

**A LOOK AT “ALIVE” BY ALEX FACE—
STREET ART ENTERS THE GALLERY AS
HIGH ART: WHAT MONET AND A GIRL IN A
RABBIT COSTUME SAY ABOUT BANGKOK.**

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Often, when street art goes into galleries it feels overly commercial. While street art represents a democratization of art when showcased in public environments for audiences who might not visit traditional art spaces, its message, often relating to issues including income disparity and political protest, can feel hollow when splashed across canvases and printed onto hats and handbags. That's what makes the current show at BANGKOK CITYCITY Gallery, running until February 19th, feel so refreshing. "Alive" by Alex Face, the Bangkok street artist whose signature character Mardi has graced walls from Tokyo to London to Berlin, enters the gallery not as a marketable commodity but as a serious artistic exhibition.

The space feels like a museum, with its skylights, tall white walls, and attendant perched on a stool in the corner. The exhibition begins with the artist's worktable, covered in oils and cans of brushes. It lies beneath two impressionist landscapes that were painted during his university career, a label explaining that these signify his long-held interest in the impressionist method of expression and are the reason he's revisiting the style 16 years later. If the quality of his work isn't reminder enough, one isn't surprised to learn that Alex Face studied fine and applied arts before establishing himself as a graffiti artist. His work on display at BANGKOK CITYCITY is more than street art in a gallery, it's fine art in an exhibition, and in keeping with the spirit and the context of his graffiti, both are enjoyed without visible price lists.

As Mardi floats across the surface of a pond in the style of Monet's famous Water Lilies series, the water painted in muddy browns, light pastels, and brilliant blues, the familiar stillness of the landscape draws viewers in and contrasts against the urban environment that Mardi hails from. Mardi is a little girl with three eyes in a tattered rabbit costume who comes from the streets of Bangkok. Her scruffy outfit, with a nipple, belly, or bottom always exposed, contrasts with the round stomach of a young child --her expression skeptical and the cause of her dark mood unknown. Her disillusioned appearance is a reflection of Alex Face's own social concerns, relating to urbanity and the underprivileged who are growing up in the shadow of rapid development.

The lily pond feels like a dream world, a refuge inhabited by the mind of a troubled child. The surface of the water is composed of loose brushstrokes while Mardi is painted much more delicately: each hair of fur carefully drawn, her skin blended, the smooth surface of her body surrounded by the textured waters. Even as she submerges herself, various body parts obscured by the surface, with knees or stomach or eyes poking out, she

doesn't seem to fit --a visitor in a foreign landscape, an observer not entirely at home, her face never completely comfortable.

Her third eye, wary and watchful, always stares in the opposite direction of the other two, looking into an unseen spiritual world. Each eye is a different color, red, blue, or brown, and throughout the exhibition her eyes alternate colors. And yet, even as her eyes shift, the pond's colors change, and she switches her position across the various works of the exhibition, her demeanor remains the same. Mardi's dissatisfaction is consistent, as in *Breathe (in the air)* when she holds a flower in her mouth that sadly droops to create a cartoonish frown. The title piece, *Alive*, an enormous fiberglass sculpture of a dejected Mardi lying on a lily pad, floats across the surface of the floor, staying above the water despite her dubious expression. In another sculpture, *The Gardener*, Mardi stands on a lily pad while offering up a flower with a grotesque set of teeth at its center, the beautiful outer shell disguising a sharp bite, while her middle finger is subversively raised behind her back.

At first look, these works are cute: a small child, a beautiful landscape. Pastels and bunny ears are typically considered charming, innocent, and not indicative of underlying issues. But the calm surface of the pond is deceiving, as is Mardi's face, her quiet concern seemingly sleepy at first glance. It's easy not to notice when, in *Sleep*, Mardi lays in a sinking boat with only her third eye alert, or when in *Awake* Mardi sits motionless in the boat as it slowly fills with water, her expression worried but not urgent. Without a reaction, the rising waters don't draw much attention.

By presenting these issues subtly in his work, Alex Face encourages the importance of critically looking at the scenes before us, both in his artwork and on the streets of Bangkok. His social criticisms aim to create consciousness in audiences so that they can recognize and understand inequalities and issues when faced with them, rather than understanding them only at face value, as if everything is somehow OK as long as Mardi is not screaming or crying. The viewer's own concerns are projected onto Mardi; when looking at the troubled face of a child in a tattered animal costume, the peaceful world of lily ponds fades away into a much harsher reality. The mental exercise of trying to understand the worried expression of a stranger --and the myriad of potential answers-- reflects a continuing need for self-improvement and development. Rather than tackle these issues with sensationalist gore, Alex Face's work feels quiet and gentle, harnessing an emotional reaction that emerges only when you sit with the paintings.

Borrowing Monet's compositions, Alex Face incorporates impressionist influences that contrast against his own work, creating stylistic differences between Mardi and her environment, a contrast that tugs at underlying issues that lurk beneath the surface of the water. Such blatant visual references to other art can easily go too far, feel cheap, and seem like grabs to establish oneself as part of an artistic tradition. Alex Face sidesteps this by keeping Mardi as she has always been, playing off of the character's interaction with the beautiful environment within the frame and the gallery space itself. In updating the beloved *Water Lilies*, impressionist staples meant to evoke and capture the moment in which they were created, Alex Face produces a series of work that captures the current political and social moment as he sees it, blending high art and street art to produce a unique exhibition that encourages serious critical thought.