Most of Vhils’ work process is rooted in the concept of dissection – in conducting an almost clinical examination into the intricate relationship that exists between people and the urban environments the majority live in today. People are locked in a process of reciprocal shaping with the surrounding environment, and Vhils likes to look into this relationship and play with the strata that gives shape to the material reality present in this equation. Each body of works and their respective series explore their own concepts related to the process and materials but they all share the core reflection on identity and the multiple forces at work that are shaping, directing and even effacing it in contemporary urban societies.

To date, Vhils has presented his work in some 86 locations in over 30 countries around the world, spanning a variety of projects and contexts. He has created some 220 pieces alone in the scope of his pivotal Scratching the Surface project—in which Vhils uses his groundbreaking bas-relief carving technique to create large-scale compositions on public walls.

In many ways, walls are the most important medium Vhils works with. This special relationship started very early, back when he began painting graffiti. Walls were the gateway to his artistic path, the place where he first tried out this ongoing dialogue with the urban space and its citizens. For Vhils, walls are not static and lifeless, but organic surfaces that absorb what surrounds them—vibrations, events, local character. Their ever-growing layers retain the marks of history, the pulse of a particular place, becoming thus unique in each and every city.
Angle Ambroise Paré / Guy Patin

PRESENTATION OF THE PROJECT

The artist’s Scratching the Surface Project has been developed in various cities around the world since 2007. It consists of an ongoing series of large-scale mural pieces, mostly based on human portraits, carved onto the surfaces of walls in chiselled strokes, with the exposed layers providing the necessary contrast and depth to bring them to life. This seemingly destructive method involves projecting an image onto a wall, tracing it in paint and carving away some of its surface layers with hammer drills, hammers and chisels. Despite its brutalist approach, the wall’s integrity is never compromised.

The fundamental premise behind this project is the act of working with the city itself, incorporating its material reality into the piece while making the artwork a part of the city at the same time. The project is conceptually based on the notion of reciprocal shaping, a process that sees cities and citizens locked in a cycle of mutual influence by which they develop a shared character. It also aims to embellish the urban landscape, rendering it a more humanised environment. It is essentially a reflection on identity in our present-day urban societies. By reclaiming the use of public space, it aims to encourage people to actively participate in the life of their city.

While speaking of the contrast between local and global realities in an increasingly uniform world, the patterns and textures that are often juxtaposed and blended in with the portraits express the growing influence which the profusion of visual stimuli present in the public space of cities – in the form of advertising, graphic and decorative elements, signage systems, etc. –, has on shaping human identity in contemporary urban societies. The pieces also speak of a degree of dissonance caused by this saturation of elements encroaching on the human component. In general, the majority of portraits depict anonymous people. In most cases these are connected somehow with the location, but sometimes might have a different origin, in order to highlight a particular point on our global reality. These depictions of anonymous, regular people also intend to function as a universal representation all of us can identify with, highlighting the poetic condition of existence in face of life’s impermanence, while making visible the invisible that lies beneath the layers of our material culture.
Angle Ambroise Paré / Guy Patin

TECHNICAL DRAWINGS

*The images in this document are for reference only, illustrating the artwork’s technique.*
Angle Ambroise Paré / Guy Patin

PLAN VIEW OF THE ARTWORK IN THE SITE

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Location of the artwork’s placement