

The Writings on the Wall
By: Stewart Dalley

Graffiti comes to Glasgow on 12th December at the Centre for Contemporary Art (CCA), in an exhibition entitled Nocturnal Activities. The exhibition is an attempt to break down stereotypical views of graffiti, as Mark Brennan of exhibition organisers, Urban Art Official, tells us, "I'm still trying to come to terms with what I want Urban Arts Official to do, we've had two exhibitions now and artists that we are working with, from across Europe, are really pushing to get into a gallery environment. I'm still to be convinced that graffiti, or street art, can move into that type of setting. So it's partly an experiment to see if we can get an audience, who go to galleries, to appreciate street art. But mostly it's to provide a more formal setting for artists and give them a different area to show their work, especially now that most people have moved away from the illegal side of graffiti."

Challenging those deep-seated views of graffiti may seem like an up-hill battle when you consider that, depending on what side of the fence you sit, graffiti can either mean, art or vandalism. So it's probably beneficial if we clear up right now that we are not talking about racist or sectarian slogans daubed on toilet doors or scribblings of 'John waz ere' on the back of bus seats. We are talking about graffiti as an art form - one, which has been about for centuries.

The word graffiti, in itself, has its origins in ancient Greece, derived, as it is, from the Greek word *graphein* – meaning, to write. Cavemen did it, ancient Egypt was rife with it, Roman soldiers scratched their names on Hadrian's Wall and there is even graffiti on the moon. The urge to mark out one's territory, or in some cases, to make statements on what's happening around you, seems almost primeval.

Today's popular culture of graffiti stems back to the sixties when people started to use graffiti more as a medium for communication, to bring attention to political and social issues of the time. And it may not surprise you to learn that it was quickly after this point that graffiti and vandalism began to share the same sentence. The seventies in America, and the birth of hip hop culture, saw graffiti drift more into the realms of art, with many 'writers' creating new letter fonts in which to capture their name, or 'tag'. It was then that graffiti started to appear in eight feet high letters on walls and railway carriages - a practice known as bombing. This custom continued unchecked for several years, until America declared 'a war on graffiti', spending an estimated \$7 Billion a year in an attempt to circumvent the upsurge. 1974 and the then Mayor of New York, Mayor Lindsay, was one of the first to publicly come out against the art form when he stated, "graffiti madness is related to mental health problems." And whilst I can't imagine many people going along with that particular line of thought today, his statement is, however, indicative of what we are led to believe - the majority of society see graffiti as vandalism.

In Scotland, local councils have decaled their own mini-war on graffiti, with 'vandals' being fined a minimum of £500 for a first offence. While in the States the penalties are far greater, with those caught receiving a first-degree misdemeanour charge, carrying a maximum penalty of 5 years or a \$10,000 fine. Earlier this year at the launch of the city's 'Clean Glasgow' campaign, Councillor James Coleman summed up many people's attitude towards graffiti, when he lumped it in with other undesirable activities. Stating, "We are fighting back against the litter louts, the illegal fly-tippers and fly-posters and the vandals who deface the city with graffiti."

The graffiti, which Scottish councils are fighting against, is generally not the artistic type, but the mindless variety that describes how Emma loves Peter. Most professional graffiti artists have now graduated into graphic design or other commercial work. Two such examples of this new, grown up graffiti culture, are the focus of the CCA's Nocturnal Activities exhibition - graffiti artist and graphic designer Mau Mau and photographer Alex Fakso.

Fakso's work centres on documenting the graffiti artist at work, catching them mid-spray as they turn his hometown of Milan into their personal canvas. "He has been documenting guys 'bombing' trains in Milan through photography, where he tries to capture the whole movement involved", says exhibition organiser Mark Brennan. Continuing "At the exhibition some of his work will be mounted in pillars, within the space, so that people get a sense of that movement when viewing his pictures. This will be heightened with sound Alex recorded whilst he was taking some of the pictures, which we will be feeding into the room."

Those pictures will adorn the walls of the CCA alongside graffiti 'pieces' – derived from masterpiece – by Devon resident Mau Mau, who will also be creating some fresh paintings on the opening night, which will hang on the walls for all to see throughout the exhibition. Mau's style of graffiti is character driven, inspired by his twin passions of "comics and cartoons", which has seen him pick up various commercial commissions. Largely based in the hip hop world his designs have shown up on album sleeves and music videos for UK hip hop stalwarts Rodney P, The Herbaliser and Skitz. But there have also been other requests, as Mau elaborates, "I was asked to do some designs for Wedgwood China but that fell through because they couldn't get a glaze that looked like spray paint, but they were really up for it, which shows how graffiti is now being adopted by the commercial world."

Urban Art Official are also planning to introduce some newer elements to the traditional exhibition, with talk of a 'tagging wall' being made available for all aspiring graffiti artists to relieve themselves on. And a piped-in UK hip hop soundtrack courtesy of Glasgow's Freakmenoovers DJs. For some art aficionados this merging of street culture with the relatively stuffy world of galleries may seem like a bridge too far, as it is for some graffiti artists. And it is Mau Mau who sums up what all sides of the debate will be hoping this Nocturnal Activities exhibition can answer. "When you take it off the streets is it still graffiti?"

Nocturnal Activities @ CCA, 350 Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow. Opening Party 12th December 7-9pm. Exhibition runs 12th-22nd December (Sun-Wed 11am-6pm; Thu-Sat 11am-8pm)