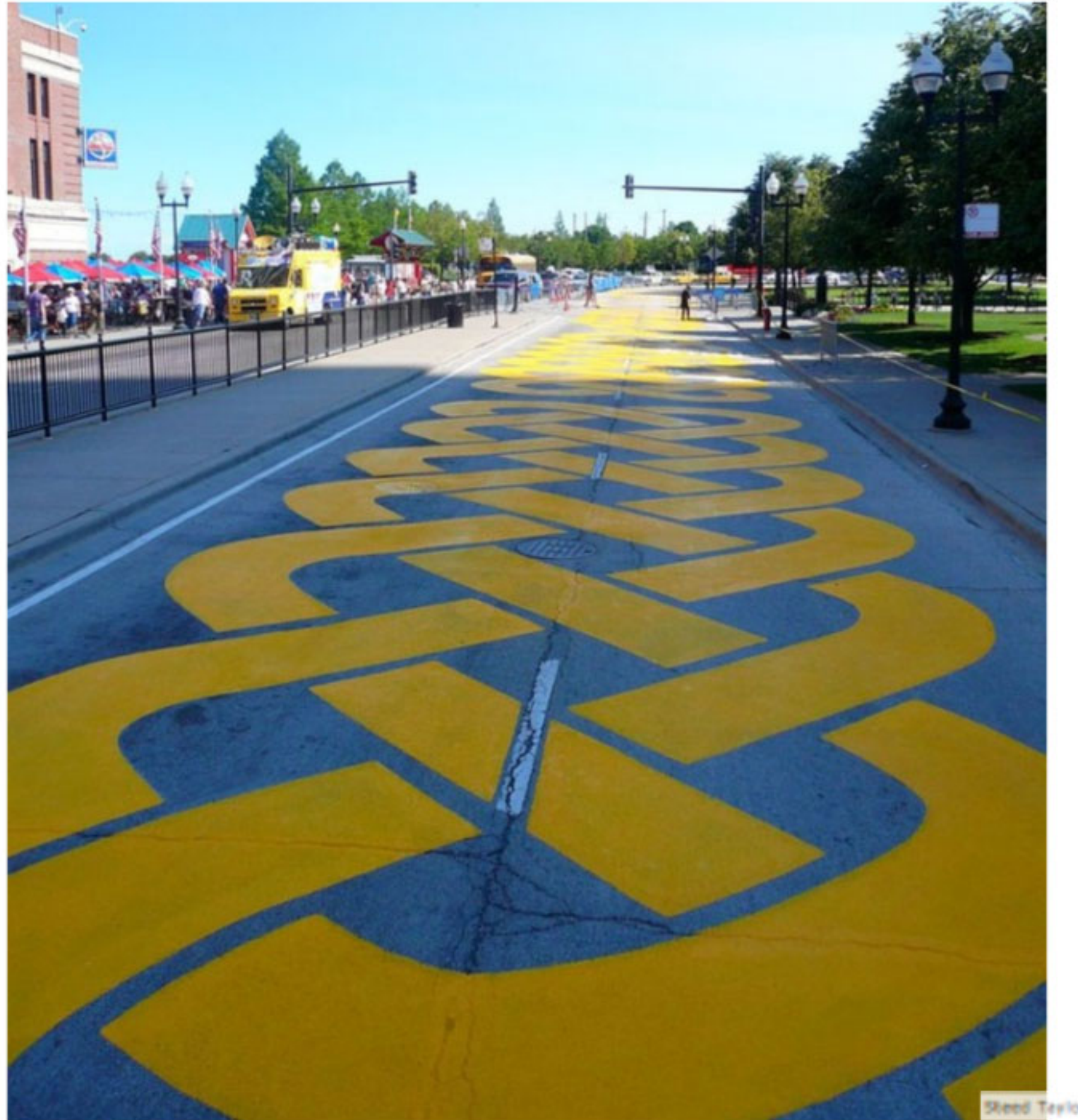


PHOTOS

The World's Biggest Gay Rights 'Tattoo'

JOHN METCALFE AUG 09, 2012 3 COMMENTS



If you've been to Chicago's Navy Pier recently, you've probably noticed it's all tatted up. The asphalt on North Street Drive sports a meandering yellow tattoo that seems to have slipped off of Mike Tyson's face (or more precisely, [Jessica Lange's wrist](#)). What's up with that?

[Steed Taylor](#), that's what's up. The 52-year-old artist visited the Windy City a couple months ago to participate in the group show [BIGArt](#), a celebration of oversized works that featured luminaries like Roy Lichtenstein and Nancy Rubins. A strip of Celtic-style tangles about 650 feet long and 25 feet wide, Taylor's "Galloon" is one of the more pupil-jacking pieces in this exhibition. While it's easy to soak up the road tattoo's surface beauty, its title - [galloon](#) is a woven trim sometimes often used in military uniforms - underscores a more serious, pain-tinged meaning.

Folks who attended the work's commemoration witnessed a secondary artwork that's invisible to today's casual passersby. Working with a small team, Taylor painted onto the street the names of hundreds of openly gay and lesbian service members. Then, in a process he's perfected in similar tattoos around the nation, he covered them up in paint to both finish the design and seal the names down forever. (Well, at least until next spring, when it's probably coming off.)

Taylor laid down his art shortly after Memorial Day as a way of honoring the soldiers who have come out. "I thought what is great with Obama is [what he had to say](#) about the first openly gay soldiers setting the tone for future soldiers," Taylor says from his New York City abode. "And yet he reflected

on the past, about the soldiers who weren't able to come out." The Navy Pier artwork exists to pay tribute to both groups, says Taylor.

Here's a little more of what the artist had to say about "Galloon" and his various other road tats, plus a few photos (interview slightly edited for continuity):

What inspired the Chicago tattoo?

I wanted to bring an idea home that is something of importance to me. I am a gay man, and I once lived in Washington, D.C., where I worked in the defense contracting business. I had a security clearance, and I knew a lot of guys in the service. A really rough thing I was exposed to at the time, is that the [military brass] would ferret out one person – the goal was you didn't want to be dishonorably discharged and have a stain on your record – so they'd catch one person and force them to ferret out other people.

It was just a really sad thing to see. It had nothing to do with the patriotism of hidden gay soldiers: They really believed in what they did, they were highly decorated and believed in this country. I've never really forgotten that.

Could you briefly summarize your career as a road-tattoo artist?

I started doing these in 1997, and have done maybe about 40 and 50 so far. They're all commemorative in nature. Sometimes they're rather serious. In D.C. in 2010, I did "[Daughters and Sons Knot](#)" off of Lafayette Square. The history of D.C. and the country is really steeped in war, and I thought I'd bring that idea to the president. So I put the names of the children of local soldiers who were killed in war on there.

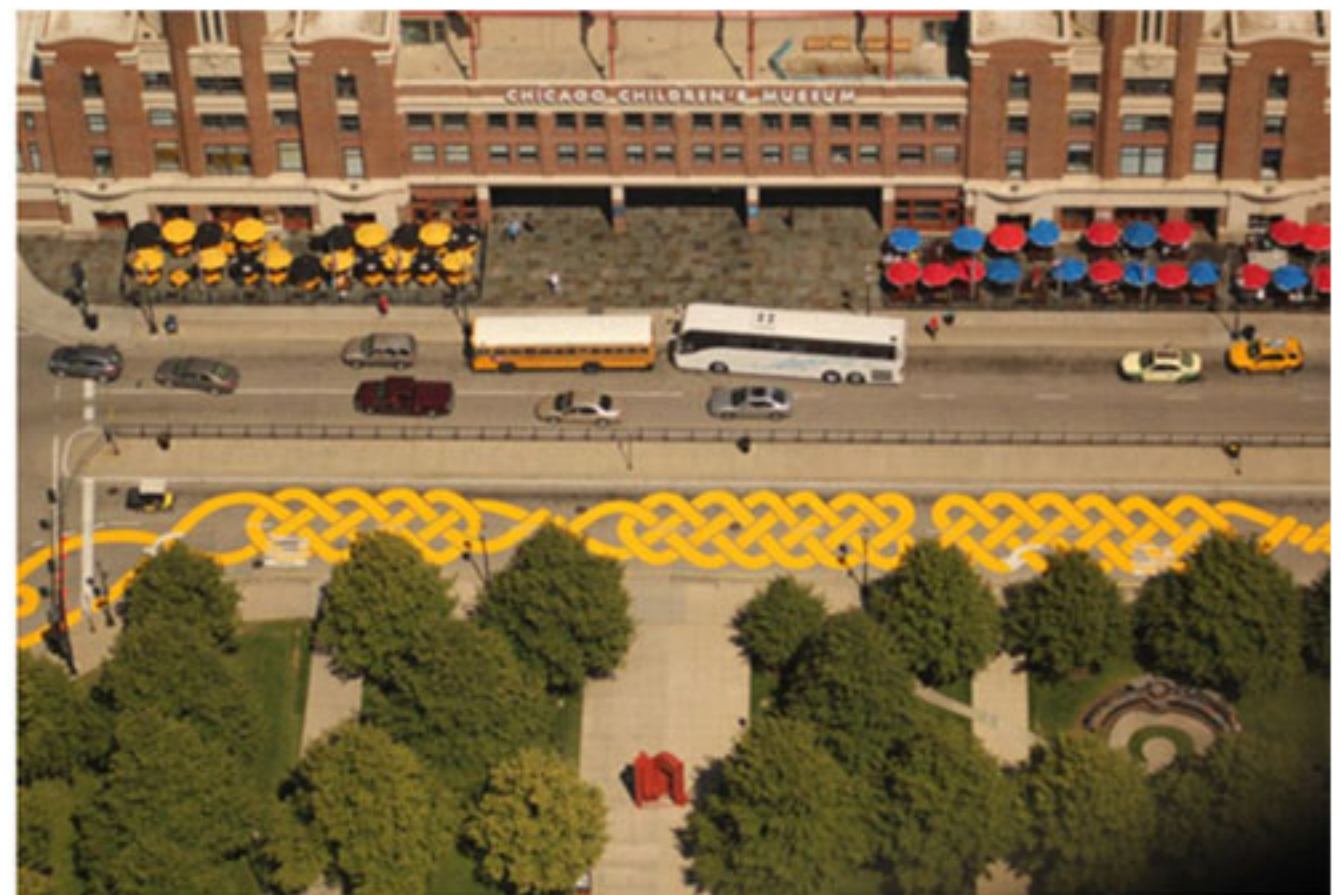
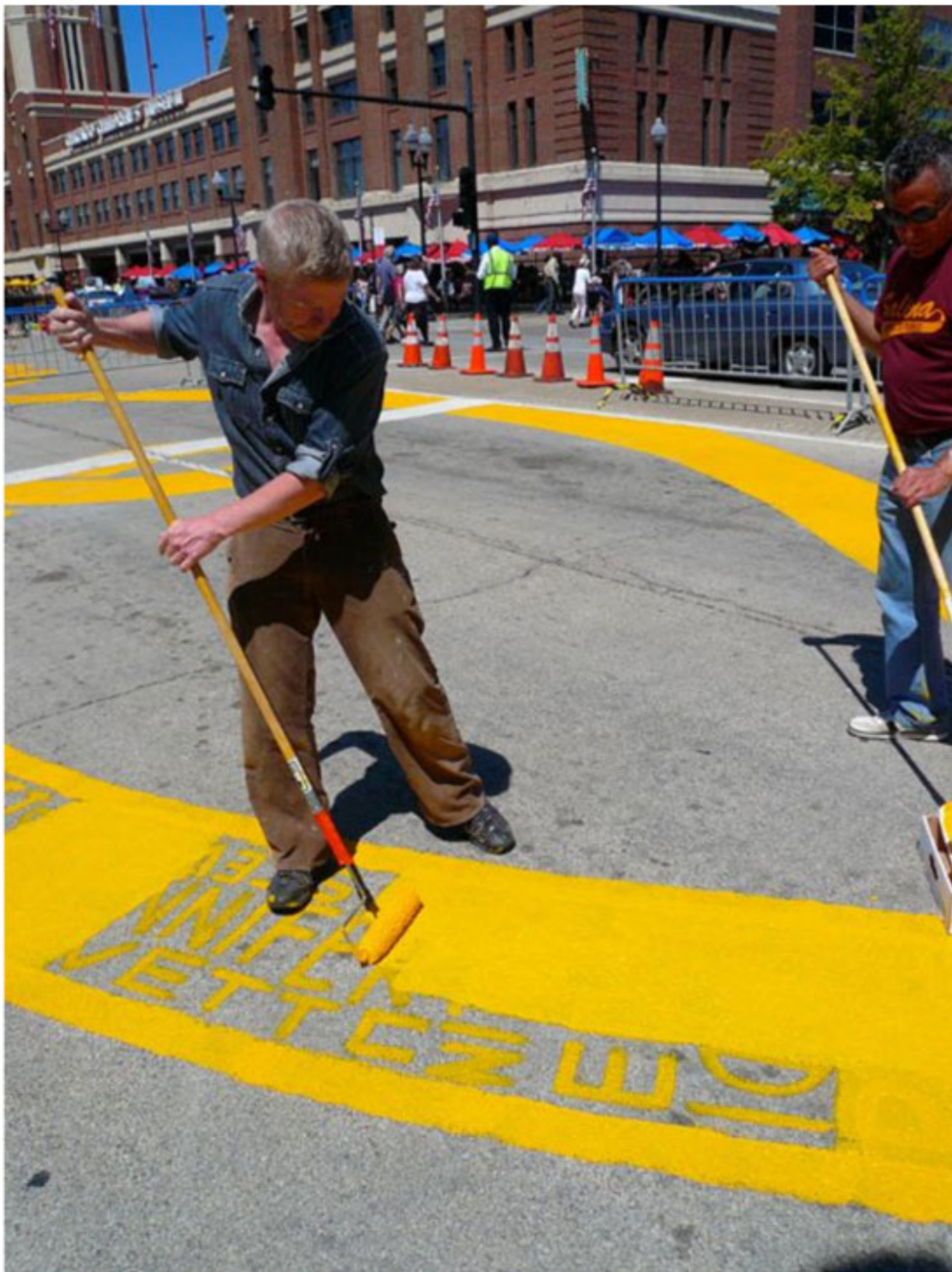
Others are more lighthearted, like at the North Carolina Museum of Art outside of Raleigh, there was a huge greenway for bicycling and running. I did a tattoo called "[Invasive](#)" using design patterns popular with young women [in 18th-century Europe]. The design was used when North Carolina was beginning to be settled and invasive species were being brought into the state. The idea was that a lot of people around Raleigh are not native to the area, aren't local, and it was maybe encouraging the idea of being accepting of local ideas and culture.

How long do these tattoos last?

It depends on locations and how much traffic there is, and also if they salt the roads in winter. In Florida, those kind of stay for a while if they're put down on a warm, nice day. They're still really vivid and nice. The one at Navy Pier, there's already been so much traffic that I've heard it's gotten a little bit of wear and tear.

What are people supposed to get out of your street art?

I think the thing with the road tattoos is that they work in two ways. If you were there at the commemoration [when the names are painted in], it has a special meaning for you. If you weren't, it has to exist as a really fun thing to drive over.



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John Metcalfe is a staff writer at The Atlantic Cities. [All posts >](#)