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EVOL: Painting Outside The Box

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The artists of Irvine Contemporary gallery's group show "Street/Studio" produce what the cops like to call "vandalism." The tags and images they insert in public spaces -- "urban interventions," the artists might counter -- are the guerrilla artworks of a tribe whose members are known largely by pseudonym.

But these artists aren't just midnight pranksters. They also show in galleries. Shepard Fairey is a fine example: He began as a street provocateur and became increasingly less provocative as he entered the mainstream art market.

Like Fairey, the seven other artists in this show make both salable and unsalable works. To accommodate their twofold practice, Irvine installed the works inside the gallery and in the alley out back.

Pay close attention to EVOL, the exhibition standout. What we know: He's white, around 30, born in Germany, lives in Berlin. He sometimes collaborates with fellow rabble-rouser PISA73 -- also in the show -- under the nom de graffitist CT'INK. As an artist, he's effective both inside and outside the gallery, mining urban experience and calling ignored landmarks to our attention.

His canvas? In the gallery, it's flattened cardboard boxes. On these he spray-paints the gridlike facades of workaday German apartment buildings. Pierced with big casement windows, these post-World War II residential slabs are slightly oppressive but steadfastly ordinary.



In "Dish," the artist EVOL transforms a cardboard box into a German apartment building, in the group show "Street/Studio" at Irvine Contemporary. (Irvine Contemporary)

The boxes EVOL paints on still bear the marks of their intended use. "Fragile," "Bestellnummer" and "Karton" call out from their faces. Each one shows raised, scarlike lines where it once folded into three dimensions. At Irvine, the artworks are float-mounted inside box frames, underscoring the cardboard's thickness and weight.

Cardboard? What doesn't arrive in cardboard? Think of all the fruit and vegetables, the laundry soap and the table lamps, the clothes and the toothpaste that arrive in a brown corrugated container. Boxes hold the stuff of our lives, yet they're largely ignored.

Onto these overlooked remnants of commerce, EVOL paints the white-framed windows of urban facades -- a particularly German kind of facade, but one most of us will recognize. He leaves areas of cardboard unpainted so that the boxes' deep tan stands in for the building's facade. Using stencils, he paints in layer upon layer of pigment, turning out precise, photoreal pictures that include cast shadows, flower boxes, balconies and, rarely, the murky silhouette of a person behind a window. The effect is clean and airbrushed; there is no trace of a human hand in their making. These pictures seem machined, and they have a Hopperesque loneliness.

EVOL's pictures force us to watch the painted image bump up against cardboard reality. For "Dish," the artist painted a balcony-mounted satellite TV saucer abutting the fat black "up" arrow of its cardboard canvas. Image and object collide. The artist sends our eyes skittering between illusion and surface.

Outside on the street, EVOL works on the overlooked stuff of the urban landscape. At the southwest corner of 14th and P streets NW, his canvas is a five-foot-tall traffic-light control box. Though a sizable object, and a ubiquitous one -- one just like it stands at most major intersections -- it's easily overlooked.

EVOL's subtle intervention enlivens the gray box just enough that the thing returns to our awareness. He stenciled windows on its four sides, transforming it into a nine-story apartment building writ small. The control box has become a street sculpture, not near-invisible street furniture. It took an artist to make us see it.