

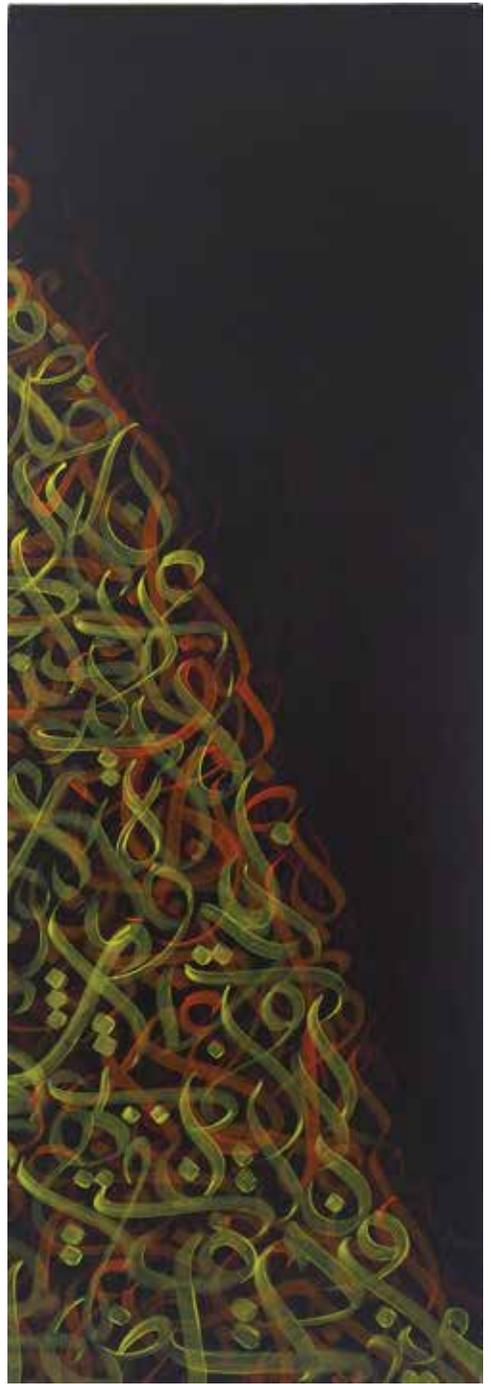


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You should know him by now

Works by Sanki King





Twin flames (diptych), mixed media on canvas, 91 x 30 cm (each), 2016



Karachi and most urban areas of Pakistan are no stranger to images and writing on its walls. From political commentary to secret messages and the whole range of homemade and professional advertising. Occasionally, artists too have moved outside the gallery to public spaces – Sadequain’s murals at a more formal level and artists like Asim Butt, Naiza Khan, Munawar Ali and the *Rang dey Karachi!* team in a more interventionist way. However, graffiti artists in the hip-hop or Banksy style are rare.

Abdullah Ahmed Khan, aka Sanki King has devoted his art career exclusively to graffiti. He positions himself in the community of international graffiti artists. His art history is the history of Banksy, Zephyr and Blek le Rat rather than Picasso and Matisse.

Graffiti was first shown in galleries in 1979 in Galleria Medusa, Rome - the work of Lee and Fab 5 Freddy. Internet became a perfect medium to share underground graffiti. With the advent of Banksy in 2004, graffiti has become almost mainstream, inspiring many across the globe.

As graffiti acquired the status of an art form, the stylistic classifications and critical evaluations have also developed: “Tagging” or simple signatures; the more complex signatures called “Throw Ups”; stenciling popularized by Blek le Rat and Banksy; stickers; “Pieces” complex often commissioned wall art; largescale “Blockbusters” or “Heavens” worked in hard-to-reach locations, and “Wildstyle”.

“Wildstyle” is a particular style of complex layered writing developed by street gangs of New York’s Bronx in 1975 and popularized



by artists like Tracy 168, Stay High 149 and later by Zephyr. An extremely stylized form of writing, with spikes, arrows and layering that make it difficult to decode, “Wildstyle” is considered to be one of the most complex forms of graffiti.

Sanki has explored the whole range of graffiti from simple bubble letters to smileys and stickers. The work exhibited in "You should know him by now" explores the complexity of “Wildstyle” – a tough challenge to which Sanki has risen with great courage.

‘Twin Flames’ and ‘Belief’ have a mesmerizing layered movement while the more static mandala like ‘Awakening’ has an almost ominous presence.

‘Gaze’ and ‘Awakening’ use alphabet as timeless hieroglyphs but in other works a conscious use of Urdu script suggest an experimentation to localize the language of graffiti.

From wall to bounded scale has given the works an intensity that would be interesting to see moving back onto Sanki’s larger scale wall pieces.

Durriya Kazi



From left to right:

Alnitak, Alnilam, Mintaka - Orion series (triptych)
mixed media on canvas, 91 x 61 cm (each), 2016



Wall art or graffiti as an expression of socio-political expression is a very recent phenomenon in Pakistan. Usually the term graffiti is associated with wall chalking, which is mostly political sloganeering or advertising at the most love messages. Hardly, one sees witty socio-politico-cultural statements on the walls of Pakistan. In fact, whenever such efforts were made they did not have the desired impact, ignored or laughed at but never became conversation starters or raised questions. The first significant campaign was initiated by the late artist Asim Butt when he painted ejection signs during the last years of General Musharraf.

Lately, the genre seems to have picked up in Pakistan. And I wouldn't be untrue if we say that Abdullah, popularly known as Sanki, has played a significant role in getting the genre its due status. Today, we see various expressions from truck art to pop culture adorning the walls of Karachi.

At the first glance this lanky artist seems like any other shy youngster. But his resolve to rise as one of the finest graffiti artists in the world defies his appearance. In his short but persistent stint in the Pakistani art scene, he has certainly become a name to reckon with when it comes to wall art. If anything that rivals his talent is his perseverance.

The sheer size and scale of genre is what excites him. Not that he cannot express his thoughts on a small canvas; he can and he does, as he is a fine draftsman too. However, he explodes on bigger scale and seems possessed the way he paints on walls. It's an experience unto itself to watch him paint on walls.

Good news is that Sanki is a voracious reader. From history to Urdu poetry, religious literature, current affairs, he not only reads all but also hunts shops of Urdu Bazar, Karachi and other bookstores to satiate his appetite for text. Imagine once all these texts appear on the public walls in the form of images laced with meaningful words. That is the day I am waiting for. And it doesn't seem far looking at the velocity, Sanki is covering milestones.





Rage, mixed media on canvas, 91 x 122 cm, 2016



Belief, mixed media on canvas, 122 x 91 cm, 2016



You should know him by now

A few decades ago, when graffiti emerged on the streets of New York City, no one would have ever imagined the influence this new art form would have on many generations worldwide. This movement resulted in powerful art pieces created by self-taught artists, who were voicing the struggles, hopes, and dreams of entire generations. Due to its controversial nature, many graffiti artists are hiding behind a nickname. Anonymous fame is fed by the creativity of each distinct style, the originality of color combinations, and the over-all statement inspired by their chosen nickname; the art is known but not the artist.

The universality of graffiti expression pushed artists all around the world to appropriate it and adapt it to their own culture. Different political, economical and social contexts shaped this art form.

In Pakistan, Sanki King is creating a wave and leading a movement by approaching graffiti in a singular and honest way. Following the paths



of the first graffiti artists, he is giving it an interesting twist by opening up, letting feelings and emotions flow throughout his artworks. His art voices his struggle but also the fears of those around him. His art speaks loud but procures a certain tranquility. Sanki as a 'King' knows he is leading, but he also looks back to make sure everyone is on the path with him. He knows his responsibility towards his work and towards others. Graffiti is new in Pakistan but take its inspiration from Ancient Arts. Sanki King is proud of his heritage. He is transparent about who he is and what he feels. The art is known and now the artist is too.

You should know him by now.



Awakening, mixed media on canvas, 61 x 91 cm, 2016



Sanki King: The Graffiti Artist Mastermind

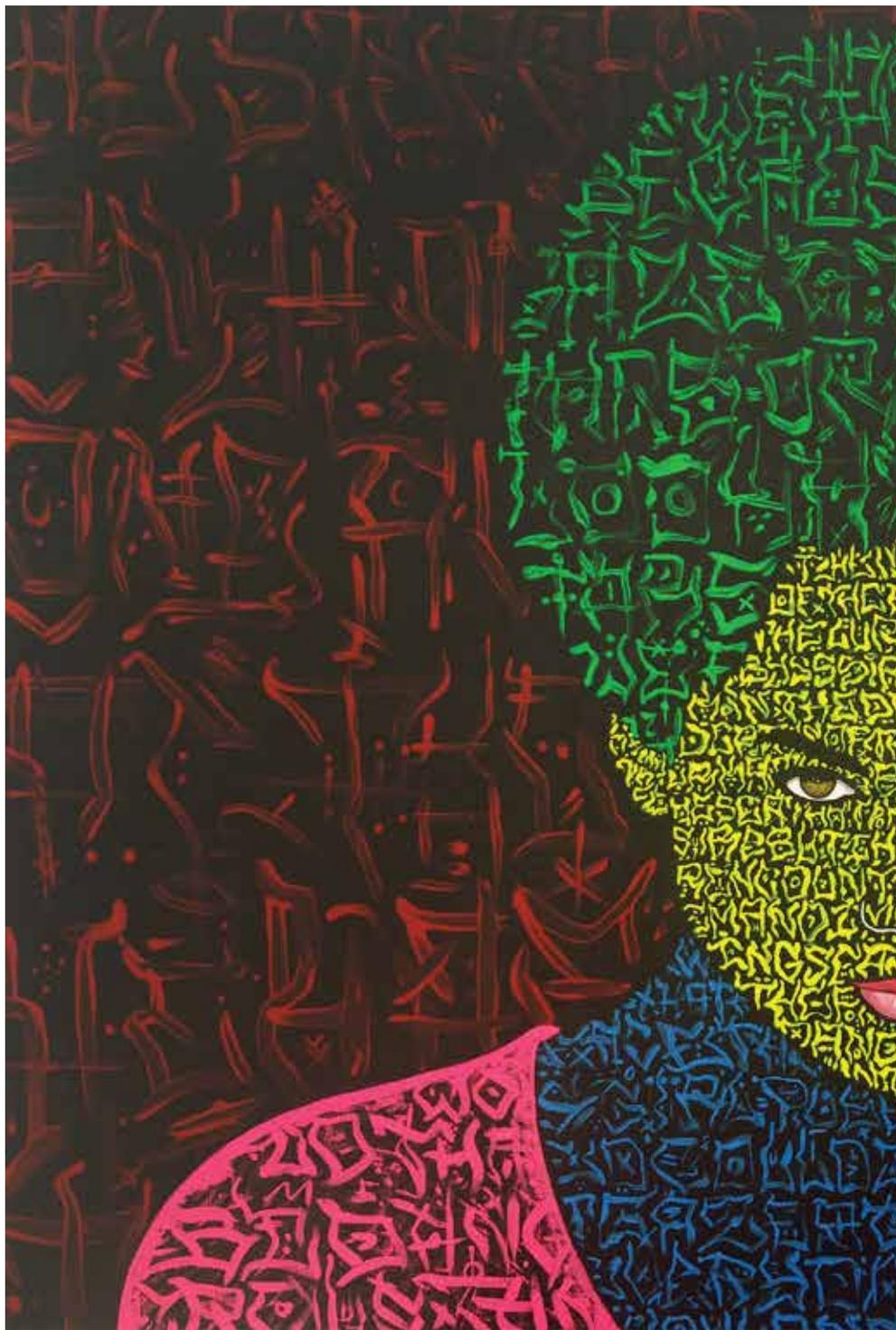
I always wanted to know how Pakistan's pioneering graffiti artist came to be known as Sanki (or Sanki King). This term is loosely thought to mean anything from mad to crazy, but the artist dispels the notion by saying it equates to 'deep thinker'. During my recent conversation with him, Abdullah Ahmed Khan explained that when he frequented gaming zones as a teenager and excelled at Counter-Strike, a comment by a friend calling him 'Sanki' stuck in his mind, and henceforth became his identity. And my conversation with him did indeed prove that, akin to his name, he thinks deeply about life.

In Pakistan, one can see wall-chalking, scribbles and marks on walls either in the form of advertisements, political slogans, names of underground groups or the general public voicing their opinions. However, while those expressions may appear unsightly or overtly commercial, what is remarkable is how Sanki takes them to another level, where he combines them with artistic ability that enables them to be deemed art. And his art speaks. Bold, loud colours with rough scribbles shape out messages of peace and hope. A wall exudes patriotism as it reads out "I Love Pakistan" (a project that took him 4-5 days to complete amidst intense traffic), while a hummingbird painted on large scale extracts nectar from a flower on another wall. Sanki has also painted a bus with the message 'Love Karachi' written on it.





What is interesting is how interdisciplinary Sanki is. While being foremost a graffiti/street artist, he has (unknowingly) been interested and proficient in hip-hop and all that it entails since the age of ten: rap, beat-boxing, parkour, b-boying, DJing and much more. After being noticed and photographed by Tapu Javeri while freerunning in a park in Karachi in 2008, Sanki and his friends performed at an event for Style 360. After that, there was no looking back. But how did he get into art in the first place? Completely untrained, Sanki did art in his free time to kill boredom. Since his mother passed away when he was only eight, art was what kept him busy and became his friend. It was drawings that interested him in biology class and occupied him during school breaks. And while family has been very supportive, his experience and knowledge came from his own research as well as practising on his friends' walls. Social media played its part by enabling him to create various pages of interest and connecting with other graffiti enthusiasts across Pakistan, and of course, the world.



Gaze, mixed media on canvas, 61 x 91 cm, 2016





It is this very social media that has helped Sanki showcase his talents worldwide and receive global recognition. In 2012, he designed a mix-tape CD cover for an artist in California. In exchange, instead of money, Sanki asked the artist to send him two books: one on the well-known street artist Shepard Fairey, and the other by Nicolas Ganz, called *Graffiti World: Street Art from Five Continents*. After an email exchange with Ganz where he shared his work, Sanki received an unexpected reply; he was invited to feature his work in Ganz's latest book, *Street Messages*. This book, now published, contains the work of 80-85 artists from all over the world, including the famed, albeit notorious, Banksy.

Sanki is not short of achievements. He has been invited to judge national graffiti competitions, lecture on graffiti art, and has recently introduced his work to a fashion brand, *Arsalan Iqbal*. When asked how it happened, Sanki mentioned that he had been hired to paint the brand's shutter in Zamzama, Karachi in 2012. For his new collection, *Arsalan Iqbal* was inspired by graffiti art, and what better artist to work with in Pakistan than Sanki? He thus contacted Sanki two years later and collaborated with him for his new collection, where Sanki provided the designs that the designer morphed into trendy denim outfits. Quoting this as his most ambitious project, which took close to a year, Sanki stated that he also painted the entire rooftop where the collection was photographed

for a prominent magazine. What's more, the collection was showcased at the PFDC (Pakistan Fashion Design Council) last year. Sanki is also Pakistan's foremost sneaker artist and sticker artist, and his clever designs and witty taglines make his work very popular. He has also been interviewed by one of the biggest sneaker conventions in the world, *Sneakerness*.

Sanki's work shifts from commercial projects to his own artistic expression. He has had a personal home-based studio since early 2012. However, commission-based projects currently take up most of his time, leaving very little for his own leisurely art practise. One might wonder, though, is graffiti merely a means to an end for Sanki, or is he saying something particular with his work? During our conversation, Sanki mentioned that what is important to him is for people to understand his journey; while our lives are influenced by what others think of us, he emphasises working hard, being fearless, persevering and emerging as a victor from hard times. He says: "You do not need expensive things or an art education to be an artist; art is inside you".

Shanzay Subzwari

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I hate you, mixed media on canvas, 91 x 122 cm, 2016



Introvert, mixed media on canvas, 61 x 91 cm, 2016

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

What if we could see thoughts, emotions, feelings, ideas & beliefs?

In the world of graffiti writing, the ones who are considered the best, are the ones who have mastered the most basic form of graffiti writing, Tagging. Tagging is a single-line lettering technique most commonly used for signing. A graffiti writer's tag is stylized according to his/her personal style and it's also known as Hand-style. I was born in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and moved to Karachi as a kid, so I grew up with 3 different languages; Urdu, English & Arabic. In this series, I have pushed the boundaries of my Tagging skills and through these languages, I have shown how different thoughts, feelings etc. would look like if you could see them as words.

Every single work is painted with several layers, and the more you look into any of the works, the more layers you will find. This is indicative towards the saying that "Do not judge a book by its cover", that everyone & everything has more than the eye meets and if we want to understand ourselves and/or the others, we must let go of all judgement and (try to) go deeper into ourselves/others, in order to understand who we/they really are, instead of believing what we "think" we/they are, in order to grow intellectually and spiritually.

All works are painted on black because, darkness is the absence of light, and the parts of our soul that we give our conscious attention or our 'light' to, only those parts become visible, everything else is covered in a mysterious darkness; our existence is a mystery, and our mind and soul are a mystery.

I have also displayed some of my private archives since childhood and a brief timeline of my work since I started working as a professional artist, 5 years ago, to show the drastic changes that my work has been through over the years from innocent doodles, to dark & detailed drawings, to wide-scale murals and so on, as a result of intense mental & emotional trauma, chronic insomnia & finally, a spiritual awakening that split me wide open.

You don't know what you are made of until you are broken, and now I am in a life-long struggle to develop a better understanding of my journey as a human being, as an artist, the world around me, and always looking for new ideas & techniques to effectively express myself, and give life to my imagination through art.

BIOGRAPHY

"Abdullah Ahmed Khan professionally known as Sanki or Sanki King is a Pakistani graffiti artist, street artist and a performing artist. Sanki is the pioneer of graffiti, calligraffiti, sneaker art, sticker art and b-boying in Pakistan and also one of the pioneers of parkour in Pakistan." - Wikipedia

King is the founder of one of the top b-boying crews in Pakistan, *Code Unknown Crew*; founded in 2008 in Karachi. And an active member of *BMK - Beyond Mankind Krew*; founded 1991, Queens, NYC and *Ex-Vandals - Experienced Vandals*; founded 1979, Brooklyn, NYC. *Ex-Vandals* is one of the first graffiti crews in the world.

King is a self-taught artist who started drawing & painting aggressively after his mother passed away a month before his 9th birthday. He got introduced to hip-hop as an 11 year-old kid and dived head first into the culture; started practicing Rap, then Bboying, DJing, Beat Boxing & finally, Graffiti. Growing up practicing graffiti and other elements of hip-hop, along with Parkour, was very tough for him as nobody really understood what he was doing and he faced intense criticism & discouragement from the society for expressing himself this way, for being different & unique, for being himself. But despite all attempts to dim his light, King did not stop and kept working on his unique abilities and digging deeper in the graffiti culture. In 2014 by becoming the first & only Pakistani artist in the world to be featured in a global street art book next to Banksy, eL Seed, Ben Eine & a long list of street art legends, and by being the only Pakistani artist to represent two of the most well-respected graffiti crews in the world, has proven that a real artist cannot be pushed down or made to quit.

Apart from graffiti writing, King is a master stenciler & custom painter, has been a judge for national graffiti competitions and motivational speaker for top youth conferences in Pakistan, has had his custom-painted clothes & sneakers modeled in top Pakistani fashion weeks & published in top fashion magazines in Pakistan. King is a major inspiration to youngsters and artists within Pakistan and around the world and has murals painted in his tribute by graffiti writers in the UK, USA & occupied Kashmir. Due to his hyper active personality and a never-ending thirst to experience new things, King also delved into boxing, floor gymnastics, skating, freestyle bmxing, cyber gaming and several other sports & activities.

Looking at the long list of milestones and achievements, and looking at the maturity of Sanki's work, one would expect a man atleast in his late 30s, but one is shocked when they find out that the artist is in his mid 20s, and this shows how dedicated, consistent & true-to-his-craft, Sanki King is.

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition

You should know him by now

Works by Sanki King



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