

# DUBAI STREET ART



# DESPITE DEBATE ABOUT ITS DIRECTION AND DEFINITION, DUBAI'S STREET ART SCENE IS GROWING, BOLSTERED BY GOVERNMENT BACKING FOR PUBLIC ART, HIGH-PROFILE SUPPORTERS, RESIDENCIES FROM WORLD-RENOWNED ARTISTS AND A SMALL BUT COMMITTED COMMUNITY OF LOCAL TALENT

Words by **Danna Lorch**

**D**ubai has made a name for itself in the art world in the last decade. It has a respected annual art fair, Art Dubai, which, having celebrated its eighth year in March, is widely regarded as one of the highlights of the Middle East's art calendar. The city is the home of auction house Christie's Middle East, and its rapidly developing gallery scene, driven by hubs in Dubai International Financial Centre and Alserkal Avenue, a collection of galleries and creative spaces in what is still an industrial area of the city, is vibrant year-round.

But, despite its growing reputation as an 'art city', Dubai is not where you would expect to find an emerging street art scene. Local patrons, gallery directors and



**MELAN HOLY** / Dubai-based Filipino street artist Melan Choly created this artwork at Tiger Translate, a sponsored event in Dubai

artists disagree over definitions, as will become evident in a moment, but mention street art to your average man or woman on the street and they will associate the movement with run down urban centres and New York's graffiti explosion in the 1970s and 1980s, with artists who painted subways, benches and other urban surfaces and were documented in Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant's 1983 documentary *Style Wars*, street-inspired gallery shows by commercial artists Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, or, more recently, Shepard Fairey, creator of Barack Obama's 2008 *Hope* presidential campaign poster, and the enigmatic British stencil artist Banksy. Those who have spent time in the Middle East might also refer to Beirut, a city that is painted top to bottom in bright murals by internationally admired artists such as Yazan. The notion of street art doesn't fit with the common – and on the whole accurate – perception of Dubai as a sparkling modern metropolis.

There's no Banksy of Dubai – yet. But most residents of the city will recognise the work of Arcadia Blank – if not its creator's tag – the only anonymous graffiti writer in town, who is known for scrawling satirical or poetic phrases such as "Alone we're empty. Together we are the universe" distinguishable by a triangle or u-shaped symbol.

Arcadia Blank is an underground artist, yet he has commercial representation and signed, numbered photographs of the tags are currently offered online by Dubai-based art consultancy Capsule Arts. Unsurprisingly, he could not be contacted for an interview, but Capsule Arts co-founder and director Rachael Brown says that Arcadia Blank's work embodies the essence of street art.



## FREZ IS ONE OF THE MOST RESPECTED GRAFFITI WRITERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

“Over the years he has developed a narrative of a long-term Dubai resident reclaiming abandoned or temporary construction spaces,” she says. “He uses these transient environments as platforms for freedom of speech through which to question the city’s changing landscape.”

Arcadia Blank was not the first artist to create public art in Dubai, though. Graffiti writer FREZ, a man known by his fellow artists and supporters of the Dubai street art scene but who shies away from publicity, has called Dubai home for more than 12 years, and has been creating public art in the city since he arrived. He

practised his art alone in Dubai for years, before a bare wall on the side of a mall parking lot brought him together with a crew of other likeminded people who would go on to form a community – a community that has endured and is still growing.

“FREZ is one of the most respected graffiti writers in the Middle East,” says his friend and fellow Dubai-based graffiti writer Sya. “Every true writer knows who he is. He is very modest in what he does and what he represents. He has a unique style that no one else dares replicate.”

Most major cities have what is called a wall of fame – a public space where street artists come to paint, compete, and connect with other artists. Dubai Festival City, not far from Dubai International Airport, played host to such a place from 2007 to 2011. The wall was first used as a canvas for international artists to work on at an event sponsored by Montana, a popular spray paint brand. Afterwards, officials allowed the wall to stay up, and creatives and skaters would get together there every weekend.

Sya bristles when he is referred to as a street artist, saying that he is just a writer who uses an aerosol can to write his name over and over. He is passionate about making a distinction between street artists and graffiti artists, defining the former as artists who might use stencils or freehand but whose work features many colours, shapes and imagery, and the latter as “all about the letters”. The essence of what Sya does is self-promotion, which can be thought of as the street art alternative to snapping a selfie, but it takes far more skill than learning how to use an iPhone and upload an image to Instagram. When he was growing up in a rough London suburb, a favourite teacher praised him on his report card as a “superb young artist” and the acronym SYA was born, instantly becoming the tag he used to write on aban-

**NUMERO UNO** / The graffiti wall in Sya And Bow's back garden tagged by graffiti writer Frez, the first writer to create art in public in Dubai

andoned warehouse walls beside the train tracks from the age of 16. Having his name read all over the city made him feel valued in a desolate place where respect was everything. It's not a simple tag, there is high-level artistic practice involved, and Sya spends days working on each sketch, honing his technique in a wrinkled sketchbook before he puts a new piece up on a wall, the production of which can take hours.

Right at the height of its popularity in 2012, the wall of fame at Dubai Festival City was taken down and painted over a dull mushroom brown. Sya, who had met his future wife, Steffi Bow – a fellow artist whose work always features a bow in homage to the area of East London she comes from, Bow, and her late grandmother, who loved ribbons – at the wall returned to propose in front of it, but neither the couple or their fellow artists had a place to publicly paint any longer.

Resourcefully, the newlyweds relocated to Jumeirah Village Triangle, a large neighbourhood of 2,000 villas and townhouses beside one of the city's major highways, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed Road, where Sya attached wooden panels to the garden's perimeter fence to create a 20-metre wall. The couple regularly host parties and painting sessions, and say that any serious artist is welcome to visit and make use of the wall, with prior notice, of course. The wall currently features work by Dubai artists, including FREZ, Sya and Bow, but international artists also drop in when they're in town, and nothing is sacred – the art adorning the wall changes on an almost weekly basis.

Sya's dream is for Dubai to have a public wall where he and his fellow artists can paint, so that people can see the work – to be able to create street art where it belongs, on the streets. This dream is yet to come true, but the government is fully behind public art, and members of the royal family are

actively supporting the fledgling Dubai street art scene.

In a recent declaration, HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, launched *Dubai Speaks To You*, a project set to link property developers with UAE artists to transform the city into a gigantic, living canvas, beginning with the Metro stations, parks and other public spaces.

This move follows more than eight years of successful initiatives by Dubai Culture & Arts Authority, a government department tasked with leading the emirate's advancement as a significant driver of culture and the arts in the region. Projects have included street art billboards, pub-

**TEAM WORK** / Graffiti artist Steffi Bow tags the wall in the garden of the Dubai villa she shares with husband, graffiti writer Sya



lic art festivals and a scheme that involved commissioning artists to brighten up traffic signals.

A few years after the wall of fame in Dubai Festival City was born, in 2009 Sheikha Wafa Hasher Al Maktoum, a patron of the arts, designer and street artist in her own right, launched a monthly art evening, Sketch, at her Alserkal Avenue gallery, FN Designs, which developed into something else entirely.

“Live art was a new thing at that time,” she recalls. “At Sketch any artist could turn up and illustrate a single piece of A4 paper, then either swap or sell [it] for a small amount of money at the end [of the evening]. [But] I got bored with the original format and in 2012 put some panels and spray cans outside in the alleyway and the artists spontaneously completed a mural.”

It was from these initial, informal partnerships that FN Designs formed a diverse community of nine artists who collaborated, in 2013, to paint Al Ydar, a 140-metre urban art wall on Jumeirah Beach Road, which was specially commissioned by HH Sheikha Manal bint Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, president of Dubai Women Establishment. The wall is said to symbolise Dubai’s heart and soul in the past and present, but such a prominent public artwork, in an affluent beachside neighbour-

## THIS DREAM IS YET TO COME TRUE, BUT THE GOVERNMENT IS FULLY BEHIND PUBLIC ART

hood, was also a sign of the future – evidence that the government was fully behind public art.

The street art scene in Dubai operates above ground and under the approval of the authorities, and planned works on buildings or murals painted on wood panels are beginning to pop up on blank walls and at events all over town, thanks largely to the support of art galleries and institutions such as Tashkeel, FN Designs, Capsule Arts and non-profit initiatives such as the Al Quoz Beautification Project, the organisation that sponsored open air gallery event Street Night Art in January. But corporate collaborations, though frowned upon by some artists, are also helping to make street art more visible.

Melan Choly is a Filipino street artist from Manila who was one of the founding members of Pilipinas Street Plan, a collective credited with bringing murals and gallery shows to the Philippines’ capital. He was also one of the community of artists, which also included FREZ, Sya, Bow, and a handful of others who met at the wall of fame in Dubai Festival City. For a time after the wall was painted over, Melan Choly struggled to find anywhere to paint.

“For a while there I was sharing a place with a couple other guys and I used to have to paint beside my bed or on the cramped balcony,” he recalls.

But, luckily, corporate brands began to see the draw of inviting a street artist to create live at product launches or events, and Melan Choly started to receive commissions from the likes of Nissan and L’Oreal, companies that recognised and appreciated his unique ability to create memorable characters out of letters. One of Melan Choly’s regular gigs involves painting live on a snow-covered slope at Ski Dubai.

He doesn’t feel that by being paid to incorporate elements of a for-profit identity into his work he is selling out – far from it. In fact, he looks forward to the events for the connections he makes with the street art community and the everyday residents of Dubai.

“If I do a painting for a gallery show it can take two months to finish, and when I exhibit normal people won’t feel comfortable coming to see it,” he says. “More people appreciate your art when it’s on the street.”

**PUBLIC ART** / Al Ydar, the urban art wall commissioned by HH Sheikha Manal bint Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum (bottom left); a wall painted by renowned street artist and Tashkeel resident eL Seed at Dubai’s Zayed University (left)

According to eL Seed, even though he is a street artist, the sculpture isn’t street art. In fact, his definition of street art is quite specific.

“There are a lot of misconceptions about street art,” he says. “If it’s in collaboration with a brand, I’m sorry, but it’s not street art. Painting on a wood board in the street is not street art. If it’s in a gallery it is street art inspired but it’s not street art.”

Tashkeel is directed by HH Sheikha Lateefa bint Maktoum, whose wide-reaching vision is responsible for establishing the organisation in the largely emirati neighbourhood of Nad Al Sheba, as a non-profit studio space, artist incubator and exhibition space. Although Tashkeel concentrates on fine art, the past two residents, Ruben Sanchez and eL Seed, have been street artists, an attempt to reach out to the local youth.

“We are trying to bring art into educational curriculums through our programming,” says Tashkeel strategy and partnership development manager Anabelle de Gersigny. “If you’re a child working on a mural, there is an appealing immediacy to the medium of street art. If you’re part of a group, then making a mural teaches you to work in a team while thinking about what role you can add. There is creativity inherent in that learning process.”

Self-taught Barcelona artist Ruben Sanchez, who is also based at Tashkeel, says that the residency was an opportunity that he simply couldn’t refuse.

“The conditions and opportunities to create are amazing here [in Dubai],” he says.

Sanchez believes that street art should be for the community and for this reason says, “I wouldn’t get paid for a wall in the street.” Sanchez is credited with “getting up” Dubai’s



A healthy art scene is naturally accompanied by debate and a culture of critique, and Dubai’s street art movement is strengthened by vigorous disagreement, mainly over defining labels. French-Tunisian artist eL Seed is a former business consultant turned world-famous street artist, who is known for his unique “calligrafitti” style – a technique that blends Arabic calligraphy with graffiti – and his work has appeared on walls in cities around the world, including Doha, Paris, Jeddah, Tunis and, most recently, Dubai. Check out his collaboration with fellow Tashkeel resident Ruben Sanchez on the exterior wall of café, library and community space The Archive in Safa Park. eL Seed is in the middle of a year-long residency at independent art institution Tashkeel, and he’s happy to talk semantics as we haul a new experimental laser-cut sculpture up a narrow spiral staircase, dropping pieces along the way, much to his horror.





**GLOBAL TALENT** / International stars and Tashkeel residents Ruben Sanchez (left) and eL Seed (above)

first permanent street art mural – a reinterpretation of the Spanish legend The Knights Of The Fish, which presents a local man on a half-bicycle-half-camel ride, reaching high into a tree to pick the perfect apple. It is a call to fight the sedentary way of life that is all too common in the luxurious city. In addition to his solo show, *The B-Side*, which ran at Tashkeel in 2013, he is also known for the Cubism-inspired mural he painted in an alleyway in the Al Fahidi Historical Neighborhood as part of *Sikka*, an annual fair that showcases local artists under the direction of Dubai Culture & Arts Authority.

Since arriving in Dubai, Sanchez, who is also a well-known skater, has partnered with Tashkeel to facilitate a number of graffiti and skating workshops for local youth. As a teenager he used to get a rush from tagging without permission, but his message now is about teamwork and repurposing found materials (during our interview his studio was filled with camel bones and telephone pole remnants he'd collected on a recent trip to the desert).

eL Seed is celebrated for a recent collaboration with luxury brand Louis Vuitton, in which he decorated a scarf with a calligraphic interpretation of an Arabic poem about tolerance by the late Palestinian poet Taha Muhammad Ali, while Ruben Sanchez partnered with Capsule Arts to paint a mural for Salero Tapas & Bodega, a Spanish restaurant in the Kempinski Hotel. The Tashkeel residents aren't against artists trying to pay their bills by working with brands – although they do refuse to paint live at private sector events and say that they aren't performers – but are insistent that these types of commissions should never be thought of as examples of street art.

Given the fact that street art and graffiti are by nature impermanent and can be tagged over (the ultimate insult from one artist to another), painted over, knocked down, or washed away by rain at any time, it may be trivial to focus on the issue of panels versus a wall. It is also possible that panels will one day be referred to by art historians as a distinguishing factor in identifying Dubai's unique take on street art.

Humaid Mansour is an emerging Emirati artist who first painted live at Street Night Art, a 2014 festival held in Al Quoz that unexpectedly drew thousands of performance-hungry visitors. The event, which was organised by a non-profit group, The Al Quoz Beautification Project, helped put Mansour on the map artistically, and he has strong feelings about its impact, and about Dubai's version of street art.

"I think that one event sparked real dialogue around the topic of street art – something that we were seriously lacking," he says. "Since then, there have been many more events that promote the idea of performance art, and while it may not be 'street art' as it's known in the rest of the world, I think that's the beauty of art – adapting to it's surroundings."

But the latest development in the story of Dubai's street art culture means that local artists will no longer have to rely on one-off events to draw attention to their work. This summer, Thomas Perreaux Forest and Stephane Vallici opened the Street Art Gallery in Dubai's Jumeirah neighbourhood, and during Ramadan the pair curated the region's first ever "calligraphic" exhibition. A celebration of the unique medium, which blends Arabic and Chinese calligraphy with urban graffiti, the exhibition featured work by local artists eL Seed, Sya, Bow and Melan Choly, alongside pieces by New York writer Cope2 and Arabic calligrapher Wissam Shawkat. The fact that street art is now formally a part of the city's burgeoning gallery scene further cement the notion that the form is gaining acceptance in the fine art market. Street art is here to stay.