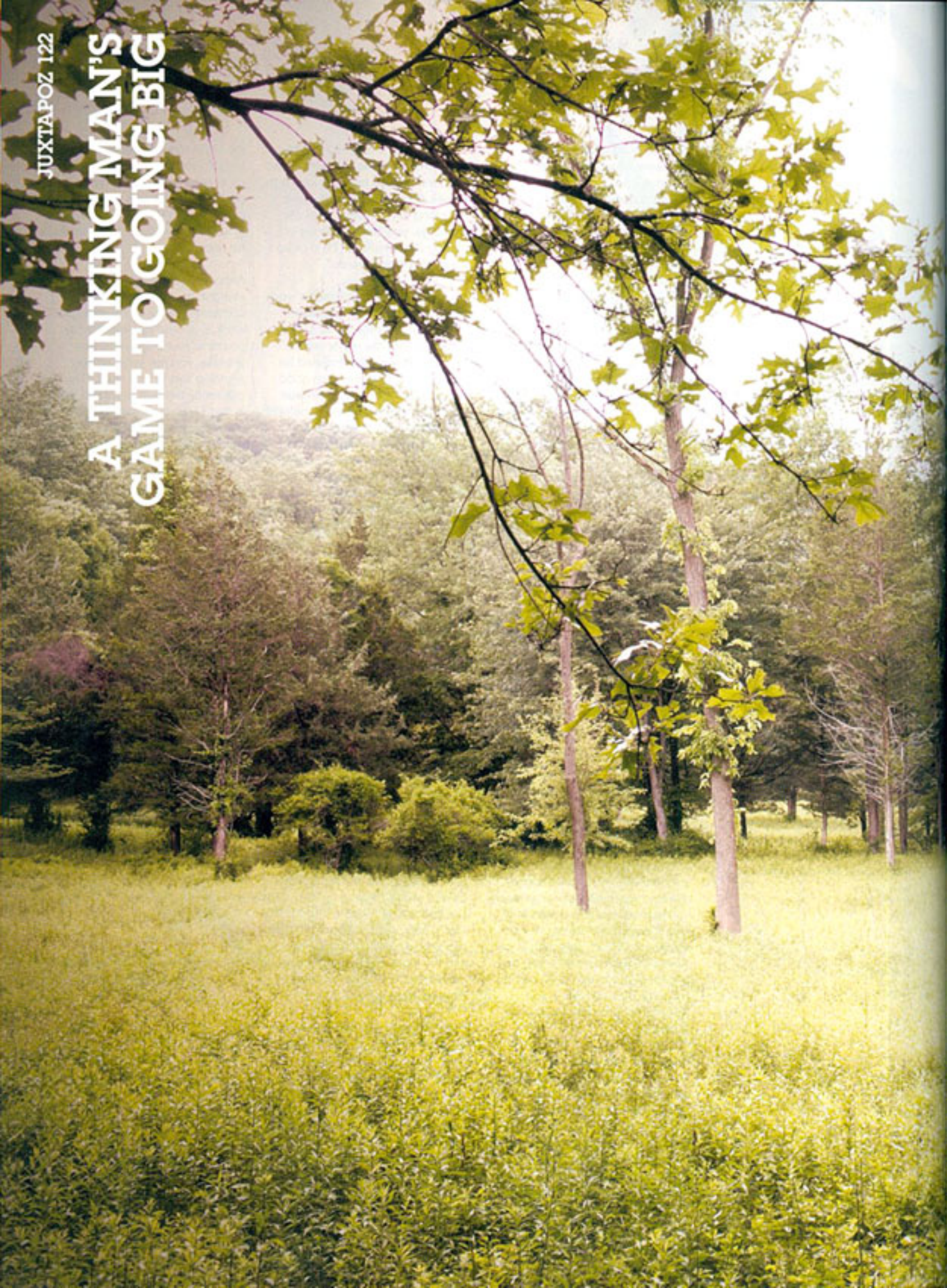


A THINKING MAN'S
GAME TO GOING BIG



CYCLE

TEXT BY CALEB NEELON
PORTRAIT BY ADAM AMENGUAL

For nearly 20 years the name Cycle has been a fixture in graffiti in the United States. Although plenty difficult to make a substantial impact in New York City's saturated graffiti scene, Cycle has managed to do so while even pulling off the same feat in both DC and San Francisco, as well as a gang of freight trains in between. Some

graffiti writers have followers who paint in their style. But Cycle isn't one of these. Rather, he sets a quiet example for younger graffiti writers with his consistency, working equally in tags, throwups, and pieces, all the while creating riveting work. The end result—despite such diverse style skills—is work that immediately announces Cycle.

"I always liked graffiti because I got to paint big," says Cycle, whose small frame sometimes surprises those accustomed to his huge pieces. "When you're in high school, what's going to pique your interest? Art class where you're drawing a still life with charcoal—or something that's big and dangerous and punk rock and colorful? Obviously, the graffiti took hold of me. There was more to it than an 8.5-by-11 piece of paper and a pencil."

Big art made an impression on Cycle early on, before he'd even noticed graffiti. As a little boy, prior to turning 10 years old, his mother toted him along to NYC's Museum of Modern Art. "The thing that really blew me away was they had Picasso's *Guernica* up there," he

retells. "That shit blew my mind, and this is why—it was fucking huge. I didn't know people could paint that big. And then when I saw graffiti I saw people painting that big; it was bright, it was colorful, you could walk around it, and you weren't bent over a desk at a piece of paper. I was climbing fences and sneaking into parking garages to skateboard already, as well as getting chased off by cops for it. Graffiti was just a visual form of that."

Growing up in NYC's Connecticut suburbs, he was a lucky youngster whose father had season tickets to the Mets. On the way to games at Shea Stadium in Queens, there was a drive through the Bronx where Cycle would see an anonymous colorful blur of schoolyard handball

courts and highways covered in graffiti. When he reached teenage years in the mid-'80s and began to skateboard, he'd travel by train to Manhattan, skate the Brooklyn Banks, and come across more graffiti. Inspiration, check.

In the late 1980s, the talk of the graffiti town was a pair of brothers, Sane and Smith. They did it all and they did it everywhere, in spaces both booming and intimidating. They were the ones any aspiring graffiti writer of that era aspired to be like. "You had successful bombers in graffiti, you had successful piecers in graffiti, but the kings did both. Sane or Smith, they bombed hard and in the late '80s they helped graffiti walk off the side of the train and into the city environment." With this model in

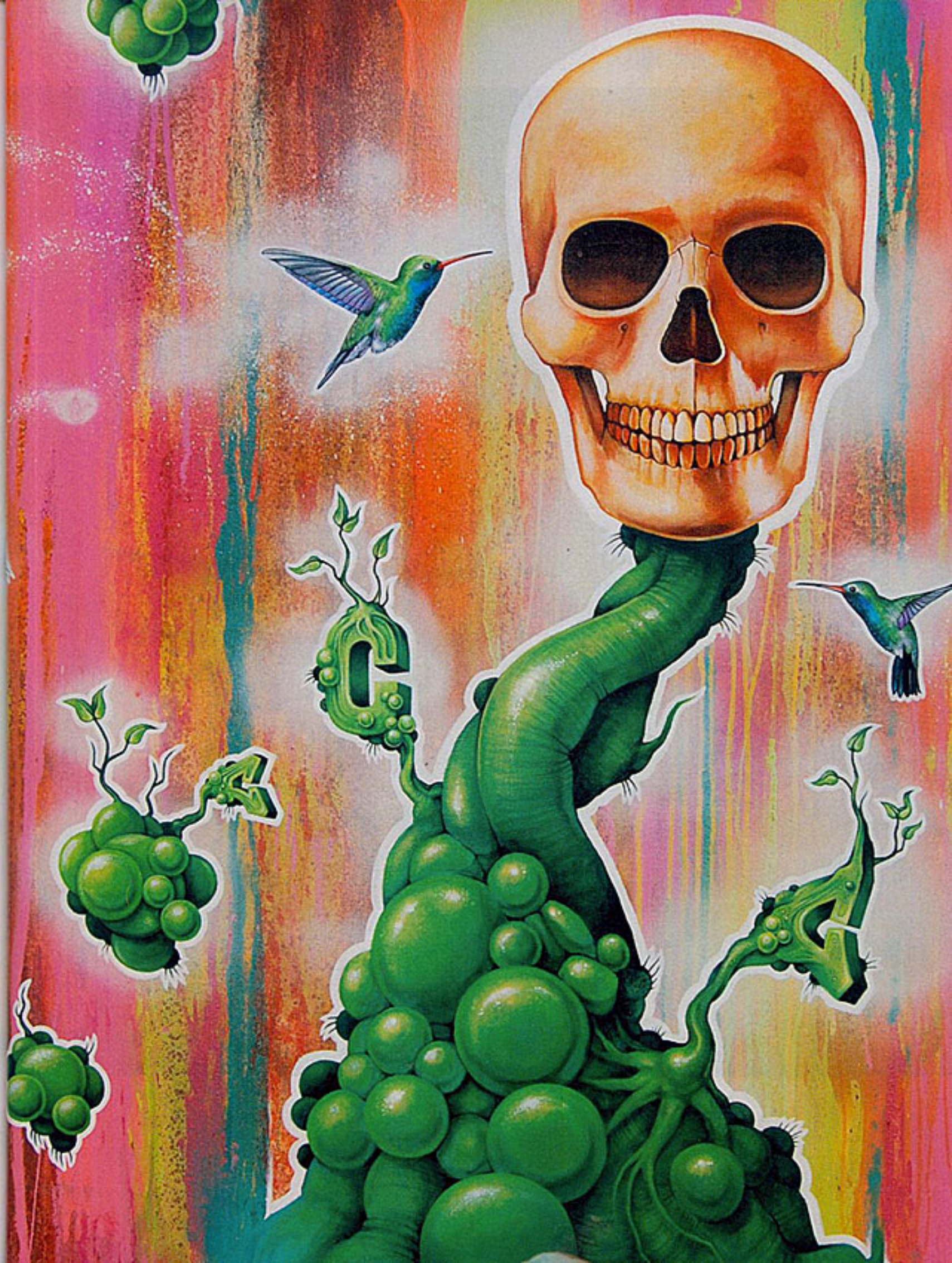
(right)
Miami Part 2
Mixed media on canvas
36" x 44"
2008

(pages 126–127)
Barney
Mixed media on canvas
6' x 12"
2008

(pages 128–129)
Total Chaos Triptych
Mixed media on canvas
Three panels, each 14' x 11"
2008

hand, Cycle headed off to college.

In the fall of 1989 he arrived at George Washington University, going from the most developed graffiti scene in the world to one that was just rolling off the ground. Taking a cue from Sane and Smith, Cycle and his friend Wake would ride bikes around the city and look for spots to paint, both hidden and in plain view. Typically as most writers eventually settle into a niche, Cycle became equally comfortable doing tags in busy areas or working on a 30-foot piece with 20 varying colors. "The formula was already set up in graffiti and I enjoyed doing both, pushing myself artistically and executing the ideas I wanted to try. I also enjoyed the adventure of running around at night, climbing through holes in







fences and up fire escapes and through tunnels. Graffiti worked really well for me because I could push myself creatively and also have the adventure tied into it. Being well-rounded in graffiti came very easily to me."

Cycle painted in DC until he graduated in 1993, then moved back to NYC. There, he painted with a growing bunch of Connecticut and NYC writers like Gaze, Ermit, and others. In 1996 it was time for a change (and another degree) so he left for San Francisco to attend the Academy of Art. SF was a new group of people to paint with—like KR, Jase, and Mike Giant—and for

Cycle they represented "the first time I'd seen artists able to marry the graffiti work with fine art work." So he did the same. While at school in SF, Cycle took a job designing graphics for Think skateboards, which was used to employing graffiti writers for graphics job. Cycle had taken over for Dug TMF, who had taken over for Mike Giant. It was on-the-job training for Cycle, who had always revered the skateboard graphics of people like Jim Phillips and Pushead. With the Think offices down the block from Thrasher Magazine, where his friend Nico Berry was the art director, and Juxtapoz joining the hub, hanging out in SF stoked a sense of artistic

possibilities in Cycle's mind.

In the nearly 10 years since Cycle completed his education and returned to NY, he's continued pushing forward both on walls and in the studio. He frequently teamed up with the man who inspired him—Smith—and put down with TCS, a historic and storied crew. While he's as well-known a graffiti writer as there comes, he's run into the same challenge many graffiti writers encounter: how to parlay your skill into anything resembling an income. "My quest now is to make work and sell it and to do design work and other projects to make a living, not just to be a kind

of cult figure guy. I can do graffiti walking backwards in my sleep with one arm tied behind my back. I've got name recognition, but I don't think people are aware of the gallery stuff I do or what I can do in other ways."

At the same time, the breadth that is a strength in graffiti can be an obstacle in art. "I try to keep that well-rounded thing in mind with my fine art, though sometimes I worry that I'm a bit too schizophrenic with it. I'll work really hard on a painting making it realistic, and then on another making it really cartoony. Cartoony stuff is fresh, I like how people like Ralph Bakshi

are loose and created their own universe. With realistic stuff you have to pay attention to your light source and whether it's reflective or atmospheric light—the technical end of things. And if you want to equate that to graffiti, the realistic stuff is the piecing, where you want to push your technique and creativity, whereas the cartoony stuff is like the throwup, fun and quick. I'm trying to find a way to marry the two, to show I have rendering skills and also remain fun and loose and weird and bug out.

"What I want to do right now, which I've been thinking a lot about lately and has occupied most of my

head time, is trying to marry all the different things that I'm interested in into one style or group of paintings to show that I can render, that I can paint things that are loose and bubbly. I want to find one consistent style where I can flow and work. Graffiti's a competitive thing; get up the most, do the best pieces, even whom you have to fight. You're always approaching things aggressively, and that's still kind of in my mindset—who's out there doing what and what do I have to do to do just as well as them? I feel like I mastered the graffiti thing and now have to set a new set of goals, which is to be commercially successful and

artistically successful in a gallery sense selling paintings. I look at people like Reas and Doze, and those are the people I want to follow up the ladder."

Anyone who has charted graffiti's ascendancy in the past decade knows it now offers more of a career path than ever before. But the trajectory isn't automatic, even for those who have made an undeniable presence in the culture, as Cycle can attest. "I've seen graffiti in the time that I've been painting it go from something that was local with no media to something that has books and jams and walls all over the world. But at

the same time, I know some pretty big-time graffiti writers who have very ordinary jobs, they're the Orkin guy or whatever. And I don't really want that. I've been successful enough at graffiti that people paid attention to what I've done, but I think if I can be successful at graffiti I can set myself a new set of goals moving forward."

For more information about Cycle, contact Cyclewashere.com.