

**STREET SMART ART: MEET ALEX FACE,  
THE UNDERGROUND ARTIST WHO'S GOING  
ABOVE GROUND**

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If you've ever been fortunate enough to be stuck in traffic while you're on one of Bangkok's major roads, chances are you've seen stylized tags sprayed on walls, payphone booths, post boxes - just about every surface - featuring the likes of BNE, Shock and HISO. At some spots, you can find more in the form of character murals. It seems you can't escape these illicit sprayings collectively known as graffiti.

The country is also seeing more and more graffiti competitions, the most recent one which was held in June by Siam Center and Isuzu to find a team to represent Thailand at Wall Lords Asia 2012. Awareness of modern graffiti as a form of street art with roots in hip hop culture is definitely spraying and spreading.

But have you ever thought of the people behind it? Do you think of them as kids with spray cans on the loose or artists in their own right? How many of them graduate from leaving their mark on the wall to leaving a real mark in the art scene? Has graffiti graduated as a legitimate form of art in the eyes of Thai society?

The 31-year-old Patcharapol Tangruen, or Alex Face, is perhaps an example to follow. After making a name for himself in the local graffiti community, he is now setting himself to go above ground, getting his art to a wider audience with his second indoor solo exhibition, "The Underground Adventure 2012", which is currently on display at Artery Post-Modern Gallery (Through Aug 3, Mon-Sat 10am-8pm, Sun by appointment, 2/2 Silom Soi 19, 02-635-3133, 087-112-7774).

Guru talks with Alex about his journey to becoming a graffiti artist, taking art to people and vice versa, and what the deal is with his signature frowning baby motif.

**SPRAY IT, DON'T SAY (YOU DO) IT**

Spurred on by foreign graffiti magazines and the work of American artists Barry McGee and Dave Kinsey, Alex first set out to graffiti with some friends who shared the same interest "for fun" and "because of his impetuous hands".

Alex recalls, "I find graffiti a breath of fresh air compared to the serious painting I do in my study." He was a first-year student at King Mongkut Institute of Technology Ladkrabang where he studied print-making and fine arts. He started out with spraying his tag Alex Face but got bored of it after a while and moved on to spraying a stylized version of his own profile.

“Back then I created works at different places so people would take notice but didn’t think about having a message through my works yet,” he admits.

Later he started creating art with stories to tell, playing off topical issues. He sprayed a two-faced head which is red on one side and yellow on the other. During the H1N1 flu pandemic, he sprayed a guy wearing a surgical mask.

Given graffiti is sprayed on a wall or a surface in a public place without a nod from the property owner, you may ask why anyone would put themselves in a situation that invites problems. And the problems can come from police, hostile land owners, dekwants and hot weather.

Alex says, “It’s because it’s out there on the street. You can look at it as a play between the work and different aspects of the space such as the texture of buildings, its age, cracks, and so on. I do graffiti because I know people will get to see it. I bring art to them. When they walk by or are stuck in traffic they can look at graffiti and form opinions about it. Besides, being able to do a big work with a limited amount of time gives me such joy.”

The unpredictability and adventure that comes with doing graffiti is a big draw for Alex. He keeps in mind spaces such as abandoned buildings or walls and other potential canvases while going about his daily life. Then he secretly meets up with other graffiti artists to unleash creativity at a site. “The process makes me feel like a kid again.”

## **UNDERGROUND ADVENTURE**

And like with any adventure, he has met many interesting characters along the way. “Some people have come to get rid of me and my friends from their property. Some have bought us food to show support, “ he adds, “Once, just as I was about to finish a work a guy arrived on a motorcycle to tell me that the owner of the property was angry. I met his boss, showed him a sketch and explained that I wasn’t spraying anything offensive. The boss happily allowed me to finish. Some haven’t wanted to listen and have simply kicked us out of their place. Fortunately, most of the time I have met kind people.”

His impromptu audiences are usually made up of ordinary passersby or people who live on the street. Alex says, “The notion that ordinary folks don’t have any appreciation for art doesn’t fly in my experience. They look at my work and form thoughts which is exactly what people should be doing with art. I think people of all level have interest in art. An auntie told me she wouldn’t walk past my graffiti at night because it’s too scary for her. Random people’s responses are simple but I find them endearing and sincere.”

He doesn’t always operate unannounced, sometimes obtaining permission from property owners beforehand. “It’s a Thai way to do graffiti. You politely ask for permission and if they say ‘No’ you move on. But if they say ‘Yes’ you can spend more time on your work because you aren’t afraid of getting caught.”

Given he was doing graffiti anonymously; you may wonder how he was discovered. “I

really don't know [laughs]. My guess was that it was by word of mouth. Friends who know me in real life know what I do and my name was passed from one friend to another."

His underground works led to jobs such as painting murals for hotels, restaurants and bars. "It's very important to do a good job when you're hired. If you're good, people will pass your name on and more jobs will come." Later in his career as a painter for hire and graffiti artist, Alex set up a Facebook page which resulted in some job offers. Occasionally, he is invited to give talks about graffiti at schools and unis.

While he agrees that interest in graffiti is growing with emerging new artists, more graffiti events, and people arranging via Facebook to meet and do graffiti, he says the art form hasn't been fully embraced by Thai society yet.

"You have to understand that people can be very sensitive about their property. Some view graffiti as an intrusion and vandalism. I think it's up to the artists too. Good artists should treat a space with respect by creating something to complement it and put thought into their works. People would then appreciate it more as street art. If you do something quick and meaningless, it could be viewed as defacement."

### **WTF: WHY THE FACE?**

We met Alex on the eve of the opening of "The Adventure Underground 2012" and we couldn't help but notice a frowning baby in almost every painting on display. The subject in question is his two-year-and-eight-month-old daughter Mardi (translate to "coming with good things") who became Alex's biggest muse even before she was born.

In his first solo exhibition, "Growth", shown at ArtGorillas ArtGallery in Siam Square in 2009, his theme was growth and life as he was waiting for her arrival. He recalls, "I sprayed a tree, river and all that stuff. People couldn't exist without such things."

After her birth, he sprayed Mardi's face in his graffiti work many times before his second solo show. But why the frown? "It was how her face looked when she had just come out of her mother [he imitates the face]. She had this face like she was thinking about something. She made me think about her future and the future of children in general. I mean what kind of future we have for them as natural resources are being depleted, babies are being dumped and so on."

These paintings aren't just a variation of Mardi in cute costumes. "I try to offer messages in my paintings. I think you can guess from the context in which these babies are in."

For example, a yellow baby with the Shell logo on its head is holding the world with a straw stuck in it. Another baby in a bear costume is eating from a toxic waste barrel. Alex filled a three-storey building with paintings, sculptures, painted skateboards and more.

## **ABOVE-GROUND ADVENTURE**

When asked what the difference between creating work underground and for a gallery is, he says, “Both methods are challenging. Aspects that I like about working on the street are freedom, examining the space and solving problems. In a gallery setting, you want to create works with your best effort and present them in the best way so people can come to see them. But you have to be happy with your works first and the rest is up to people. I think both settings share the same principle. They involve people exchanging thoughts about my work.”

About memorable feedback he has received from an audience, he recalls, “I went to a garbage dump near a railway and I sprayed Mardi’s face on a wall. An older woman asked me what I was spraying. I told her, ‘My daughter’. She asked ‘Why did you do that to your own daughter?’ I said I want to portray how kids being abandoned by their parents would feel. She went quiet for a while before she said, ‘I don’t know what to say. I’m going now.’”

It seems Alex’s works, either sprayed in the street or hung in a gallery, have something special about them. His second show sold out on the opening night.

Here’s hoping that more anonymous kids with spray cans can grow up to become appreciated artists in the future.

## **GAUGING GRAFFITI**

Some interesting reactions to the controversial art form

Graffiti mustn’t become accepted [by society], otherwise it would enter the mainstream. Graffiti needs to maintain its rebellious spirit and be questioned. It’s rebellious because it involves secretly spraying on walls that aren’t the artists’.”

Prathan Theerathada, managing editor of Art4D magazine (in an interview with Thai PBS).

I’m not against it. Legally speaking, it’s vandalism but it can be considered a form of art because it’s like a tattoo, but done on buildings. It’s an acquired taste so people may take some time to get used to it.”

Roselyn Debhavalya, TV host and news anchor

Jarunee Suwannratsamee, who wrote a thesis on graffiti, said Thailand had its own graffiti before hip hop culture was introduced to the country. She equated scribbles by vocational students boasting about their institutes or marking their territory in public spaces as Thai graffiti since it’s a form of self-expression for those who do it without caring if they would be approved by society or not.