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NY CULTURE

Art to Lead Kids to Water

Art exhibition and first lady looked to encourage kids and adults to drink more water

By LUCY COHEN BLATTER

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Michelle Obama signing a mural by Trey Speegle *Associated Press*



Jean Pierre Nicholas Hunt/*PatrickMcMullan*

A party held on Thursday night at the New Museum celebrated a collaboration between a for-profit bottled-water company, a nonprofit dedicated to childhood wellness and a group of street artists. They all came together, rather creatively, in an art exhibition, entitled "WAT-AAH!'s Taking Back the Streets" (and a bonus visit from first lady [Michelle Obama](#)).

Here's the deal: WAT-AAH!, a New York-based bottled-water company targeted to kids and tweens, has joined forces with the Partnership for a Healthier America, whose Drink Up initiative encourages kids and adults to drink more water—just what the exhibit promotes.



Rose Cameron *Nicholas Hunt/PatrickMcMullan*

Partygoers got a sneak peek of the work on Thursday at the New Museum, but the exhibit opens to the public at WallPlay on the Lower East Side this weekend. It will then travel across the country starting at the beginning of March.

The exhibit features murals and water-bottle label designs created by well-known street artists like Shepard Fairey and Kenny Scharf. The works incorporate the Drink Up message and sometimes the WAT-AAH! logo.



Jake Fragua, Li Chi Ban, Renice Lee, Tony Concep
Nicholas Hunt/PatrickMcMullan

While the nonprofit and for-profit worlds linked up rather seamlessly through the art, the launch party on Thursday night wasn't all smooth sailing. Guests waited on long lines to enter, rooms were at times too packed, and at certain points throughout the evening, the elevator rides from the cocktail hour to the rooftop exhibition were hectic.

But most of the uber-hip crowd didn't seem to mind one bit. They are laid-back artists after all.

Tony Concep, a street artist who is known for incorporating pop-culture icons into his work, was among a select few artists who accompanied Mrs. Obama on a tour of the exhibition on Thursday morning, during the first part of the two-part celebration.



Trey Speegle *Nicholas Hunt/PatrickMcMullan*

Aside from her commitment to childhood health and wellness, the first lady "is an art enthusiast," he told us.

Mrs. Obama, honorary chairwoman of the Partnership for a Healthier America, commended

the artists on their efforts. She signed a Drink Up mural created by artist Trey Speegle and chatted with a group of students from the Little Red School House in Downtown Manhattan, who helped Mr. Speegle with his piece and completed a design of their own.

Before she hugged each of the students, Mrs. Obama offered a message that summed up the exhibition, and the WAT-AAH! brand: "Water is the easiest choice to make. And we're going to make it cool."

That was the very idea that prompted Rose Cameron to create WAT-AAH! back in 2008. Ms. Cameron, who on Thursday night wore a Prada dress spray-painted by Mr. Scharf on Thursday night, said her own sons' disinterest in drinking water was what motivated her.

"They liked soda and juice and thought water was



Damien Mitchell work in the 'WAT-AAH!'s Taking Back the Streets' show. *J. Grassi/Patrick McMullan*

boring. I wanted to change that," she said.

Understanding that appealing to kids required lively branding, Ms. Cameron created labels with neon colors and a cartoon of a boy screaming, with a text bubble that says "Drink WATAAH!" (riffs on that logo show up in many of the works on exhibition).

But for kids, of course, looks aren't everything—taste matters too. Tyler, a 10-year-old brand ambassador for the company who lives in the Bronx, told us he likes how WAT-AAH!'s bottles all include one word that describes why they're healthy. "Some say 'Body,' some say 'Brain,' and one says 'PH+.' I'm not sure what that means, but I know it tastes good," he said.

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