

FA-Q: ART'S HARD MAN

by Simon Song for the Weekly Standard, May 21-22, 2005

<http://fa-qart.com/wp/2005/05/21/arts-hard-man-weekly-standard/>

His features are rough, his face weathered. He is 49 years old and dresses like a teenage punk. He is an artist who goes by the name of FA-Q, pronounced in two words, not three. It's a name that goes back to a hard attitude he used to put on for the broken streets of New York City – like a clown puts on makeup.

He was once a prince among painters in New York, but then FA-Q's life turned into a meaningless decade of imprisonment and destitution.

In that past, he was like a deer, he says. When you weren't hunting, he was everywhere. Pick up a rifle, and he would vanish.

But his drug addiction turned him into a criminal. It stole his life which he tried desperately to buy back through creating art.

His day job during the late 80s and 90s was roaming the bookstore and art galleries of New York City, stealing expensive books. He had to steal. If he didn't, his craving made him sick. His body was like a haunted house, and his life was busy selling, busy scoring drugs, and then, when there was time to spare, he would draw and paint.

FA-Q VS CAPITALISM

Kevin Wendell is his real name and he is off drugs now. He says he hates capitalism and is driven to use his art to change lives. He is taking on a bastion of capitalism– Hong Kong, with an exhibition tonight at the Fringe Club of his haunted and haunting work.

“The meaning of doing art when I was using [drugs] was to exorcize the demons from my mind. It was my therapy, transferring the poison to the paper, making real the things that bothered me,” he explains. “I used to wake up, asking why I had to wake up.”

He drew suicidal, insane faces, chronicles of life in hell. He took the streets for a canvas, spraying graffiti all over New York. It was the heyday of graffiti art in New York. It was everywhere, in doorways, on trains and buildings. The “zero tolerance” clean-up of the city under Mayor Rudolph Giuliani hadn't yet begun.

FA-Q is serious about street art to this day. “The beauty of street art is that it is free. It came from not wanting to take money for art,” he says. But you have to eat. During his years of pain, he continued to sell drawings and paintings to galleries. He even managed to sell some of his art in Japan while he was in prison.

Life in jail was hard, but also a blessing. “I didn’t get arrested, I got rescued,” he says. “If I had continued as I was going, I would probably be dead. It gave me the time to do those things like eat and sleep and get healthy again. But when I got out, my attitude was the same, and I was back using.”

Now he’s been clean for five years, and as his life has changed, so has his art.

“Now that I am not using drugs, I don’t have so much anger in me. My art is more humorous. I am still twisted in my head, but since I stopped using I don’t take myself so seriously. I used to think of myself as a lone wolf. Now I’m clean, I’m only a rabbit dog,” he laughs.

MAKE SHIT HAPPEN

FA-Q’s “proper” art career started in New York. Before that he marauded around Cleveland, Ohio, where he grew up. “I did graffiti, and changed billboards and advertisements, scraping out letters to give them new meanings,” he says.

By the mid-80s he was a rising star, getting as much as US\$2,500 (HK\$19,500) for a painting. He had drive, talent and ambition. He was a rough genius and he worked constantly, and courted chaos like a demon.

His motto was “Make Shit Happen” and he sprayed this all over the city. “I was starting to get my work sold,” he says. “I was given a grant and went to Finland. I had a studio in Dusseldorf in West Germany.” He worked with Italian master artist Enrico Baj, one of Italy’s best known contemporary painters. “He bought all my art,” FA-Q says.

He also went to Japan twice where he made huge paintings that were part of installation art shows sponsored by department stores. The shoppers watched him create giant paintings so big he had to use rollers. FA-Q was a hit.

ART IS SHIT, ART IS EVERYTHING

The turning point came in 1987. “I got married,” he says. “We had a baby daughter, but after six weeks she died, a crib death. I became angry with God.”

He took to hanging out on the edge of the edge, with the Rivington School group of artists in New York, a Lower East Side band of metal sculptors, blacksmiths, painters, performance artists and other outsiders. Heavily anti-establishment, the Rivington School was criticized for being destructive and anti-social. “We were against commercial art, and against capitalism, championing art for people with no money,” FA-Q says.

The school adopted a dissident belief in the “great confusion”, a philosophy of sorts called neoism, coined by Canadian performing artist Monty Cantsin who called himself an “immortal hard-art revolutionary.” Cantsin was once arrested for spraying his own blood on a Picasso painting, FA-Q recalls, an act he did not support. The aims and objectives of the Neoists can be summed up in one short slogan: “Art is S***, art is everything,” he says.

For almost 10 years, members of the Rivington School, headquartered in an old primary school in a run-down neighborhood, met almost daily. It was chaos, he says. “We got together from 6 o’clock to 6 o’clock, welding, painting and drinking beer. There were many extreme types of people.”

The Hong Kong connection is local performing artist Frog King Kwok. Frog King Kwok, alias Kwok Mang, originally performed with FA-Q in shows at the Rivington School Sculpture Garden. “One fun activity”, FA-Q remembers, “was the ritual smashing of TVs that we found on the street. “We used to smash TV sets to ridicule the passive consumption of mass media. Another time I made my own traffic law, sitting in the street in a bathtub letting only cars with New York plates go past,” he says with a smile on his face.

The school’s most significant production was the construction of the Rivington Sculpture Garden in the mid 80s. The garden was founded by sculptor Ray Kelly with the idea of promoting low-budget art and neoist experimentation.

At his low ebb, FA-Q slept in the garden “on a tin roof.” As he was a junkie, they had to lock up everything in the garden, otherwise he’d sell it to feed his addiction. The garden was built from junk and scrap metal, a product of a time and place when the neighborhood was still cheap and dangerous. Today, the New York street artist scene is fading. The artists’ lots are gone, victims of gentrification and a changing scene. Renegade artists can’t afford the rents. There are a lot fewer painters and performers and many of the new ones work primarily with computers.

ART IS COMPULSION

FA-Q’s view of capitalism, however, hasn’t changed since the Rivington School days. “The more money gets involved, the more corrupt things get, the more evil things get,” he says. “I believe capitalism corrupts culture.”

His art is still a reflection of his life. “My art is like a journal, an inward vision that is getting clearer with time. That has to do with my age. It’s a spiritual journey.” His imagination is always there, and it reacts to whatever is going on. “I can be spacey at times. My reality is often different from what people see.”

He thinks art is more than entertainment. “I want to change how people think, how people see, put a new perspective on things. But sometimes I have tunnel vision. A lot of people have tunnel vision. Sometimes they only see their next shopping trip. I want people to open their eyes.

“Art is a compulsion, I have to do it, and it’s like breathing, no, more than that,” he continues. “Art is the most positive thing I can do, and one of the great things about it is that it doesn’t hurt anyone.”

FA-Q’s life has changed dramatically in the five years since he kicked drugs. He now sets goals and achieves them. His career is on the move again. He had shows in New York just before coming to Hong Kong. The addiction doesn’t handcuff him to New York any longer and he doesn’t isolate himself as he did in the past.

Now he's experimenting with human relationships – he has a Chinese girlfriend.

“I used to hate everybody, including my family,” he says by way of explaining his compulsion and anger. He sees life differently now. “I can understand now that it wasn't my stepfather's fault for beating me; it wasn't my mother's fault for not stopping him.”

“Everyone is human and everyone makes mistakes. I don't dwell on the past, and I don't dwell on guilt either. [But] I still have some hate in me, against government, corruption, against greed.”