

**Early '80s**

Josh Franklin watches the trains.

He takes the train to school; the independence of travel, par for the course for a New York City kid. Waiting for the subway with the masses, he'd see the indecipherable calligraphy on the cars' exterior: the drips, the wildstyles that are thick in lines, bright in hues and crazy in form; there's an energy emanating from the art.

Most people subscribed that the letterings were the handiwork by vandals. It is an anonymous affair but Franklin sees it as advertising. Personal branding. These were tags, handstyles that point to the identity of the writer. An OG of New York's graffiti scene, Skeme, says that "graffiti culture was a secret among writers, and writers knew each other's work". It is a secret language hidden in plain sight.

Like a passing meteoroid caught in a planet's pull, Franklin is inevitably drawn towards the clandestine graffiti scene. It wasn't so much as escapism as it was in the way you would join a sporting club. Franklin inquired about this covert fraternity. He was inducted into the lifestyle, running with people like ZEPHYR, Duster and Futura ("I knew Lenny from being a New Yorker. Same neighbourhoods, same galleries, same cool. I'm a lot younger but we remain friends since the mid-'80s.") Franklin describes himself as the 'baby of the bunch', learning at the feet of the masters.

There's a wistfulness in his account. Back then, the graffiti crowd was a close-knit group. Knowledge from the older generation was easily dispensed to the neophytes. Now the world is a different place, where it's every person for him or herself. Franklin can pinpoint the moment of that shift: when the graffiti scene was commodified. "Before it became commercialised, passion drove us," Franklin explains. "Nobody paid us to go paint subway cars. Nobody paid you to risk dying or arrest when you're spray painting. As graffiti started getting celebrated, people realised that they can do what we do."

**8 December 2019**

It is the final day of Culture Cartel, a three-day convention dedicated to street culture and the like. Held at the Singapore F1 Pit Building,

hypebeasts, bedecked in their trendiest threads, peacock about with an air of nonchalance and an unspoken need to be noticed.

Yet in the crowd, Franklin stands out. He is recognisable in his signature cap and t-shirt that drapes his stocky frame; a similar ensemble that he wore back when he was 18. Despite the resting glower, the man opens himself up to meet with fans. He loves the interaction, is humbled by it even. To be appreciated for his work is one of Franklin's highs. Sipping his drink, Franklin nods to me as I approach and we make our way to a quiet corner next to a G-Shock booth.

Decades of being in the scene have left Franklin as somewhat of a hoarder. There are things that he bought and the things that he had made. It had gotten to a point where he couldn't keep paying for storage, so he gave most of it away. "I still have a lot of stuff though but most of them are now in my archives." The archive contains 20 years of t-shirt designs, cut-and-sew, 15 different sneakers... these are going into a book that Franklin is putting together and will come out this year.

"People only know me for graffiti, and for the collaboration sneakers with Nike. But they don't know that I designed the Burton Analog logo; they don't know that I did all this work over here. It's gonna be pretty cool once they see all the other stuff that I did in this book."

This is Franklin's fourth trip to Singapore in the last two years. He loves to travel. This very human quality of moving is a big part of what he does. And while one might appreciate the opportunity to have your travel and lodgings comped, this is hardly a holiday. "I haven't had the luxury of a vacation," he explains. "A proper one where I don't think about work. It's only when I get an opportunity to, if someone were to invite me to Rome for a job for three days, I'll ask my wife if she wants to go to Rome with me. My vacations are just free days added to a work trip."

**March 2020**

The world is in the grip of a pandemic. It is given a regal name, this virus. Up-close under an electron microscope, these virions resemble the arches of a crown. Like beams of light shooting from the head. The great and terrible *corona radiata*, seen on Helios the sun-god; the

Colossus of Rhodes, the coronavirus endures as a symbol of power over its subjugation of man.

The hospitals swell with patients, breathless and frail, and the earth opens to receive the mounting dead. Commerce slows as the world retreats into hibernation; once-populous streets now stand empty; business establishments are shuttered.

Franklin had a scheduled gallery show but it was called off due to the pandemic. So he took his seven paintings and put them up for sale on the Internet. All the proceeds were donated to NYC Health + Hospitals, an organisation that operates the public hospitals and clinics in New York.

A sum of USD10,210 was ultimately raised and went into the purchase of personal protective equipment, meals and other resources for doctors, nurses and other essential staff.

**1984**

At 17, Franklin has his work put up alongside Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat at a Christmas show at FUN Gallery. This in fact will be repeated often years from now and while it is correct, it is also far from the truth. Franklin sets the record straight: "Yeah, you know that story. There were 30 other artists in that show, but everybody only sees those two."

According to Franklin, there were many artists at the Christmas show organised by Patti Astor, the owner of FUN Gallery. "Futura was probably in the show, ZEPHYR, Revolt... all the artists that were at the FUN Gallery and people focus in on the two most popular names—Jean-Michel and Haring—and forget about the rest."

Still, the acceptance of graffiti as an art form is a validation. After years of being seen as a subculture ("It's not even a culture, it's below it, 'sub'"). All the pushbacks from art galleries were replaced with an opportunity to reach the youth market.

"Listen, we were branding ourselves before the terminology 'branding' even came to be. We're making a name for ourselves, trying to bring value when no one would give it to us." The graffiti movement would ripple out to reach a larger and appreciative audience. It would be validation on a mass scale.



Words by Wayne Cheong

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