Coating Baltimore in a message of love

By Jill Rosen
THE BALTIMORE SUN

Artist Michael Owen has a plan for Baltimore that involves a lot of black paint and a tender little sentiment.

He's brushed its letters onto one wall, then another, and now, with the "L" word drying in a third place along one of the city's busiest thoroughfares, it's safe to say that the Baltimore Love Project has officially launched.

Can you feel it yet? The love?

If you can't, Owen hopes you will, certainly by next year.

That's when he'd like to have painted 20 love murals across town, each broadcasting identical four-letter pleas of passion, emotion and affection.

For now, he'd like you to become Love Project fans on Facebook, subscribe to its Twitter feed and buy the love logo emblazoned on a T-shirt. No average muralist riding high on acrylic fumes and idealism, Owen just wants to give Baltimore love — one way or another.

"It's about inspiring people to action," the 27-year-old MICA graduate says of his artsy, would-be social movement. "In a day, it might make one person think. Maybe they'll pick up flowers when they weren't planning on it. Maybe they'll be kinder in speaking to their partner. It's little things like that that I'm trying to do."

See LOVE, page 14

Anyone not looking for it would have missed the first love mural, which appeared in a secluded, forested and — let's be honest — romantic spot by a burbling creek in Mount Washington. The next rose in bold fashion, splashed onto a tall wall in Carrol Park, alongside the Gwynns Falls Trail.

The most recent, which Owen finished last week, covers the side of a building in Highlandtown, where barbers and storefronts promising fast tax refunds are plentiful but love — one frilly bridal shop aside — not so much.

Ryen Easterling, who works as a Bank of America security guard, watched with interest as Owen and his partner, Scott Burkholder, finished the latest mural on a wall that fronts his bank's parking lot. Though at first he thought Owen and his partner were painting gang signs, he smiled when he realized the message. "Love, yeaah," he said, still smiling as he got off work. "Hopefully people will listen to that and take it into consideration."

Wayne Ching, a retiree who volunteers at the nearby Creative Alliance, thought struggling Eastern Avenue could use a little love. "Art slows people down and maybe if people slow down and stay businesses will come," he theorized. "It's a little thing that might build, piece by piece."

Bringing love to where it's not, or to where folks might have forgotten it, is the goal driving Owen's project.

He wants to paint love in the shadows of violent neighborhoods, on desolate concrete culverts, in the neighborhoods with the renovated row homes and in the poor ones, where true art is hard to find.

The idea came to Owen casually — not as any sort of epiphany, no, as he puts it, "genius moment." He'd sketched "love" in a notebook and when he saw it again later, it spoke to him. He felt it deserved to be big, to be seen — and by as many people as possible. He felt it had power.

As someone who's painted a number of murals — including perhaps the longest one in Baltimore that runs for a colorful quarter of a mile along Eastern Avenue between Highlandtown and Greektown — he immediately knew his canvas had to be walls.

One might wonder what a young man who's not reached his third decade knows about love. But Owen's been around a bit.

He likes to say he's from "everywhere," having lived in Seattle, Cleveland and Florida — and now Baltimore, after coming here to get a degree in illustration at MICA. In the six years since, he's been commissioned for murals, he's designed logos, he's created paintings — some of Baltimore's legends that hang at the city's Convention Center hotel — and he's painted people's homes.

For Owen, with his marketable face, tousled hair and paint-stained skin, the main
life lesson in love surely comes from his marriage of five years to his wife, Shelley, whom he met while he was playing in a band, and his relationship with their 4-year-old son, Harper:

“I find love to be the most powerful force that I’ve ever encountered,” he says. “It changes people. It connects people. It can break people apart.”

It’s important to him that each mural is exactly the same. That way Highlandtown is equal to Mount Washington. And when he someday paints one in Broadway East, it will look just like the one the wealthy Inner Harbor residents might soon see along Key Highway.

Owen’s design uses hands forming the shape of each letter of the word love. Complete, his walls have a whimsical, shadow puppet effect. He says he’s always been drawn to hands — their expressiveness and how they’re seldom still. He thinks they personify the concept of action.

And action, after all, is key to what Owen’s doing.

So far, The Baltimore Love Project has nearly 900 fans on Facebook and about 200 people follow it on Twitter. The partners sold out of their $25 shirts a few times in the short while they’ve been available.

More tedious and slow, though, is getting legal approval to paint. Before doing anything, Owen drives the city, with a map in hand, looking for suitable locations. When he finds one, he and Burkholder must dig through land records to find who’s got claim to any given wall, and then convince them that a giant “love” sign is just what their property lacks.

They also have to charm money from investors. For its duration, the Love Project is Owen and Burkholder’s full-time job and donations not only put paint on their walls, but food on their tables.

When the young men first approached Mirza Yalcin, the Turkish immigrant who owns the Highlandtown building, he wanted nothing to do with it. To him it sounded like graffiti, which, frankly, he had more than enough trouble with. “It’s too much headache and hassle,” he says in his thick accent.

Yalcin had already told Owen no when he mentioned the project to his son. The boy, who loves art and happens to be attending New York University and majoring in urban design, told his father he was wrong. “He said you gotta do it,” Yalcin said. “I couldn’t say no to him. He’s much more sophisticated than I am.”

And now that it’s on his wall, Yalcin is pleased. Pleased and a little perplexed. “I don’t know what the love stands for. I don’t really know,” he says. “I look at it as art instead of the meaning. I look at it as art. As art, it is nice.”

Joe Schultz, a developer who’s renovated about 100 homes in southeast Baltimore, wrote Owen and Burkholder the $5,000 check to support the Highlandtown leg of the project. The Love Project came knocking on Schultz’s door at the right time.

At 51, he’d just had his first child and the businessman was walking on air, overcome with the very emotion the young men were talking about and eager to start changing the world to make it better for his baby boy.

“‘You see the word. We need it. We all need it,” Schultz says. “Who doesn’t want to be a part of something good? Goodness is very contagious.”

In Mount Washington, the love mural is tucked into a tranquil pocket of nature that most of Baltimore doesn’t know exists, a tiny preserve called the Mount Washington Arboretum. To get to the mural, one must walk along a bark-strewn path, past magical-sounding plants with names like cinnamon fern, bald cypress and wild geranium. The “love” is painted on the opposite side of the Western Run Stream. The arboretum set up a bench built for two so, perhaps, romantics might sit there and gaze at the message framed by wisteria.

Mike Sherlock, a pediatrician who worked years ago to save the pocket of arboretum land, says he’s heard only good things about the mural, which has become a favorite spot for besotted teenagers.

“Hopefully, it doesn’t give them ideas but I’m sure they’re already thinking about love,” he says laughing and adding that he’s heard rumor of at least one marriage proposal at the spot.

Sherlock thinks the sign’s giddy voodoo might also have spread to the wildlife — he’s noticed a pair of cliff swallows nesting near the art, as if they, too, have gotten the message.

jill.rosen@baltoresun.com
http://twitter.com/Jilrosen
As part of the Baltimore Love Project, Michael Owen has finished his third mural, at Eastern Avenue and Conkling Street. "It's about inspiring people to action," he says.

Michael Owen painted his first Love Project mural along a creek in the Mount Washington Arboretum.