Alex titled "Flint" and signed "tonic", c. March 6, 2001.
Colored Pencils



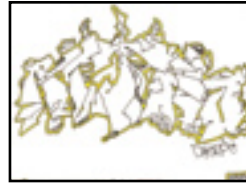
Lined in concrete as it flows through downtown, the Flint river alternately hosts commissioned murals and outlaw graffiti.

MJF: Do you know of any place where there might still be some of his graffiti work?

Zero: Oh on the walls? Aww no, they repaint pretty quickly over. There's layers of history underneath those walls...

MJF: Do you know where some of these (photos) were located?

Zero: This one's at an underpass. This other one's at a house, possibly abandoned. I don't know... my friend's got a place in Kalamazoo that we always graffitied.



Zero: Oh, look at this! [picture of palm trees in pink that AW drew.]

MJF: Oh yea, he drew that one in Fiji.

[looking through sketchbook.]

He did this thing where he got the design from the work drawn on the other pages.

Zero: It looks like old style where it has been painted over again. These lines going off here and there. I'd say that's his own style.



"Slickz", one of Alex's handles. He has colored the background in order to bring up the design from the page below.
Dated 5-30-01. Colored Pencils & Pen.





Zero: That's ah "Slick". See, this is the "S", this is the "L", the I, the C, and the K. And the rest is just abstract.

MJF: Do graffiti artists do that on purpose?

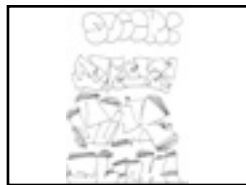
Zero: Yea, it's like abstract design with a word hidden into it. It's almost like you gotta decipher it to figure out the work. You want to make it so it's illusion enough so you can keep it's design and not the word, but still be able to see the word. Usually other graffiti artists can (recognize it) and if they can't well then it's too out there.[Looking at some of



Text in Art: (some is unintelligible, some represents handles of different graffiti artists.)

"Willie G. Everfall? Never that!!!! F.M. 810.
Props Z: Desk CETH EWOP Liberty Jamie
EGBE fuckinyomamaielc. Vaughn Bode Ferrin"

signed Duece Nod Art, circa early April 2001.
Marker, Pen and Colored Pencil

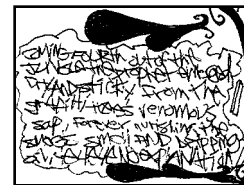
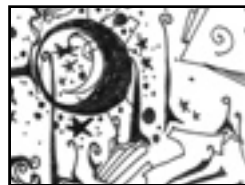
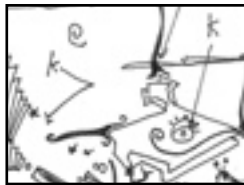


"Keno", possibly created by a street artist other than Alex. However, one of his many handles "DNA" and a reference to it in his handwriting "Deuce Nod Clan?" appear in the bold design. circa March 24-25, 2001. Colored pencils.

AW's work.] It's way out there.[Seeing the word "Keno"] Sometimes they put what it says below the art. This is not his style. Yea, a lot of graffiti artists will draw in each other's book. I have a book like this somewhere... His "W's are way out of control. [spells Wizdom] That one's out of control.

MJF: Most of the time, when they're doing this kind of art, are they doing their name (handle), mostly?

Zero: It all depends upon the artist. This is just like, ah, doing calligraphy or... but it's higher. It's more art. Depends on the artist himself. You do it just to pass the time, pass their thinking. And then there's some that, like I used to do it just to throw down names and stuff. And then some art would just be out of control.



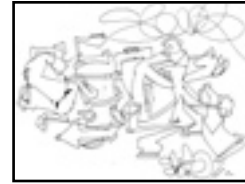
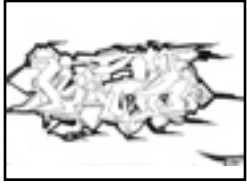
MJF: Now, a notebook like this, would you do this and then recreate this artwork on someplace? Or, is this just another place where you do your art?

Zero: This is another place to do your art. And then sometimes it's a place where you work something out. This is where you ...practice. I think some people, like I used to graffiti for about a year and then I quit. And then I just kept on doing this.

“Coming fourth out of the jungle the prophet emerged dry and sticky from the grafitti tree’s venomous sap, forever nurishing the smog’s smell and dripping oil it eyeeye(?) no explanation!!”

Other text in drawing: “stop”, R/R, ouch!, Dogment Setup!!, “one way”, “k”. Black pen. circa June 18, 2001.





"Wizdom", dated March 30, 2001. Pens and gel pens.

MJF: Drawing in sketchbooks.

Zero: Oh yea...It's a lot of fun. A release of energy.

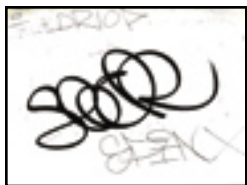
MJF: He (Alex) does a lot of arrows. Is that common?

Zero: The arrows, it's just part of the graffiti style.
Just like (design) to throw you around...

"A lot of Wizdom" (in the notebook sketches). You know, he had it rough, man. The girl that he dated that I knew was crazy. She was crazy. The girl after that was, ah, a slut.



Features graffiti text "Hip Hop!" along with imagery of the musical genre. Signed "tonic" and "DNA" with a heart. Dated 3-24-01. Colored pencils.



Iso Fresh, so clean! dated March 22, 2001.
Signed "Wizdom" and "I". Pencil.

MJF: What about the one that I knew?

Zero: Yea, yea. She's no good... He's a good guy and the relationships he got himself into didn't help him a lot.

Oh, that's pretty cool...

[Deciphering one particular piece.]

MJF: A "g"?

Zero: That's just a design. Most of the letters are here.
Here's an "O", a "V".

MJF: Do you think he was trying to just mix up the letters?



Zero: You can tell which ones are solid and which are more insane. And some of these are just struck out.

MJF: Then most of these are from the last year of his life.

Zero: Oh, here's me! [A piece he drew in Alex's book - shows Zero's caricature, etc. See p. 29] Yea, I hadn't seen him in a while so I wrote it in there.

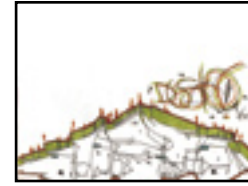
Zero: If I had kids today, I'd explain to them the world of alcohol and, like, you shouldn't be a part of it.



Heavily drawn piece (drawn over imprint of previous page).
 Circa July 13-18, 2001. Created either enroute (on longhaul flight) or upon arrival in Korolevu, Fiji.
 Pen and gel pen.



"Wizdom", dated March 21, 2001, shows Alex's caricature on left. Signed on the left "Wizdom eg", on the right "Stanley Stylez", t-shirt says "DNA" and character holds a spray can. Bees fly off the character, and "smoke spirals" come off points along the top of the design. Pencil.



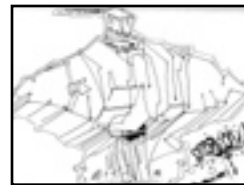
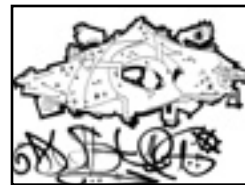
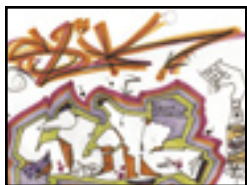
[Zero's story of an Acid trip...]

Zero: ...I didn't know how long this stuff lasts (Acid), and I'm like 'I'm going to go home' and my friend like 'No, dude, you gotta come home with me. You're gonna freak out if you're by yourself.'

So, let me remind you, this is my first time doin' this kinda thing. I go home, I'm sittin there. And my parents are really artistic, and they got these like kites that look like bugs on the walls. So I'm sittin there, and I'm just layin' on this floor lookin' up on the wall and this thing looks like it's flyin' around! EVERYTHING is like gettin' to me. So I end up talkin' on the phone, I



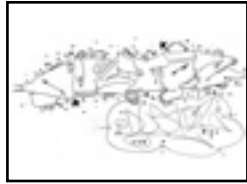
Page created by Zero-MSK in Alex's sketchbook. "Basement Crew Production" and miscellaneous small sketches, one signed "Zero" and "Wyzdom". (One of Zero's handles, spelled slightly different from Alex's "Wizdom" handle. MSC stands for "Mad Skate Crew" scrawled across the bottom of the page.) Pen and pencil. Circa June 8, 2001.



810 Flint! A common mnemonic for graffiti artists in the Flint area. Found in the skate park area along the Flint River. March 2004.

think I end up talking to quite a few people that night...actually all of Alex's friends that were my friends. And then I end up playin' video games when my Mom comes home from work.

THAT freaked me out so fuckin much. Like, 'She knows!' It's like, you know, she comes up stairs and she starts talkin' to me. And I'm like playin the video game, I'm really into the video game cause I'm flippin out, and, you know, I'm all flippin out. And she goes like 'Whats ya doin'?' and I'm like 'Oh, nothin'.' And she's like, 'Oh, really, so I just got home,' and I'm like 'Yea, oh, where do you work again?' And she was just like 'Ooohh kay.' And she's like, uh, 'lab technician?' And I'm like, uh, 'Oooh, yea, so how's that goin' for ya!?'



Cause I'm so scared, I didn't know what to get some long conversation... [nervous laughter, throughout his story.]

It's like so I run in my room and I get the phone and I'm on the phone with my friend and I'm like tellin' him 'I think she knows I'm stoned, dude!' and it lasted a really long time...and I'm not doin' that stuff ever again.

MJF: Did you have any flashbacks after that?



Zero: Just the one small one. And it was, like, really like relaxed, nothing really weird.

MJF: Do you think that was the case for Alex's condition? What caused his break?



Alex's sketch, early July 2001, before departure to Fiji on July 13th. The text reads "it alwyas feels like... somebodys watchin me..." with musical notes around the words. On July 12th, he described to his mentor that he had heard his deceased father speak to him over the radio. She thought he was describing a "spiritual" experience or making a metaphorical statement. Pen and Pencil.

Graffiti artists appreciate the rear of the old Blackstone's building on Saginaw St. in Flint which barely hides its secret behind a trompe l'oeil style mural. No graffiti mars the painting. Yet the building is only a shell with no roof or glass. Photo taken March 2004.



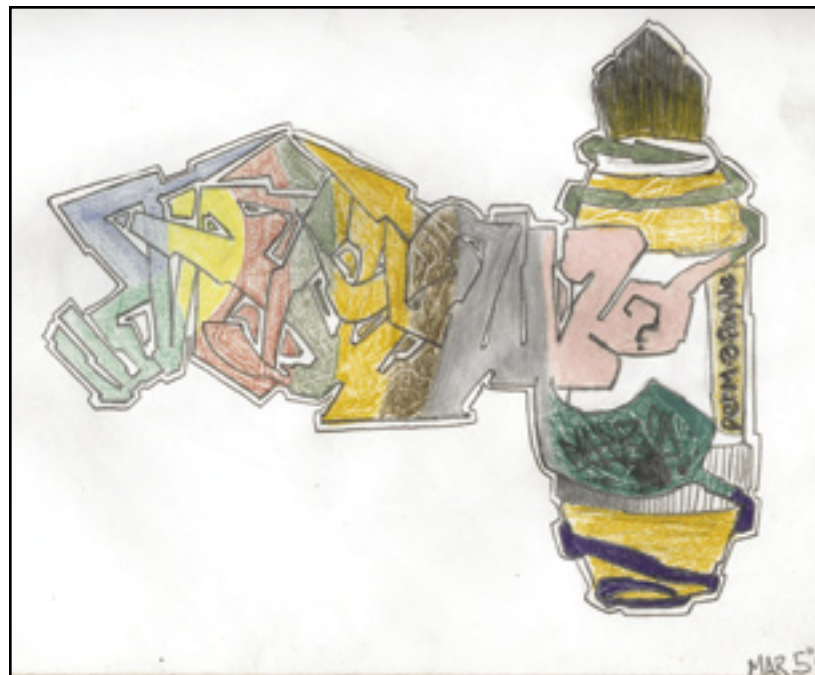


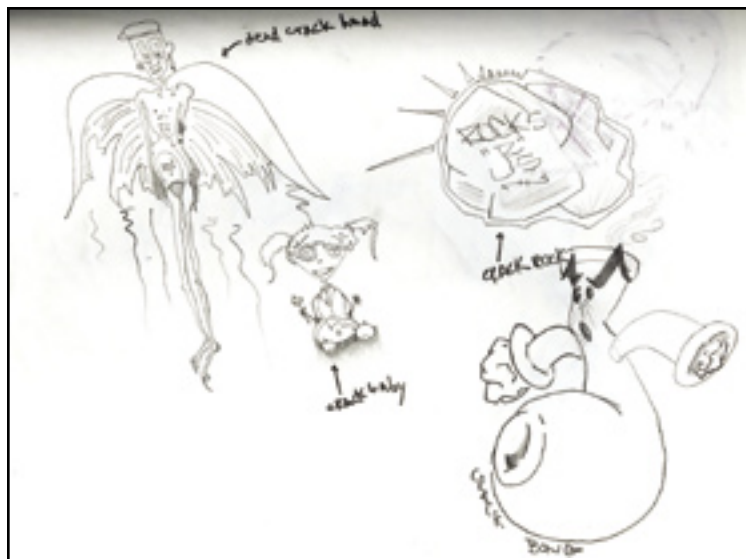
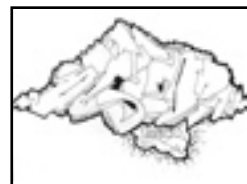
Zero: Oh yea, if he did this, well all my friends have done a lot of this stuff and I only did it once. And I was like 'Oh, I did it once' and Acid's not addictive at all. I mean it was like, it wasn't addicting at all.

MJF: Do you think he did it a lot?

Zero: Oh yea, he did it. I known the kid a long time and he was always a bit trippy like that. I mean, he's had a lot to deal with...He had two bad relationships, two really bad girlfriends, and bad parents and he loved his girlfriends no matter what and he what he did

Main text uncertain, though it almost looks like it could be read mirrored. Paint can label says "permopaque". Dated March 5, 2001. Colored pencils.





Sketch by Alex circa March 21, 2001, labeled "dead crack head", "crack baby", "crack rock - Rocks 'R' Us" and "crack bong". Pencil.

he always tried to be the stand up guy but he just had so much on top of him. I mean, it was so hard. I never appreciated how the one girl treated him that I know. And then, I know that he didn't appreciate it but he cared about her so he would do whatever it took to be that kind of person.

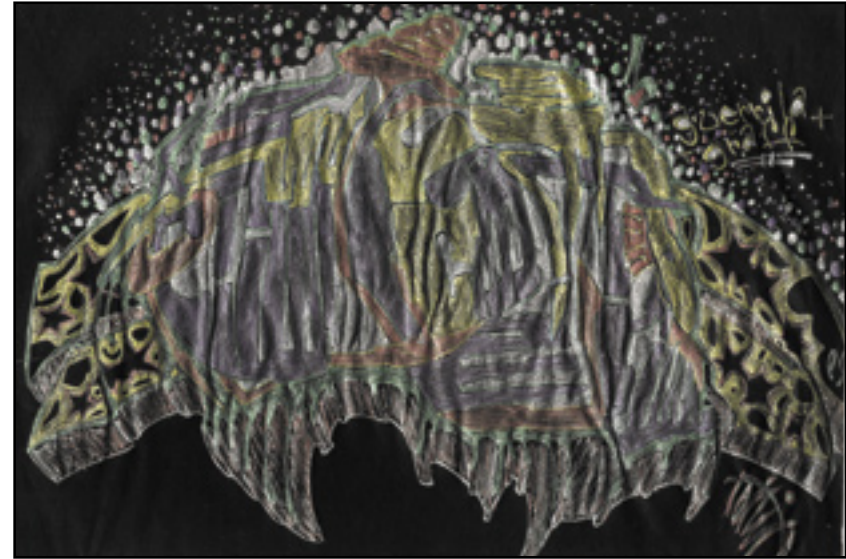
MJF: There's one last piece that I want you to see that... you've probably never seen.

Normally this kind of thing would have been lost or ruined, or lost shortly after. But the police never came



to get it (as part of an investigation) in the case of an obvious suicide who appears to be some kind of junkie who shoots himself. Left a mess, blood everywhere. Freaked out his girlfriend, freaked out his friend. Apparently the police didn't tell or offer any info on who to hire to clean up the mess. After they took the body away, one of his friends told me they were still finding pieces of his brain on the coach.

Do you know what that says?



"Guerrilla Graff" signed "Tonic" with the note Gel Penz below.
Black page is pasted into notebook. c. June 14, 2001.
Gel pens on black paper.

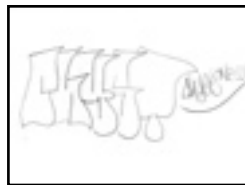
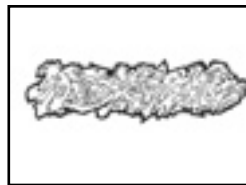
Zero: S...SHOT.

DUSTIL\$.

RELEASE
YOURSELF...
PRAY FOR
FREEDOM...



“SHOT” drawn on a college drawing board during a class attended Fall 2001. Found shortly after his death October 25, 2001. EKG lines are drawn throughout. SG or 56 is in lower corner of “T”.



MJF: This was drawn the last class day before he shot himself. He was in a second semester drawing class...We had gotten back from the trip (to Fiji). He spent two weeks in the mental hospital and they let him out 'cause they said he wasn't a threat to himself anymore. And he really wanted to go to class.

Zero: I know that a lot didn't help from her (his ex-girlfriend)... You see I found out about that girl. I was at a party and, uh, at my friend's house in Flint. And, uh, me and my friend Bill, he was a really nice guy and it was his birthday and he was really sad cause 'no one to hang out with'. So me and him went out and he says



Graffiti makes it to the rooftop "terraces" of rundown buildings in downtown Flint. The remote access provides a place that allows the artists to work undisturbed while also providing a visible canvas.

Foreshadowing madness: "Shot"
(spilling glass next to
the "t") with graffiti type
spelling "Shot" and a common
motif "ouch" over a dripping
"bullet" hole in an arrow.
Dated May 30, 2001.
Pen and colored pencils.





Train Stylez, signed Slick.
Other text and symbols appearing
in image: 810, RR symbol, Fire.
Circa June 2001.
Colored pencils and pen.

let's stop at my friend's house and we go to my friend's house and these girls got picked up in a bar and blah, blah, blah, and one of those girls was his (Alex) girlfriend. And she freaked! She remembered that the last time she seen me she was with Alex. Alex had gotten my number but I was never really able to get his...

MJF: Half the time he didn't have a phone.

Zero: Right! Exactly! So, I was never really able to get hold of him but...I didn't want to tell him that, I was like, oh man...

MJF: This says "shot" also, right below it...



Alex's "Paradise Fiji", c. July 13-26, 2001
Black pen and pink gel pen.





A building-sized mural on the theme of the autoworkers labor movement, born in Flint, provides a bright spot in an otherwise dreary urban setting. March 2004.

Zero: Yea.

MJF: And that says “ET”?

Zero: Or “EG” but it looks like a “t” because of the (line) goes across.

MJF: And it’s got these, like, lines going through it representing the crosses.

Zero: You got it.

MJF: After we got back and then he came out of the hospital, he was supposed to be on these anti-psychotics but he refused to take them after awhile. And with his drug background, it probably added to it.



Zero: And with all that stress, even his drug background, well it wasn't like a big drug background, but the kind of drug background any average kid might run into when they grow up, you know?

And with his stress in life, with a) he's got stress in life, b) you know, he's got these mental problems. You put drugs on top of that and the odds start shooting against you.

Labeled "graff life" and signed "DUSTOL!" (?). Circa early July 2001. Pastels and colored pencils.



MJF: ...And then another problem was that, shortly after the semester started was September 11th. And, you know, his whole routine was to come to class. James (from the trip) would come on Tuesday and Thursday to school just to check on Alex, to make sure he was in class. Then September 11th was on a Thursday and Alex comes to my classroom and asks me "what do I do?" And the college is closing. He just looked at me so completely lost. This is his routine, he's here for class, this is the routine...to come to class! So I tell him to "go home" though I hated to say that, just from the look on his face.

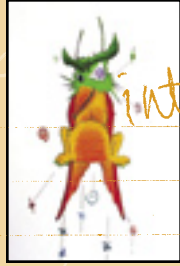
Zero: "Home" isn't the place he wanted to be.

MJF: And so it was October 25th, a Thursday, that he didn't come to class. James had come in to school to check on him but he wasn't there. Where's Alex? he asked. And I get a call the next day around noon from his girlfriend that he'd killed himself. Say what you will about her but she still cared for him. It was her father who had come that night when we returned from Fiji to Flint at 2 am who came out to pick Alex up and brought him home since he wasn't in any condition to drive himself or be alone.

Zero: Oh wow... Yea, he had it tough man...

NY 10





int. of art

Alex White

My goal for my art is to ~~the~~ create, through the recreation of several poses of myself, a feel for who I am as a person, presented in a collage style rendering with pen and colored pencil. Some



Artwork found in Alex's portfolio after his death. Most from classes taken in college as a graphic design student.



Graffiti found at the Flint riverside skate park catacombs. On the left, a face with a joint in its mouth, on the right graffiti text. The area has been painted over many times since Alex had hung out here. Photo taken March 2004.

Zero: No matter his troubles, he'd always say 'Everything's cool, I'm cool, everything's cool.'

MJF: He seemed to want to be playing it down.

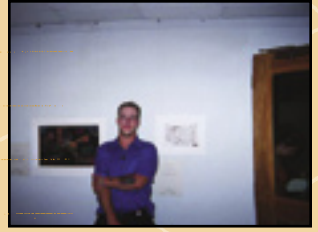
Zero: Right. He played a lot down.

MJF: He seemed to want to be that person that everybody else looked up to.

Zero: Right, right.



of the poses will demonstrate me doing things I love such as drawing and spraypainting (aerosol art) another pose showing me in a graduation gown and also me ~~being~~ acting silly showing my personality. All of these different "me's" will be presented as one picture giving a feel of who I am.



Alex poses for portraits during the art exhibit opening at the Fiji Museum, Suva, Fiji Islands, July 18, 2001.
Overlay: his handwritten proposal for his artwork (shown on p. 7).



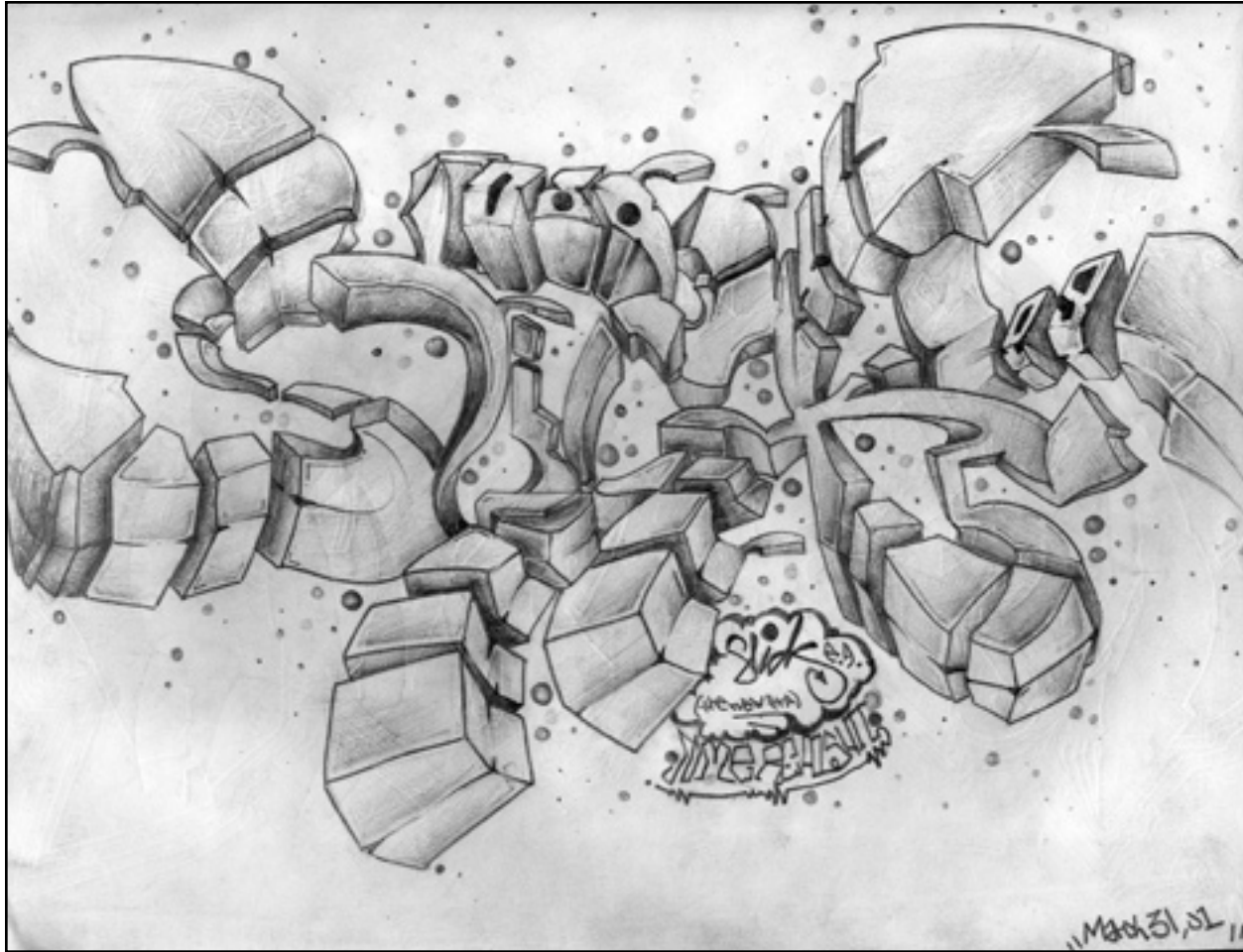
MJF: He'd tell me that all his friends are doing drugs around him and I'd tell him that he didn't need friends like that.

Zero: I don't think he really did a lot of drugs. I know back when I knew him we did some together. But I don't think he did as much as a lot of people. He did, you know, just your average experimentation but I don't think it was a lot.



Saginaw Street in Flint boasts references to a more prosperous time. Its original brick paving has been restored and new archways added to look like the original ones from Flint's history. These various efforts to dress up a city trying to fight its way out of bankruptcy can't hide the dearth of open stores on its main street.



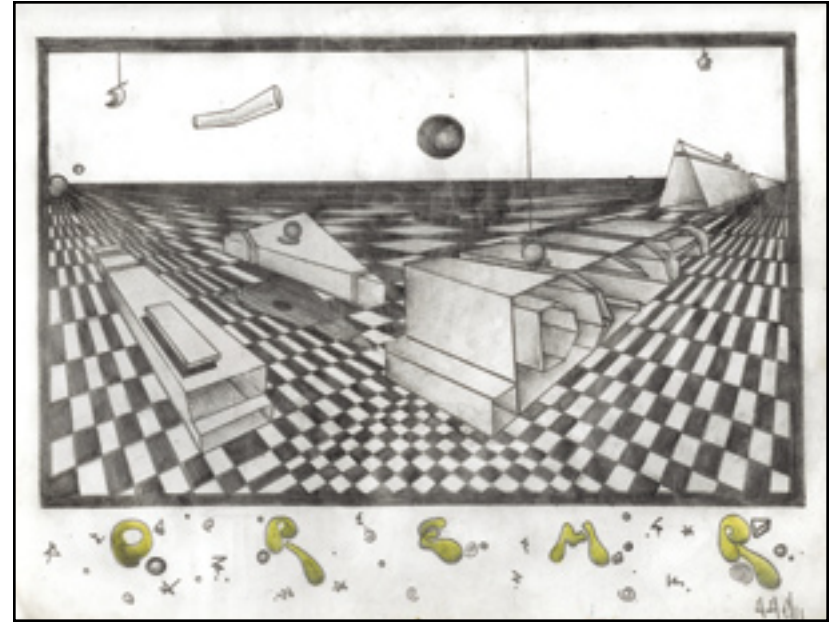


"Some Real Shit" appears with heart lines. Signed "Slick" with "e.g." and "(the new era)". Dated March 31, 2001. Pencil. Other recognizable images include the typical arrows, plus the numbers 08 and 09. The style of this drawing, which appeared opposite a similar fish design signed "tonic", seems to be a departure from his usual work.

She's just like my mom, my grandma. They're just like each other. And, my grandpa, you could see how he was just this really nice guy, but he would just pull his hair and say 'I'm goin' to the...' he had this barn, and he was always in the barn. And like he would say 'I'm outta here!' Ya know!?

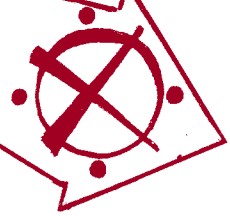
Well, you gotta remember back then, when people married, they just married, you know. They married for - that's it. You didn't get 'unmarried', ya know? You'd take care of your family and that's what you decided to do.

So, after he passed, I was like...I remember, 15, and I was in gym class and I suppressed it all. And I



Titled "Dremer" (possibly for "Dreamer") and dated 4-4-01. Contains the 3-d letters "DNA", his call letters for "Duece Nod Art". Pencil and colored pencils.





realized that was he the only person that really like I ever cared about and whoever cared about me. And I was in a bad mood and I got hit by a basketball in class and started throwing things at everyone. [nervous laughter]

MJF: You were being just the typical teenager, really.

Zero: Yea. Right. And the gym teacher pulled me back and he's like "what the hell's your problem", ya know, and it's like, I just whigged out. I started crying and flippin' out all over. He was hugging me and telling me it 'it'll be all right, man', ya know? And everyone in the class, like, heard it, right. And it was like all over the locker room, and uhh. I was really messed up for a long time.



Advertising art for Vernor's Ginger Ale on the side of the Greater Flint Arts Council building. It was restored from its earlier poor condition. May 2003.



I made a few friends and it was just hard for me to have friends because, you know, I go home and my mom tells me I'm a piece of crap and no one should like me. And so much stuff rollin of one person's mouth that she doesn't think that anyone's listening but I'm taking it all in, ya know?

And then, um, I was a mess. I wasn't normal. I felt like a freak even though I was pretty normal, ya know? Every little thing in my life starts comin' down on her.

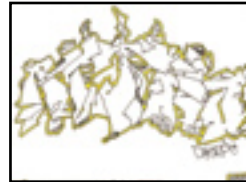
MJF: I'm not saying it's normal for a mother to start telling her son he's a piece of crap. But it's normal to be upset.



Thug II (?). "Rockin madnasty like rhynoplasty." Signature unreadable but could be an iconic interpretation of "Flint".

Railroad crossing symbol in right corner.

Dated June 5, 2001. Colored pencils, markers and pen.



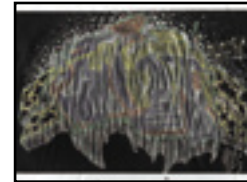
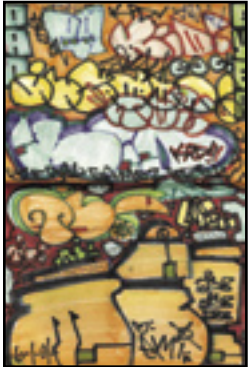
Zero: Yea. It's normal to be mad. But when you say things like 'I wish I'd never had you' and explain how you were an accident. And that was when it went beyond the limits of like ... and all those things that she thinks that I don't remember are like right there, you know.



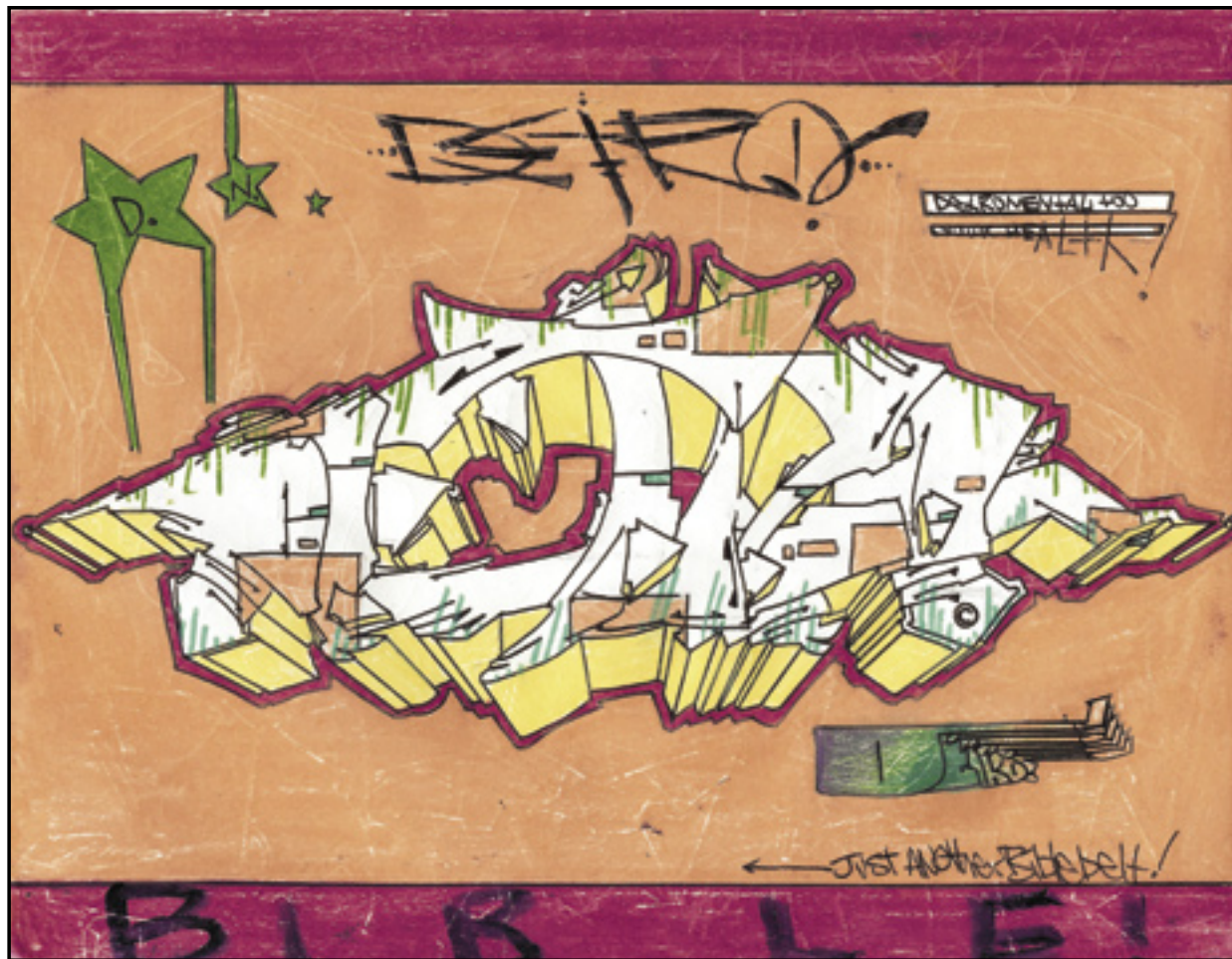
...When I dated my first girlfriend in high school, I was like "Wow, someone cares about me!" And when I started dating Kelly is when actually I started having to care about someone else. You know? Like I started to have to understand and communicate and do things. And I did a lot for her and she did a lot for me. Our relationship didn't work out, obviously. You know, I was always coming in with a bad attitude and mad cause, you know, she was an alcoholic and I wasn't. And I wasn't going to go that route. So, it changed me a lot.

And, I'm pretty good with kids. Cause her friend had a kid when she was really, really young and I took care of him a few times. All different from what my mother said. All the stuff that was done, it's just not right.

MJF: Do you ever think you'll settle down, have a family?



Signed "Detro" which could be a variation on "Detroit" and labeled "Detromental too your health!...Just another Bible belt!...BIBLE!" Letters D.N. and Detro in the graffiti design. Colored Pencil and pen. Undated, c. late June-early July, 2001.





I tried... oh well.
R.I.P. my little guy.

R.I.P.

Dated May 30, 2001. Alex memorializes his cat "Tiger" in graffiti and illustration.

Wednesday, July 18, 2001
Beachouse, Korolevu, Fiji Islands
~ m.j.f.

Amazing. Everything is falling together. The students are finally settling in to their new temporary home, feeling very much the extended family that they are.

Even the occasional personality conflicts are mellowing just like a real family would have.

Last night was our "opening" of the exhibit at the Fiji Museum. Titled "Faces of Flint: Images from An American Community College", the exhibit opening was reasonably well attended by the hosts, the Friends of the Fiji Museum Society. Joan Teiawa and Paddy Nunn from the University of the South Pacific were there, as well as the acting US Ambassador, Charge d'Affairs Mr. Ron McMullen and his wife Joan and the museum staff and others from the community. The event was catered and wine and drinks were served. Sagale Buadromo, Interim Director of the Fiji Museum was there as well as the new Publications and Marketing Director, Stephanie Hackett, and PIMA Secretariat-General Lata Yaqona.



Images from Fiji
Study Tour, July 2001.
Top: Alex with James.
Center: Fiji Museum
exhibition opening.
Bottom: Dinner in Suva.

Zero: That's just the thing, you know. I've never had a good relationship with someone. All because I had such a bad mother, you know, or a woman-figure in my life who's never been good.

MJF: Thanks. (sarcastic)

Zero: Well, you know.

MJF: Well, you know I've done my share of yelling.

Zero: You, Kelly, and my high school sweetheart were like the three best females in my life ...I probably wouldn't be where I'm at without you guys in my life. I mean, think about it. YOU got me into education. So I got my education!



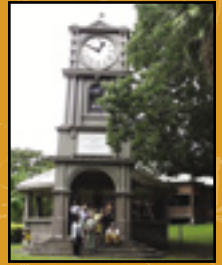
Titled: "Character Page!" Orange outlined figure is signed "tonic" and dated 4-2-01. Figure in lower right corner is one of Alex's common self-caricatures. Pen and colored pencils.



The students were overwhelmed. Emotions seemed to run pretty high. I had not anticipated the depth of feeling that would accompany such an event. One by one, each student came to me and told me of the tears they shed, or tried to hold back, of the emotions that welled up inside from the outpouring of welcome and generosity of the Fiji Museum and the people they were meeting.

The exhibit, which displayed not only the students' "conceptual self-portraits", but also the artists' statements that were meant to provide some insight into their thoughts, was met with great success and even an honest tenderness and empathy from an accepting audience eager to learn about their foreign visitors and what was going through their minds.

But it also provided the students with insight into the thoughts of their fellow classmates and comrades. Important, yes. But not just for art's sake. Important for their humanity, for building friendships, understanding, and acceptance. This truly was an important and highly successful event on many levels.



Alex poses for a photo at the Fiji Museum art exhibit opening and on the museum grounds with fellow travellers, July 17 and 18, 2001.

MJF: You graduated! You got a degree!

Zero: Kelly pushed me into getting an education. And she got me away from my mom and my old group of friends, which is Alex's group of friends and basically what could have been my future. Which I see that a lot of my friends are really messed up now.

MJF: Or dead.

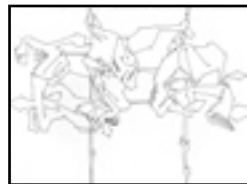


Zero: Exactly. I was lucky not to follow the road. And I was right on that, a straight train in that direction.

MJF: Do you think that a lot of those people who are in this type of business have suffered some kind of bad home life or bad life in general?

Zero: Graffiti art, for one thing, is...the fact that they write on the streets, would be like, um...

MJF: Do you think of it as a sort of rebellion?



Today was a day of quiet and recovery, laughter and lessons, camaraderie and playfulness. We had the first of our workshops out at the Beachouse today, with Taraivini Wati and Daiana teaching pottery. Daiana's granddaughter, Mari, assisted as well as a few of the museum staff initially. The students were eager participants, spending the bulk of the morning taking turns with the potters attempting to learn their techniques. However, by lunchtime, many had chosen to find ways to relax, still suffering the effects of celebrating the night before combined with persistent jetlag.

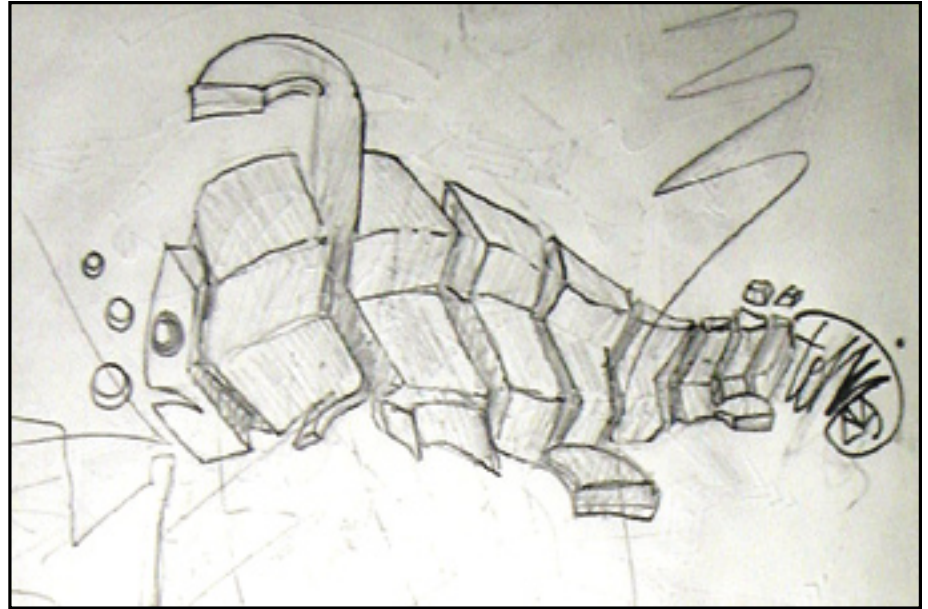
Games on the beach, snorkling and swimming at high tide by afternoon, and relaxing in hammocks, all filled the rest of the afternoon before our evening lovo. They all seemed to enjoy the dinner that came from under the dirt.

But many took advantage of the offering of green coconut juice for conquering the problems of travellers' constipation. The natural laxative seemed to do the trick for most who requested it.

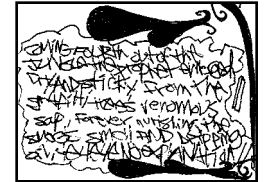


Images from the Fiji Museum
art exhibit opening and on the
museum grounds, with fellow
travelers,
July 16 and 17, 2001.

Zero: It's a rebellion but it's... it's almost sort of like a mark, you know? Most of the community comes out there, you know, and they're artists! And they're making art! And they're expressing their names, they're expressing their style of art on the streets. And they're doing it as (if) the street is a canvas. And they're doin' it because, I mean, yea, they're from, yea not all of them are from bad homes. Most of them have, like, a harder life, and they don't have output. A lot of graffiti artists don't even have school to go to. And there's a lot of wasted youth that has talent.



Fish design signed "Tonic" c. March 31, 2001. Pencil.

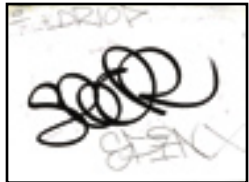


Zero: Oh yea.

MJF: A way of saying 'don't ignore me'?

Zero: Oh, Yea! If a graffiti artist is making a name for himself, in the world of graffiti, is your handle, is, you want it to be known. You want to be respected by other artists. You are. You're making a statement that says: "Look. Here's Art. You drove past it. Here's my Art. And you have to look at it." You know? Here's Art. It's on the train, you know? It's non mainstream art. That's what it is. And their "showing" is when you're sitting there at the train track if the train goes by. They're showing you artwork. Right. And it's your exhibition. And you're going into the city. And you're going to see this artist, and you're going to see this art. And it's almost a form of culture within something that doesn't have it or doesn't appear to have it. It seems to be a wrecked urban community.

MJF: It seems to be a form of expression by people who society would rather ignore it's existence and this is a way of this community to assert their identity. This group comes together to fulfill a need to express themselves. And assert themselves and assert their identity. And so their artwork consists of their name, their identity. In a



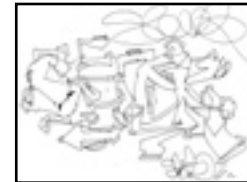
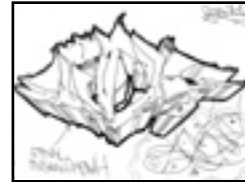
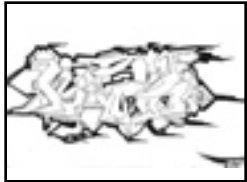
way, it's putting it in your face, and you can no longer deny my existence because you can't escape it, as if to say "You can't ignore me, or ignore my art."

Zero: Right. And at the same time, they're doing it and they're keeping it abstract but they show you the art and you see the art. But the name is just for the people in that group so its underground. So it's like "Here's our art!" but no one knows, you know, only the people.

MJF: So it's a way of being a somewhat elitist approach.



From Alex's sketchbook: Titled "Kids on the tracks" (type is also buried into the abstract graffiti design). Other text: "©8!0. DNA! esc!" and a sign in top right corner which says "Bomb specialist!"
Gel Pens. c. May 2001.



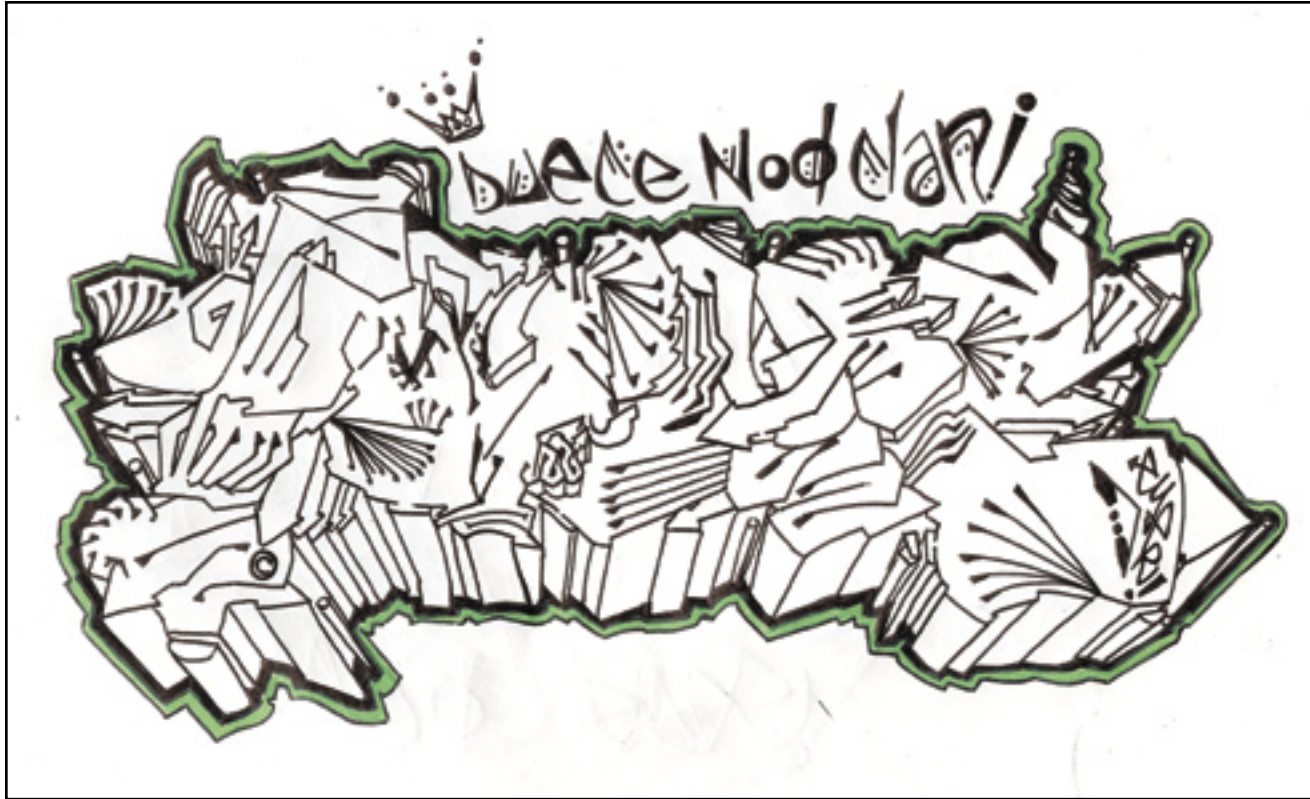
July 28, 2001, 12:30 pm ~ m.j.f.

...Alex (age 20) had been the first and most enthusiastic to sign up for the trip that would eventually take 23 people to Fiji...At our last meeting before the trip, Wed. July 11th, Alex seemed a little nervous, said some funny things, but I thought nothing of it. A few of the students started having that "oh my God!" look, like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming car. I took it as nervous pre-trip jitters and re-assured everyone that, though the journey was long, they'd all have a good time...

Thursday, July 12, as I prepared my final packing, I called Alex to see if he was okay. He came over for a cup of tea and he shared with me a book he said his father "lived by". I can't recall the title now... *"1927"* - *he said his father swore by it. Alex had highlighted numerous sections of the text...* but the topic was the 1920s, Herbert Hoover, and political, social, and economic issues. I really didn't understand the significance ...but tried to suggest others that might help Alex in what seemed to be a spiritual journey. He told me a little about his father, how he'd been mayor of Birch Run, Michigan, a driven man, successful in real estate and had committed suicide when Alex was 12.



Alex in various scenes from the July 2001 Fiji Study Tour.



Titled "Duece Nod clan!" with a crown, which some explain to mean he perceived himself to be a top graffiti artist. It may also relate to his middle name "Earl".
Text "eyer!" appears within the design on the right. Pen and gel pens. Dated 5-21-01

He told me he heard his dad talk to him on the radio, though later he would tell a doctor (in Fiji) that it was a message that came from his dad, not his actual voice.

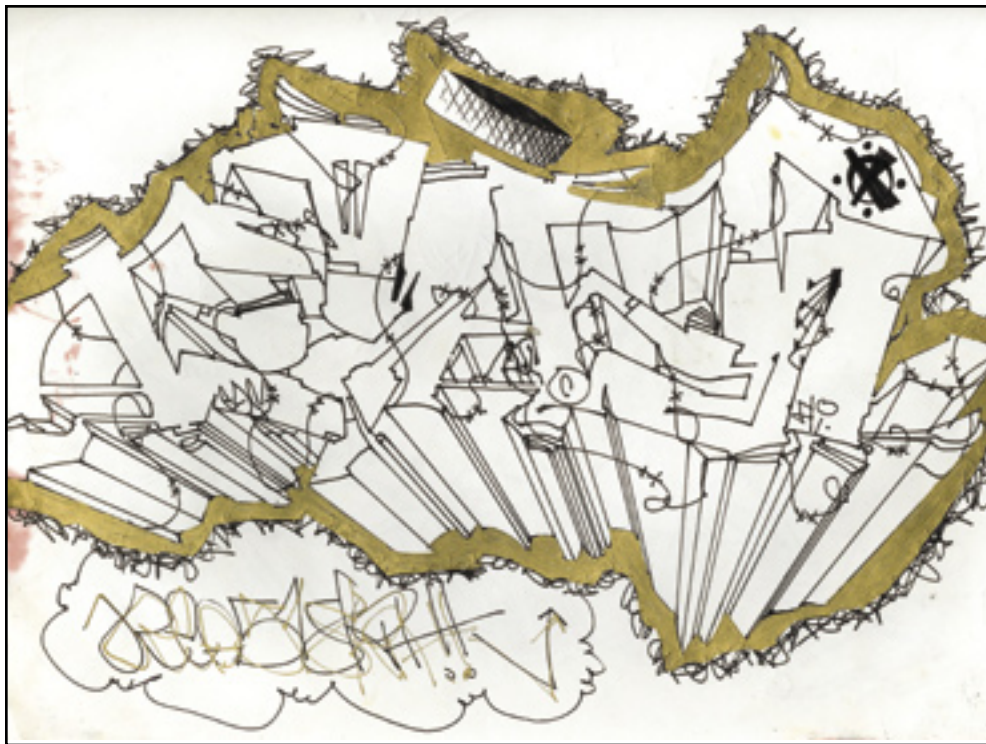
After some more chat and herbal tea, Alex left saying he felt much better. I thought maybe he was confused, that maybe I had not understood what I was hearing about the “radio” and that he was really feeling a little homesick before his travels.

Friday morning we all met at the Art Center, a big noisy, enthusiastic group, ready for the “BIG ADVENTURE!” A big luxurious bus came into the parking lot and we began to load all the suitcases and carryons...It seemed like everyone was asking “are we really going to Fiji?”

...Only one voice asked the question with more than just minor trepidation. Alex seemed convinced that someone or something was going to stop him from going. Again, though more from distraction with trip details and other students, I was impatient but tried to reason with his fears, still believing this was some kind of travel anxiety. Once on our way, a great shout was yelled by the group. “We’re on our way!”



Top: Workshop on the beach in Korolevu, Fiji. Middle: Standing in line for Fiji immigration. Bottom: Taking the Fiji tour.



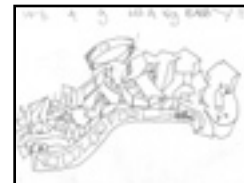
Zero: It's an elite approach to art. You have to be able to read it. So all the people in your group can see each other's art and know each other and appreciate it and become an admired artist. But, at the same time, we're artists there. We put it everywhere, our canvas is the world. Art canvas on the outside world. Art in its true open extreme. Art without limitations of just a gallery. Art that's there. It's their art. We're going to put it out there, you're going to look at it, you know?

Possibly "REA51SHOTT!!" or "REA5LSHITT!!" Railroad and/or barbed wire design throughout. Railroad crossing emblem at top right. "esc" and "810" along with a "@" are also visible. Black Pen and Metallic marker. c. June 1-13, 2001.



Zero: Charlie McWain, you didn't really know. He was a lot like me and we spent a lot of time together. We'd drove around and have fun. He eventually became a member of my crew (street-racing).

Graffiti text and title is "Kid!" Image is made more dynamic by the bleed-through from the markers on the other side of the page. Pen, colored pencils. Dated 6-1-01.

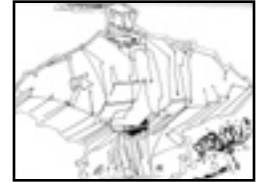
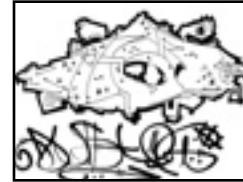


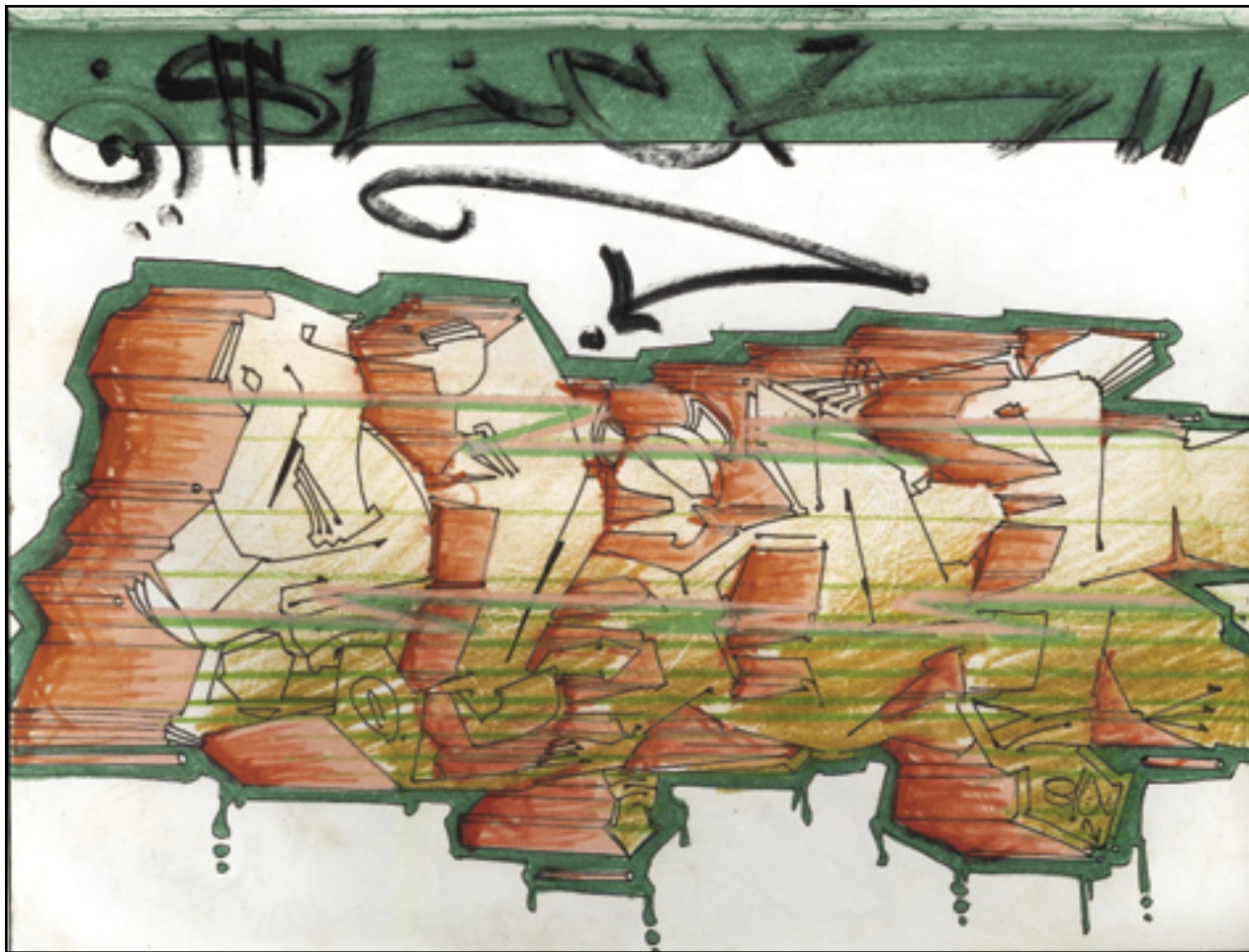


Untitled. Possibly created on flight from LA to Fiji. Page opposite says "Tweter" with "713" scrawled out (the date of the flight - Friday, July 13, 2001). Blue pen and gel pen.

liar and stuff. And I found out that when you really get to know him, he would always tell these jokes, he always called it 'hooking people', and he never lied about anything real. But he always played pranks. And he was a really cool guy. But the reality of who he was was that he never did drugs, and he never drank, ever. All he ever just wanted to do was just hang out, drive his car, and have fun. And he cared about all his friends. You'd always get mad, cause you'd never think that Charlie would pull through for you when you asked him a favor, cause he'd always say like 'Oh, whatever' and he'd make fun of it. And he'd always do whatever you asked, you know?

This art was digitally scanned
by Alex before his death,
while working on his final
piece, combining a photo and
graffiti art, for a second art
exhibition after the Fiji trip.
c. July 27, 2001.
Black pen and pink and
blue gel pens.





Signed "Slick", this is also the content of the graffiti image. Circa June 15, 2001. Colored pencils, pen, pastels, marker.

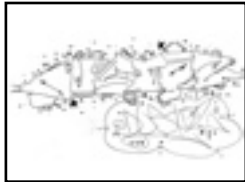
Me and him became really good friends. And I really got to know who he was, you know? And I liked him a lot. And, he passed away. He was with one of his friends and someone had pulled the wrong way out of a one-way drive and hit him. He passed away a really horrible way, he was okay. And he had a pain in his stomach and he didn't want to go to the hospital. I think he was stubborn and scared of them. He woke up in the morning with a really bad pain. And just that morning we were supposed to have a car show because we were doing a tour last year. And he was supposed to bring half the stuff. And we were at Street Dreams and me and John were running around pulling our hair out, setting up a display, and wondering where this and this and that is.



MJF: And you were probably wondering if this was the time when Charlie would fall through.

Zero: Yea. Right. And he went to the hospital. He had ended up having internal bleeding that went on all night. So he died when he got there (to the hospital). He was like "I don't feel good, I don't feel good" and he died, he died. And his dad thought he was just bringing him in to get checked out.

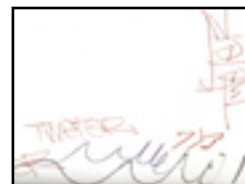
And so his girlfriend called us. And we still had to do the show without him. And it was really hard.





Flint's riverside park area is covered in layers of paint and graffiti. Its catacomb-like structure is a favorite hangout among graffiti artists and skate-boarders. Photo taken March 2004.

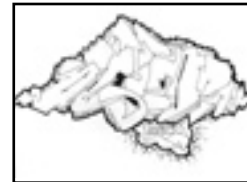
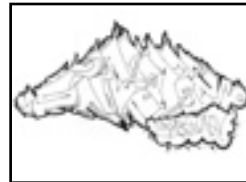
So I made a video for the Automotive Chaos (movie) section of just me and him driving on grass when he was just eatin pizza and was making fun of everyone driving by. Like "Oh, nice wing, boss!" and he's just like raggin on everybody, cause that was all he ever did. And then at the end section (of the movie), I got a little section at the back of hillbillies makin' fun of Hondas, makin fun of the cars. And it seems that that's what he's remembered for, he made everyone laugh, he made everyone happy, that's why he acted that way. And then at the end, I've got, you know, "In Memory of Charlie McWain" and I've got his car driving away and



just fading off. Cause he'd always be known,
he'd go flyin' by your house, and you'd hear
his muffler ...it had a distinct sound.

So, that was it, and... he always wanted his
own part in the video. And I'd go "awright,
awright". He's like "I want a whole section
of me!" I was, like, awright. So, I made that
promise, so...

Titled "Killer Midwestern Art" and dated April 5,
2001. The frog character holds a spray can of "Rusto"
paint which is missing the spray tip (in the thought
"balloon"). Colored Pencil. Signed "Tonic 2001". The
"EY!" was a common theme in several pages of the
sketchbook made with a thick stroke marker.



xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

[Looking at Alex's artwork in sketchbook.]

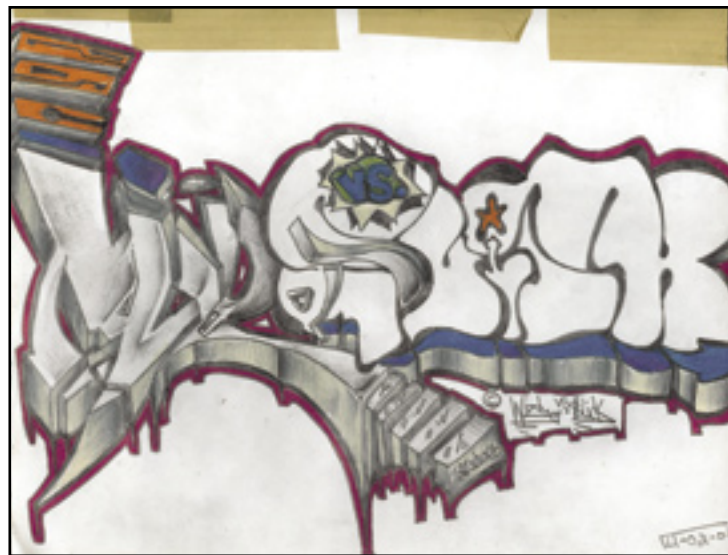
Zero: This is his own style, right here. With all these little lines and stuff. So it makes it really impossible for me to decipher.

MJF: Is this an "O"?

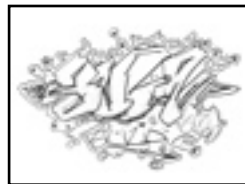
Zero: No, it's an "A".

MJF: I think he did this ON the airplane.

Zero: Really. He was really freakin' out on the airplane, too. Cause it shows in the artwork that he's really, like, like outta control, ya know. This is all outta control.



"Wizdom vs. Slick" dated April 22, 2001. Pencil, colored pencil, pens and gel pens.





July 19/01

~~Dear~~ I miss my mother soooooo much. I just want to go home. ~~Dear~~ Mara is going into the city today. What is going on I'm not sure. I'm ~~in~~ in a foreign country and I don't know if I can get back home. What a mistake this turned out to be. I feel so tired. I want to apologize to every one here, to the ambassador. Dear god I pray he could find it in his heart to ~~let~~ let me return ~~home~~ home with my mother.

I have a few questions about my well being. Is it illegal to leave ones village. I didn't do anything to deserve death. All I want is to ~~live~~ live, to live and be free. What is the law here? Do I still have rights as an american citizen? but over here does that matter? Can you contact my mother for me mara. I need the number? Jozette can call Justin or go to the house and get my address book. the number is in there.

At left: Alex waiting for the bus in Pacific Harbour. Overlay: A cry for help in a letter written to his mentor on July 19, 2001 in Fiji.

MJF: Did you ever hear the story of the flight out? Right?

Zero: Right, right. You can see it in this art, how he's drawn it. He's focused, everything he's drawing here is focused lines. But I can't really decipher it. That's how outta control it is...Like right here, he's got these little flowers so obviously like that's where he's going.

MJF: This was on the way back.

Zero: Oh, okay. On the way back?

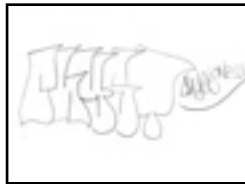
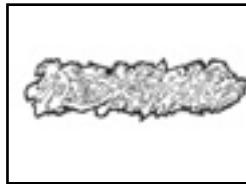


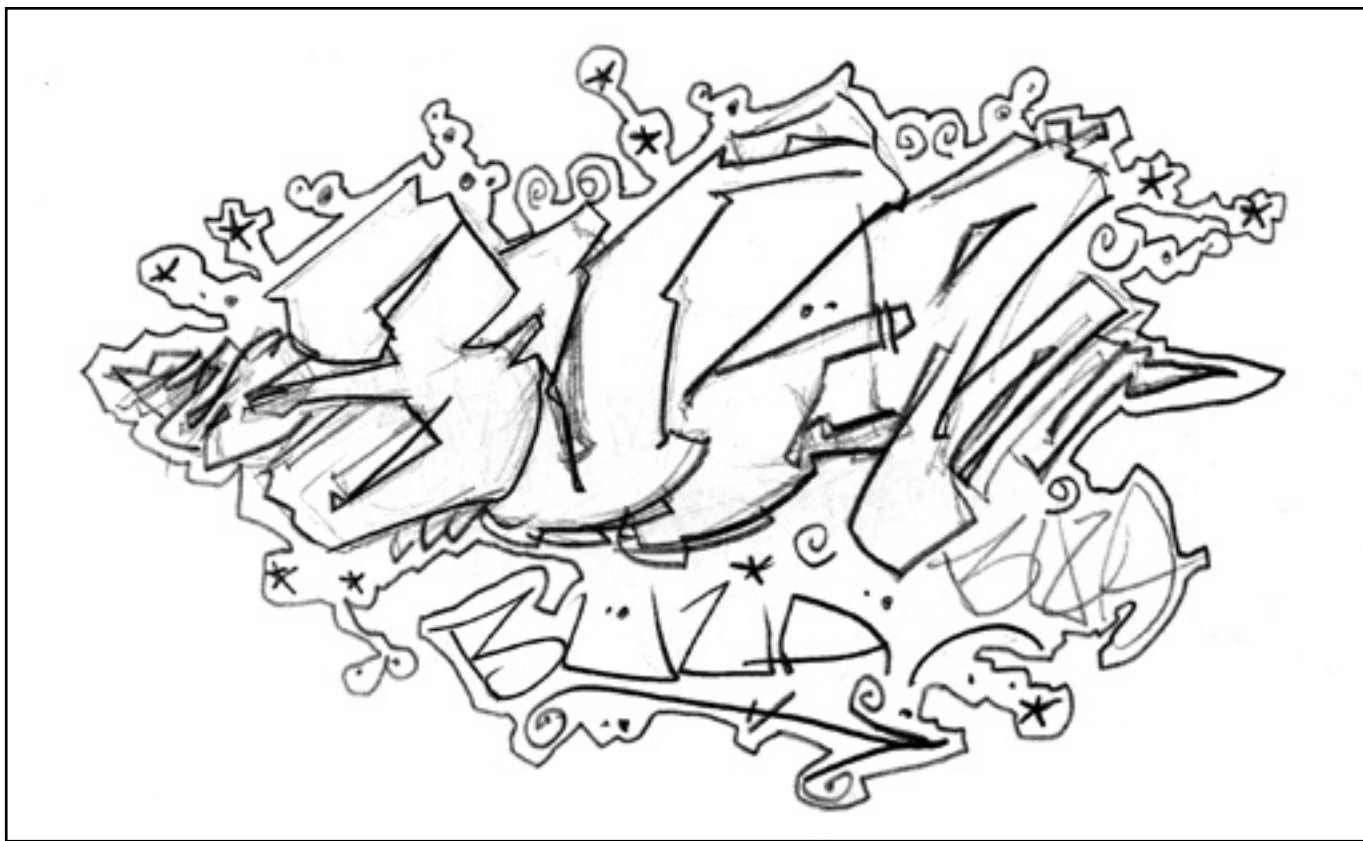
MJF: On the way out there, did I tell you the story of how he actually got off the plane?

Zero: No! But here he's got flowers. That's new. You can tell, this came back with him.

MJF: Yea. We managed to get him to have some good experiences while he was in Fiji.

Zero: This is wild. I wonder what...



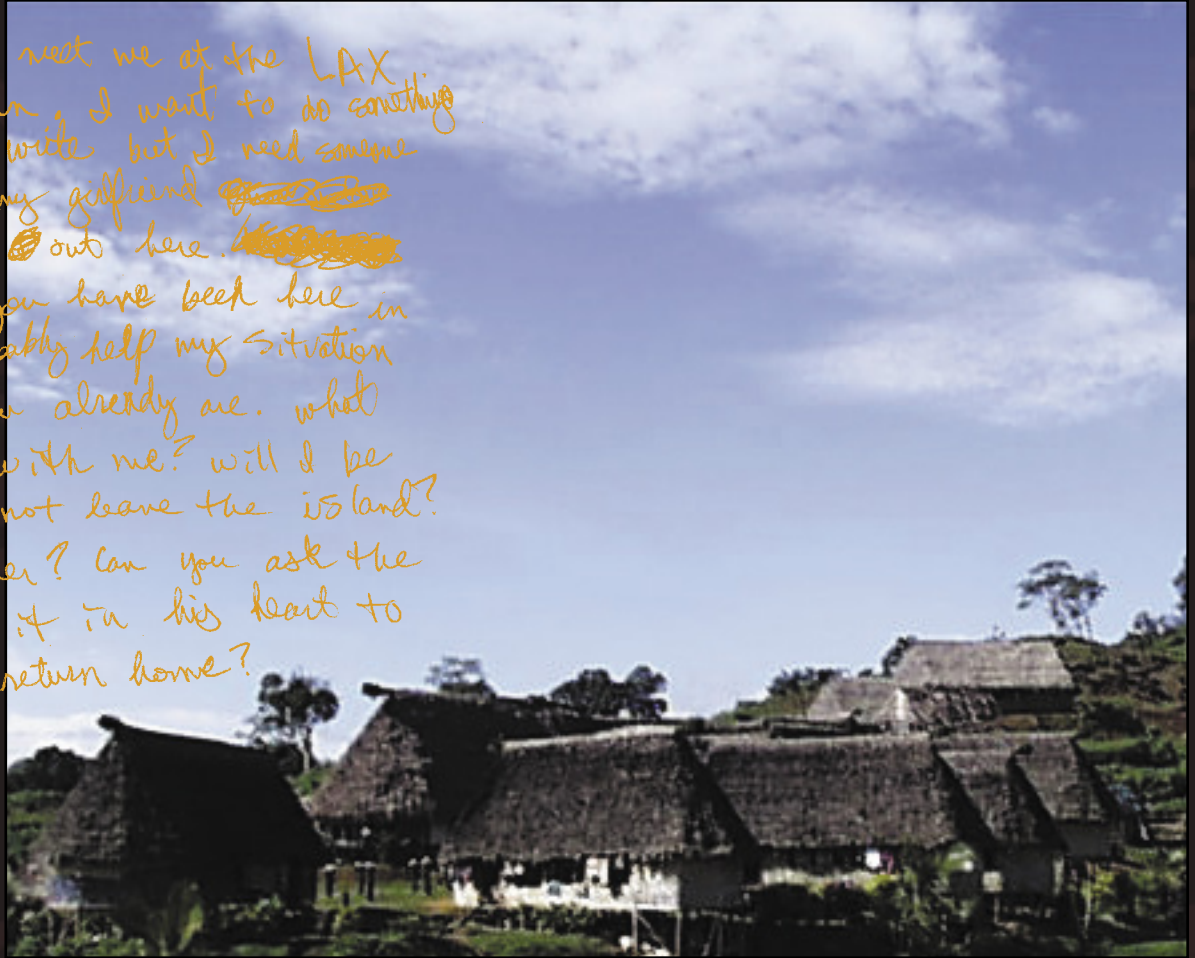


Artwork created on flight. Titled: "Bula" which means "Hello" or "Good Health" in Fijian.
Pencil. c. July 27, 2001.

can you try to have her meet me at the LAX
when and if ~~you~~ I return. I want to do something
fun besides sit here and write but I need someone
to let my mother and my girlfriend ~~know~~
know what is going on out here. ~~My mother~~

~~you know~~ I know you have been here in
Fiji and you can probably help my situation
although I believe you already are. what
do they want to do with me? will I be
forced to death? to not leave the island?
can I see my mother? can you ask the
ambassador to find it in his heart to
let me leave and return home?

Namadi bures built in the traditional
Fijian style. However, these were built
as "transitional" housing for convicted
criminals returning to society. Alex
feared he would end up living there.



MJF: He showed it to me and said “this is what I want, for my ‘post artwork’”. And, well, I said this is a lot like your other work, is there a way you can take it to the next step?

Zero: I’m just trying to find where a letter starts.

MJF: He might have learned some Fijian, too.

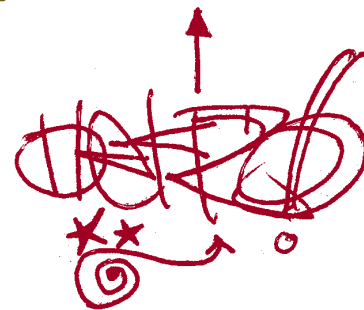
Zero: You can see two “O’s” and a “W” here. This looks like an “E” but it could just be a design.

MJF: “Bula” is a word he might have learned, “Vinaka” maybe...

Zero: Oh wait a minute, the one he ripped out is another one from the trip. I can see the (impression of) it.

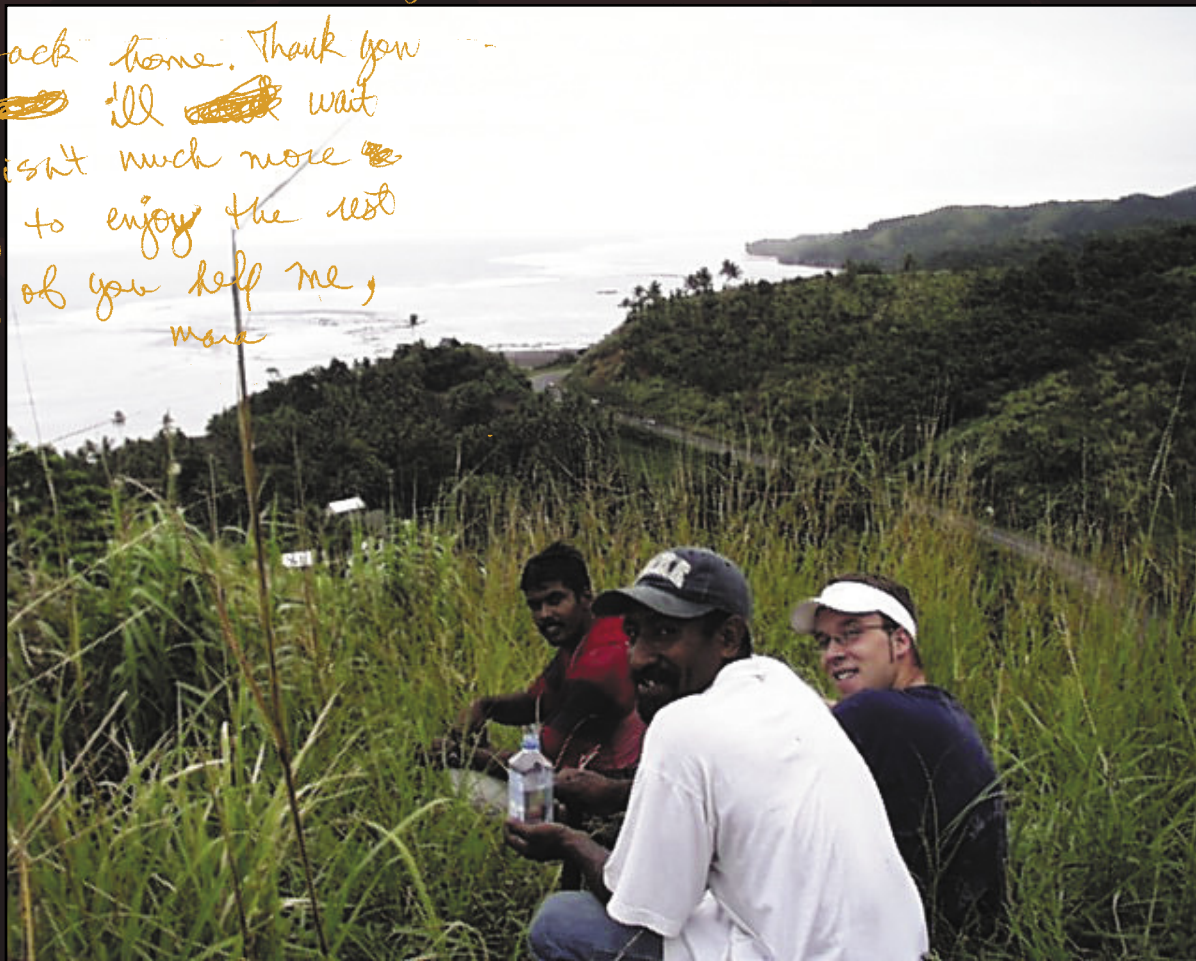


Photo, by M.J. Fulmer, of Alex at dawn on the morning of our arrival in Fiji on July 15, 2001. The photo would later be combined with his scanned graffiti in response to a dream.



I will apologise

I'll do any thing to get back home. Thank you
maia. ~~the~~ the rest ~~ill~~ ill ~~wait~~ wait
to find ~~out~~ out, there isn't much more
I can do now. ill try to enjoy the rest
of my trip. Please I beg of you help me,
maia



Alex poses with new friends Iso, center, and Ramesh, left, on a hike up the headland above the backpacker resort where we were staying.

MJF: It was his scan (of the image) since I didn't have the notebooks. He was working a lot on it. Some of the pages were notes written and torn out for folks.

Zero: This is a fan or something.

MJF: There were fan palms...

Zero: ...Graffiti art was something he enjoyed doing.



Photo of Alex's graffiti in Flint. Found in amongst his sketchbooks. Date unknown.





"Did I have anything to do
with that?"
~ Alex, July 17, 2001

epilogue is prologue to understanding..



The Lighthouse Restaurant in Suva, Fiji's capital, was burned out during riots that accompanied an armed overthrow of Fiji's elected government in May 2000. Covered in graffiti by protestors on both sides, the blue paint is the main color in Fiji's flag. A year later, on July 17th, 2001, Alex was heading into a full psychotic breakdown when, during a bus tour of the city, he asked his mentor:

"Did I have anything to do with that?" Frustrated, his mentor and group leader, asked him frankly: "Were you in Fiji a year ago?" Alex looked confused and stumbled with a reply, mumbling nonsense about not wanting to be punished or arrested. His paranoia seemed to be consuming any sense of reality that might have been left to him. Meanwhile, across the street



Children in Fiji's schools wear colorful uniforms indicating which school they attend.

At left: Details from graffiti on the Lighthouse Restaurant in Suva, Fiji.

from the burned out Lighthouse restaurant, children dressed in various colored uniforms played in the schoolyard at Veiuto elementary school.

The Encounter 11/1/01 ~ m.j.f.

I awoke with a start. The sound of a breath quickly withdrawn. 2 am. The light of a full moon filled my bedroom. A whimper from my 5-month-old Borzoi puppy lying upon a blanket on the floor. My husband Keith, curls up with me, his arms tightening around my body.

What is it you want, Alex? What do you want to tell me? What is it you want me to do?

These thoughts were not so much said, but floated through my mind, as thinly as a veil.

Stanley, the puppy, came to the bedside and tried to climb up into the small space left. But with only enough room to fit his back legs, he stretched his 54 lb body overtop of my chest, his nose coming to rest at my chin. He whined quietly and so I gently stroked his soft fur upon his neck.



DNA



The artwork, Mara. It's on the disk. You told me to try something different, to take the graffiti art that I drew in Fiji and take it to the digital realm... You told me to try and add images of the things that made me feel good, my good memories of Fiji, the ever drifting light of a sunset, the soft rippling waves upon the sand...

But the disk is ruined, Mara. I couldn't make it work. I'd spilled something on it, my backpack. I didn't know what to do...

A fear began to creep within me. Did he kill himself over this? Did he now want me to try to retrieve the data with his artwork upon the disk? Sleep finally took over, as I drifted deeper into an unsettled peace, still puzzling over how to fulfill his request... and maybe provide the peace he needed to go onward.

I awoke early, still pondering over the answer that bubbled softly in my brain...

Wizow V. Slick



Graffiti text possibly "DEAD" with the caption "Why ask why" and some possible representations of fish, birds and palm trees. Circa early August 2001, after his return from Fiji, and around the time he was hospitalized. Colored pencils and pen.

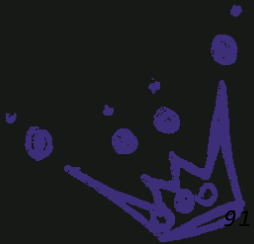
postscript: the encounter, part 2.

11-5-01

My horoscope said I would be done with a losing proposition today. I gave up trying to read Alex's disk. Instead, focusing on the images that kept flowing through my mind, a blending of the graffiti art that he'd created in his notebook journal and digitized on the scanner in the lab. I found the file that had been scanned by Alex on August 29th on computer #19. I sat down today during a quiet time during my class when all the students were busily working on their projects.

In only an hour, the images in my head took form upon the computer screen. The prints finished, I signed them "Alex as told to MJF" and left them to be viewed by the students. Alex's back was to the camera, a small but sad figure at the center of a long seascape framed by palms. They mirrored the abstracted palms he'd drawn in his graffiti art. The results seemed whole, more so than he'd apparently felt since his return home.

Later, I advised another student whose brown face had been ravaged by chemical burns but whose injuries I'd earlier attributed to adolescent savaged acne. I hadn't thought anything of it, except to note the depth of thought in his dark eyes, yielding the identity of one who had seen far too much pain in his short life. He shared with me, briefly, a story he'd written for his pre-college English writing class. Marques had come to me last Spring while still in high school to work on a project on Gun Violence that we later titled Disarming Art. During his initial advising in March for entering the graphics program,





The Last Maze, as told to M.J. Fulmer in a dream following Alex's death, October 25, 2001.

he'd shown me a piece he'd written about the violence in his life. He had even laminated it, owing to his pride from the receipt of high praise his high school English teacher had shared with him. It was such a poignant and powerful statement that I encouraged him to participate in this art project. He faithfully showed up or called every week, feeling a bit out of place but still contributing to the creative collective.

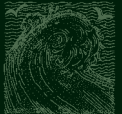
11-6-01

Today, Marques came shyly back to my office after we'd worked out his schedule for winter, yesterday. "I wanted to leave this with you, just so you can read it, get a better idea who I am..." he told me, as he handed the green-pen marked typed pages. It was an earlier draft of the piece he'd shown me the day before.

The words were difficult. He called it "One of the Lost Children", as if his isolation, pain, and violence experienced growing up had lead him off some intended course of an idyllic childhood. But in the end, after the pain, the hurt, the hate, the violence, he wrote: "I am blessed that after all this I'm still alive! I am blessed that my mother still loves me! I am happy for the other lost children, who are still staying strong! I am blessed that I meet nice kind people. I am blessed that I have teachers who are helpful and care! I am blessed that I meet nice students! Almighty Creator bless you all!"

Yesterday, my horoscope said I'd be done with a losing proposition. I gave up on reading the disk, and restored my faith in reading my heart, mind and soul...

~ Mara Jevera Fulmer



List of Photographs and Supplemental Illustrations

All photos were taken by Mara Jevera Fulmer unless otherwise noted. All graffiti art was created by Alex White unless otherwise noted.

Small images running across the top and then bottom of the page throughout this book are generally chronologically ordered pages from the two sketchbooks highlighted here.

Title page overlay: "Slick" full page graphic.

2 - Photo of Central High School, Flint. "eyer" graffiti icon.

3 - "slick" graffiti icon

4 - "wizdom" graffiti icon

5 - Sprayhead Character titled "psyco "circles" and dated March 5, 2001, signed "eyer".

"wisdom vs. slick" graffiti icon

6 - Practice page for "Kid" icon.

7 - "Mind Matter Maze" created for Mott Community College Fiji Study Tour exhibit at Fiji Museum, July 2001.

8 - Saginaw Street view facing north near Second Street. May 2003.

9 - "Slick" and "RR" railroad icon. Flint is crisscrossed with railroad tracks necessary for the transport of raw and finished materials to and from the many factories located in the area. In some cases, the railroad tracks are the most dominant remnant of Flint's heyday in the automotive industry.

10 - "RR" crossing icon. Flint's

Metropolis, now housing the "Local 432" a popular hangout for teens and young adults.

11 - Graffiti art labeled "Flint Original" and framed by "e" and "g".

12 - Photo of alley-way and parking area behind the Metropolis and Buckham Gallery.

13 - "TLP" graffiti icon. Photo found in his notebook of graffiti, presumably Alex's, near railroad tracks at an underpass in Flint. Photographer and date unknown.

14 - Double "I" graffiti icon. Photo of Flint's Riverside park, a favored hangout by graffiti artists and skateboarders. March 2004.

15 - Photo of graffiti, presumably Alex's, on a bridge abutment of a railroad underpass found in his sketchbook. Photographer and date unknown.

16 - Titled "Earlz" graffiti art from March 15, 2001. Alex's middle name was Earl.

17 - Portrait graffiti art circa March 6, 2001, signed "tonic" and labeled "Flint". The "eg" is a common motif.

18 - Photo of Flint River lined in graffiti and murals. Photo taken March 2004.

19 - Titled "Slickz" dated May 30, 2001. Contains common motif of the iconic railroad crossing sign.

20 - Promotional sticker for "Flint Local 432" that was affixed to one of Alex's sketchbooks.

21 - Graffiti art, probably a plan for a major wall piece, crosses two pages in his sketchbook. Character wearing star-design hat holds sign that says "Willie G. EVERFALL?" and paint cans are lined up on the lower left and lower right. Within graffiti there is "F.M." and "810". There is the common "hole" towards the center (as if looking down the barrel of a gun). A large text block appears on a scroll near the right half and appears to go on as a sort of manifesto suggesting a challenge amongst or between rival groups of graffiti artists. A duck character on the right has a sign saying "NEVER THAT!!!!" Just below some Japanese-style characters (a reference to anime?) it is labeled "DUECENODART"

22 - Graffiti art "KENO" and labeled "DNA" and signed "DEUCE NOD CLAN?" circa March 24-25, 2001.

23 - Pen and ink complex manifesto style art. Circa June 18, 2001.

24 - "Wizdom" graffiti art dated March 30, 2001.

25 - Hip-hop graffiti artwork with duel turntables and controller, signed "tonic" and "DNA" with a heart and dated March 24, 2001.

26 - Similar style art to page 25

but in black and white and labeled "ISO Fresh, so clean!" and dated March 25, 2001.

27 - Graffiti art in this "pressure" bubble style. Features commonly used arrows and lever-style motifs mostly pointing outward. Circle and line inside arrow suggests the top of a flat-head screw using a flat screwdriver. Circa July 13-18, 2001.

28 - Graffiti art with Alex's personal caricature wearing "DNA" on his chest and holding a spray can. Signed "Stanley Stylzez", the main body says "WIZDOM" and is signed "wisdom deg." on the right side. Tiny bees buzz off the character's head and little smoking points dot the top of the art.

29 - A page in Alex's book that was drawn by Zero-MSc including his address and telephone number (omitted). MSc stands for Mad Skate Crew. Zero also signed Wyzdom" which is his own handle. "Basement Crew Production" is scrawled along the right corner. The cityscape in top left graffiti text shows the CB weather ball tower from the Citizens Bank (also visible in some of the photos taken by the author in other parts of this book). Circa June 8, 2001.

30 - "810 FLINT!" adorns a wall of the Flint Riverside skate area. March 2004.

31 - graffiti icon "810...." appears in many of Alex's pieces. Zero says it is common practice for graffiti artists to

use the area code mnemonic. Graffiti art sketch, early July 2001. Text "It always feels like somebody's watchin' me" with musical notations in reference to a song lyric.

32 - Photo of trompe l'oeil style painting on the back of the empty Blackstone building off Saginaw Street, Flint. March 2004.

33 - A can of "permopaque" unravels the graffiti text in this art dated March 5, 2001.

34 - Sketches all dealing with crack, circa March 21, 2001.

35 - why-ask-why graffiti icon with two fish. Gel pens on black paper "Guerila Graff" and signed tonic, circa June 14, 2001. The only art on black paper in both sketch books.

36 - "DUSTO\$ - RELEASE YOURSELF... PRAISE FREEDOM..." graphic icon.

37 - Drawing board from a class Alex attended Fall 2001. "SHOT" with ekg lines and smaller text "shot" appears within the letterforms. Found shortly after his death Oct. 25, 2001.

38 - Back of buildings in downtown Flint off Saginaw Street. Graffiti adorns the "terraces". March 2004.

39 - Graffiti art says "shot" with spilling glass next to "t" in top text. A hole in an arrow has cracks and drips along with the word "ouch!" written inside. The "T" in the main graffiti art takes on a Christian cross-like quality but with a gun-turret on top.

40 - Graffiti art for SLICK labeled "Train Stylez" signed "SLICK" and many railroad icons and flame symbols appear in upper right. Text says "ON FIRE!" Circa June 2001.

41 - Titled "Paradise Fiji" the style is more representational than usual. Circa July 13-26, 2001.

42 - A city mural on the theme of the autoworkers' labor movement adorns a building alongside dilapidated structures on Flint's Saginaw Street. March 2004.

43 - Graffiti art "Dustol" with a darkened square in upper left corner. It is overwritten with the text "graff life" and ekg lines.

44 - NYZO graffiti iconic text.

45 - Three pieces of art from drawing and illustration classes at Mott Community College. Underlay - Practice graffiti art sketch from his notebook. Overlay - part of a written proposal by Alex for artwork to be created for the Fiji Study Tour art exhibit in the Fiji Museum.

46 - Photo of graffiti art (not Alex's) from the Flint riverside skate area where Alex and friends enjoyed hanging out. March 2004.

47 - Three photos of Alex taken by different photographers at the Fiji Museum art opening. Bottom left - Photo by Mara Fulmer; Middle - Photographer unknown; Top right - Photo by Louise Parham. Underlay - Practice graffiti art sketch from his notebook. Overlay

– second half of written proposal from page 45 overlay.

48 – Photo of Central High School off Crapo St. in Flint's College/Cultural Park area. March 2004.

49 – Titled "Some Real Shit" with ekg lines and signed "Slick e.g." and subtitled "the new era", dated March 31, 2001.

50 – Photo of Alex on the morning of arrival in Korolevu, Fiji at the Beachouse, July 15, 2001.

51 – Titled "Dremer" with "DNA" 3-d letters in the design, dated April 4, 2001.

52 – Graffiti icon of railroad crossing now inside the arrow. Photo of the restored Vernor's Ginger Ale advertising mural on the side of the Greater Flint Arts Council building. May 2003.

53 – Graffiti art says "Thug II" and dated June 5, 2001, with text at the bottom "Rockin madnasty like rhynoplasty". Signature looks like a possible interpretation of "Flint". A graffiti artist, possibly Alex, stands to the left side.

54 – "DNA" with heart iconic design.

55 – Graffiti art titled "Detro" or a variation on "Detroit" and labeled "Detromental too your health!...Just another Bible belt!...BIBLE!" Letters D.N. and Detro in the design. The "T" in the center takes on a Christian cross-like quality. The icons to the lower right

look like variations on guns.

56 – Graffiti art as a memorial to Tiger, Alex's cat, who apparently died some time around the date of the artwork, May 30, 2001. RIP icon and text are pulled from the original image.

57 – Photos from Fiji Study Tour in July 2001. Top: Alex with another Mott student, James; Middle: Posing with fellow students at Fiji Museum art opening, photo by Louise Parham; Bottom: Dinner at the Japanese restaurant Daikoku in Fiji's capital of Suva, photo by Louise Parham. Overlay – Portion of text from author's personal journal. Underlay – image from Alex's sketchbook.

58 – Character page from Alex's sketchbook, dated April 2, 2001.

59 – Photos from Fiji Study Tour in July 2001. Top: Alex poses for photo at Fiji Museum art opening; Middle: Mott students pose at Fiji Museum clocktower; Bottom: Mott students pose for photo at base of a banyan tree on the museum grounds. Student photographer from tour. Overlay – Continuing text from author's personal journal. Underlay – image from Alex's sketchbook.

60 – Graffiti icon from Alex's sketchbook.

61 – Photos from Fiji Study Tour in July 2001. Left: inside the Fiji Museum art gallery during opening of student exhibit; Middle: Verandah reception at the museum for the student exhibit opening; Right: close-up of students

posing for photo under banyan tree on museum grounds. Student photographer from tour. Overlay – Continuing text from author's personal journal. Underlay – image from Alex's sketchbook.

62 – Fish design signed "Tonic, circa March 31, 2001.

63 – "Ouch!" graffiti icon taken from Shot graffiti in sketchbook.

64 – Titled "Kids on the Tracks" which is also contained in the graffiti art itself. Track-like lines appear throughout.

65 – Photos from Fiji Study Tour in July 2001. Top: Travelling on the bus, photo by Kathleen Johnston; Middle: Posing for photo at Orchid Island Cultural Centre outside Suva, photo by student photographer; Bottom: Waiting with another student, Laura, on a layover in Auckland, New Zealand, on the way home, July 27, 2001. Overlay – Portion of text from author's personal journal. Underlay – image from Alex's sketchbook.

66 – Graffiti art "Duece Nod clan!" with crown, indicating his pronouncement as a top graffiti artist. Dated May 21, 2001.

67 – Photos from Fiji Study Tour in July 2001. Top: students participate in workshops by the beach; Middle: waiting in the Immigration line to enter Fiji, photo by student photographer; Bottom: on the bus in Fiji, photo by Kathleen Johnston. Overlay – Continuing text from author's personal journal. Underlay

- image from Alex's sketchbook.

68 - Text nearly indecipherable, possibly "REASLSHITT!!" with Railroad tracks or barbed wire design throughout. Railroad crossing icon appears along with a tire motif. Circa early June 2001.

69 - Graffiti art "Kid" with much bleedthrough adding to the overall texture. Dated June 1, 2001.

70 - Graffiti art created most likely on the flight to Fiji or shortly thereafter, July 13-15, 2001.

71 - Graffiti art created by Alex specifically for his "post" trip visual response. Circa around July 27, 2001.

72 - Graffiti art "Slick" with "810" in lower right. Circa June 15, 2001.

73 - "Tonic eg" graffiti icon.

74 - The catacomb-like entry to Flint's riverside park area, a favored hangout for skateboarders and graffiti artists. March 2004.

75 - Graffiti art titled "Killer Midwestern Art" with "ey!" in the top right. Frog character holds a spray can that is missing the tip which the frog is "thinking" about. Signed "Tonic 2001" and dated April 5, 2001.

76 - Graffiti art titled "Wizdom vs Slick" dated April 22, 2001.

77 - Photo from Fiji Study Tour during a busride pitstop, photo by Louise Parham. Overlay - Beginning portion of letter to instructor revealing Alex's madness and paranoia. Underlay - image from Alex's sketchbook.

78 - "Dusto" graffiti icon.

79 - Photo from Fiji Study Tour of Alex walking on the tidal flats at low tide. Overlay - Next portion of letter to instructor revealing Alex's madness and paranoia. Underlay - image from Alex's sketchbook.

80 - Graffiti created on flight home and titled "Bula" which means "hello" or "good health" in Fijian. July 27, 2001.

81 - Photo from Fiji Study Tour of Namadi bures used as transitional housing for youth in Fiji who have had brushes with the law. Overlay - Next portion of letter to instructor revealing Alex's madness and paranoia. Underlay - image from Alex's sketchbook.

82 - Photo of Alex at dawn on the morning of our arrival in Fiji, July 15, 2001. "Detro" or "Detroit" graffiti icon.

83 - Photo from Fiji Study Tour of Alex with Ramesh (right) and Iso (middle) at the top of hill overlooking the Beachouse headlands. Overlay - Next portion of letter to instructor revealing Alex's madness and paranoia. Underlay - image from Alex's sketchbook.

84 - Photo found in Alex's sketchbook of his graffiti in Flint painted with his handle "Slick". Date unknown.

85 - Photo from Fiji Study Tour of burned out Lighthouse Restaurant in Fiji which is covered in graffiti from the overthrow of Fiji's government in May-June 2000.

86 - Three small photos of Lighthouse

Restaurant in Fiji (see above). Top and middle photos by Kathleen Johnston. Photo at right: school children at Veituto Elementary school across the street from the Lighthouse Restaurant.

87 - Three small photos of Lighthouse Restaurant (see above). Middle photo by Kathleen Johnston. DNA graffiti icon. Overlay - Portion of author's personal journal from November 1, 2001.

88 - Lighthouse Restaurant (see above) in Fiji.

89 - Wizdom vs Slick graffiti iconic text. Overlay: second portion of author's personal journal from November 1, 2001.

90 - Graffiti art text spelling out, possibly, "DEAD" with caption "Why ask why" with palm, fish, and bird/cross image, circa early August 2001.

91 - Crown graffiti icon. Overlay: Portion of author's personal journal from November 5, 2001.

92 - "The Last Maze" completed by the author from Alex's drawing and author's photo.

93 - author's mark of a big wave. Overlay: Final portion of author's personal journal from November 5, 2001.

98 - Pre-dawn arrival of Mott students at the Beachouse on July 15, 2001.

