

## **Beneath the Surface**

*The story behind Montreal's most striking street art*

It was a Technicolor day in Montreal. A shimmering yellow May sun shone from deep blue skies on picnickers in the park sitting on grass so green it looked like it was freshly painted. I rode in a touring convoy of neon pink bikes that passed the park to stop and pose for photos in front of a whimsical wall painting of cartoonish purple aliens.

As our group progressed along Saint Laurent Boulevard, colorful murals popped out at nearly every corner, awaiting their Instagram moment: an eight-story purple Leonard Cohen, a fifty-foot-tall rainbow Jackie Robinson, abstract designs, neon pop art, stylized taggings. It was a fun, vivid, non-stop slideshow of urban renewal, with illustrations provided by Montreal's annual Mural Festival centered in this vibrant district.

Then the eyes stopped me.

You could barely see them, sunken into darkened sockets, obscured by shadow, with wrinkled, weathered lines of skin leading to them like fault lines to a crater. The eyes topped a face sprawled across 200 square meters of wall. This was no glamor portrait, no comic book creature or pop art creation. It was striking enough to make even the most dedicated Instagrammers drop their cameras and think.

The portrait was of a man caught in a moment of passion—whether anger or fear it was unclear. The mouth was wide open, perhaps caught mid-shout, or maybe just in shock. It might have been a protester, but where was his bunched fist, his sign and slogan? It could have been an edgy hip-hop artist with the thin dreadlocks framing the face, but where was his microphone, his engaging song? Instead, the face seemed to recoil inward in pain or worry.

The stylized caption spread across the face and the wall said it all. This was “Personne,” “Nobody” in French.



My guide said the real-life model was a local homeless man, a mentally ill panhandler who had haunted the neighborhood for years, a paranoid schizophrenic, recently deceased. “Personne”. A nobody.

Whether it was because of the mystery, or sympathy, or just plain curiosity, I felt I had to learn more, dig behind the surface of this mural. Who was this man? What was his story, and why was he on this wall?

I researched to discover this nobody had a name. Adrian Edgar. He had been somebody. And the caption said as much, too: “Personne.” The double meaning of the word in French signified that this “nobody” could also be considered “somebody,” depending on how you used the phrase -- or how you looked at the man.

Adrian had literally lived behind his own portrait, in the building upon which the painting was drawn. The Chambreclerc facility is a government-run halfway house for what many consider the human detritus of Montreal—drug abusers, mental patients, the

chronically homeless who have slipped through the cracks of society, turning into nobodies.

## **Becoming Somebody**

Adrian told his story in a film about the mural project, his head shaking and his words stuttering to come out, as if he was fighting through his own walls. He said he was just a regular kid, adopted into a Quebec country home outside of Montreal, with five brothers and sisters. He did okay in school, was sports-minded, even playing American football for his university team.

But after he was injured and couldn't play football any more, Adrian sunk into a downward spiral of drugs and alcohol. Then, just as the random spray of dreadlocks burst haphazardly outward from his head, something went haywire inside it. He disappeared from home and school to wander the streets of Montreal, sometimes doing odd jobs, but mostly panhandling, using the spare change to self-medicate to ease his pained mind. He had become a nobody, sunk beneath the surface life of Montreal.

Adrian's days on the streets turned into weeks, years, then decades, until he found himself at age 52 living at the Chambreclerc facility, except for those times when his demons drove him to return to the back alleys of Montreal.

He wasn't a bad man, and in fact local business owners tell of how Adrian with the help of a fellow Chambreclerc resident would actually protect the boulevard against aggressive panhandlers. He began to be known as the Guardian of the Boulevard, a newly found identity for a lost man. He'd usually set up shop outside of the famous Schwartz's Deli, politely hustling change from tourists. After his wall-sized portrait went up, he proudly placed himself at the base of the building, eagerly waiting to tell anybody passing by "That's me!" He had truly become "somebody" again. But how did he get up there on that wall?

## **Nowhere to Somewhere: “Culture is our new Anchor Business”**

The Saint Laurent business corridor, where Adrian’s mural is located, was a bustling immigrant business community in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But in the 1950s families began moving to the suburbs, businesses started to close, and by the 1970s blighted storefronts lurked along Saint Laurent like the blackened eye sockets of Adrian’s portrait. Through the 1990s, the mural’s home, now the Chambreclerc facility, was abandoned, used as only a squatter’s drug den, where Adrian spent lost years of his life.

Over the past two decades, the Saint Laurent Boulevard has undergone a gradual renaissance, with investments for business, infrastructure, and even graffiti art. Many of the boulevard’s abandoned buildings were covered with spray painted “tags,” a fine line then separating guerilla artists and simple vandals. The cheap, basic housing started to attract artists who took street painting seriously, launching Montreal’s Under Pressure graffiti festival in 1998. In 2012, organizers created the larger Montreal Mural Festival with major works planned to cover multi-story building walls along the corridor.

There was one problem, the Saint Laurent property owners had spent years sandblasting nuisance graffiti off their buildings. “Yes, they had a negative perception of this form of art, which had been practiced for decades,” said festival organizer Andre Bathalon, dryly. They had to be convinced graffiti could be good business.

First only a few property owners allowed the murals. Then they saw the publicity it garnered, and the trickle became a flood of offers for “brick canvas” locations, and business has been booming ever since. According to Mural Festival organizers, commercial occupancy rate along the strip has increased by 50%, with property values increasing 30% since the festival began.

Glenn Castanheira, head of the Saint-Laurent Business Development Corporation said of the murals: “Culture is our new anchor business. It has an identity strong enough not to be duplicated.”

Instagram-minded tourists, normally the bane of disdainful locals, are bringing cash to the corridor as they stop for coffee, beers, and meals on their selfie-stick led journeys to see more than 80 murals now painted in the area. What had been a vacant nowhere of Saint Laurent Boulevard has become a tourist destination, somewhere to see and be seen.

The annual Mural Festival brings over 400,000 attendees to the neighborhood for a week-long celebration of graffiti art and culture with about 20 new works painted each year. The fifty/fifty split between local and international artists helps showcase the local scene while infusing it with the ideas and energy of international artists like Axel Void, who painted Adrien's portrait.

### **The Persistence of "Personne"**

Street artist Alejandro Hugo Dorda Meva, born in Miami to a Haitian mother and Spanish father, was classically trained in art in Spain, graffiti-educated on the streets of Berlin, and now works out of Miami and on the streets around the world. He paints under the pseudonym of Axel Void, because like Adrian, he too could be considered a somebody and a nobody at the same time.

Axel is an in-demand artist for projects around the globe, somebody who is a big name participant in mural festivals like Montreal's. But his mixed race, his transnational upbringing, and nomadic lifestyle has turned him into an outsider, a nobody with a void of a typical nationality, home, or office. He too is out on the streets (albeit profitably).

When he was given the wall to paint as part of the 2015 Montreal Mural festival, Axel said he wanted to "be inspired by the environment of the city," rather than force his own views upon it. So he looked beneath the surface of the building to meet its residents.

As he met tenants of Chambreclerc, Axel was struck by Adrian's story and his powerful and unsettling presence. The gap between Adrian's personality and his status in society

made for a powerful statement, as Axel explained at a festival interview: “In history, the people who had the right to be painted in murals were kings or politicians. Early on we are all confronted with the idea of ‘becoming someone.’ I want to show people who do not fit this ideal.” When this nobody gets super-sized, the contrast is striking. “As soon as the people who see the mural wonder who the person is, the word ‘nobody’ makes no sense.”

I had fallen into Axel’s trap, pulled almost against my will beneath the surface of his painting, following an undeniable urge to turn this nobody into a somebody in my own mind. Adrian has leapt out from his two-dimensional portrait to become a fully formed figure for me, a personality that defines a hidden segment of Montreal, providing a troubling, but very real sense of the past and present of this place.

Unfortunately, Adrian was only able to enjoy his newfound identity and fame a brief while before he passed away, succumbing to decades of hard life on and off the streets.

But his painting and his memory persist. Mural Festival walls often get re-painted from year to year, valuable vertical real estate for artists and organizers. However, Adrian’s portrait is planned to remain indefinitely, transformed from a living testimonial to a moving memorial of a “Personne” who mattered.

As the Saint Laurent corridor reaches new heights of culture and commerce, it’s important not to lose sight of Adrian’s eyes and the ongoing stories of the people who are still literally living behind his painting, and the many others who figuratively live beneath the surface of regular Montreal society.

As one of Chambréclerc’s long-time residents said in the mural’s documentary film, “Yes, sure, we have problems with drugs, with drinking, with homelessness. But we are part of society not the waste of society. We are still human beings.” They are nobody, somebody, “Personne.”