

**BANGKOK STREET ARTIST ALEX FACE ON
MAKING FRIENDS (AND ENEMIES) THROUGH
GRAFFITI**

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Patcharapol Tangruen, 32, aka Alex Face, is one of Bangkok's most prominent street artists. His iconic character Mardi, a kid in a bunny outfit, has gone on show in London, Korea and at the ongoing Thai-Taiwan arts exhibition in Taipei. BK chats with this free spirit about his early run-ins with disgruntled land owners and forging friendships through graffiti.

Graffiti is fast, direct and amazing. It's completely different from what I studied at university, fine arts. There, creating work involved a long, drawn-out process. But with graffiti, I can make something great in just 30 minutes!

I couldn't stop after doing my first graffiti. I would paint everywhere I went and it got me in trouble.

I had to move out from my apartment to get away from an angry, high-ranking soldier. I got very drunk and graffitied his home. The next morning, he declared he would hunt me down. Luckily, I was not around whenever he came looking for me.

Then I painted an abandoned wall in my neighborhood, and it turned out the plot belonged to that same angry man, too! Later, I found the stuff in my rental room had been moved and some stuff was missing without any sign of a break-in. That was it! I moved out to live with some friends in town.

I used to paint only random things that I thought were cool, or just my name, or my face. That's why I used Alex Face as my alias.

Good graffiti connects with people. Spray paint is expensive so every baht must give something back to the people. I started to pick up on local problems and play with the environment around me to express my ideas.

People can be touched by street art. One time an aunty came up and asked me why I was painting a picture of a kid at a garbage dump. I told her I wanted to remind people that so many kids have been dumped like this, too. She was so moved that she just murmured her agreement and walked away sobbing.

You reach points in your life when you don't know what to do next. I was stunned when my girlfriend told me she was pregnant. I sat crying in the dark, my mind totally blank. I was

happy to be having a kid but I was just this poor artist who couldn't guarantee anything for them.

Taking a journey can give you strength. My girlfriend told me to travel up to Chiang Mai to meet friends there. It really helped. I regained my focus and realized I would have to work harder to make everything better for us.

My Mardi the Bunny character was actually inspired by my daughter. When she was just born, her face looked so grumpy, like she was thinking really hard or worrying about her future in this troubled world. I sketched her face and started creating Mardi, a little child who wears a ragged rabbit suit. Rabbits also symbolize being a victim in this world.

Painting on the street lets me learn more about life. People always come up to talk about what I am doing and how they relate to each place, especially in the slums.

Outsiders have this perception that the slum is a scary place, but it's just like elsewhere, with families taking care of their kids or parents.

Everyone erects their own thin wall whenever they meet a stranger. But once you knock it down, you will find just how easily we can get to know each other.

Art can help calm people, including those who create it. I'm always frustrated every time I have to face selfish people in the city. But graffiti helps me relax as I can release my feelings and regain my optimism through the nice people I meet.

I love that Bangkok is full of random things: signs, people, cars or drain holes. It's not a perfect city. It's like people's lives. It might look like an ugly town to some but it's a wonderland for me. If you can survive in it, you will have so much fun.

You can measure the freedom index of a city by its graffiti. A city with limited graffiti means there's strict control on people's actions. In Bangkok you can find street art and graffiti all over the place. Artists just ask permission from owners directly, then spray!

You don't need to be rich to be generous. One time I was riding my bicycle to an area really far away in the Suanpueng district of Ratchaburi. I got stranded from the other cyclists and I was completely exhausted with no water left. I just threw my bike on the ground.

A man saw me, gave me water and even said I could stay the night at his place for free. He said "My house is really big. I built it myself. You can stay here as long as you want. I just live with my daughter."

In fact, his house was a really, really small shack. It just seemed really big to him because he has a big heart. And more than that, he only had one arm—he built the house with one arm. Meeting him was one of the greatest experiences. I'll never forget it.

I wish I could travel more. I would love to go to the Philippines to the areas that Typhoon Haiyan destroyed. I would like to do some graffiti there. It's the least I could do try to lift

their spirits. I'd need a big budget, though, and I just don't have that much money.

Miracles always happen when you're on a journey. It makes me feel so lucky to have been born a human.