

PHOTO FEATURES

A MISSION TO SPRAY

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It has always been a challenge for Hong Kong's local graffiti artists to make money from their art, while staying true to what drove them to pursue it in the first place.

Simply think about how spraying paint on the street wall is an illegal act and you will understand how hard it is to persist in being a graffiti artist.

Pantone, a local graffiti artist, started promoting graffiti by giving classes three years ago when he noticed that fewer and fewer people were practising graffiti art.

Just like Pantone, all graffiti artists have a self-designed name, also known as a tag, by which they are known in graffiti world. Apart from making it easier to remember, the tag "Pantone" also conveys a meaning that graffiti can be very colourful.

Although he makes money by teaching graffiti, Pantone also regards teaching as a way of promoting something he is passionate about. He started off by teaching students how to create their own tags and how to apply them into different styles of graffiti.

Mainly teaching students from band three schools, Pantone feels that he has a mission. "I can see that the students who are on the verge of going astray can get a sense of direction through learning graffiti. It might be harder for them to learn painting because unlike graffiti, it won't give them a quick sense of satisfaction," said Pantone.

He finds that most students do not know what they are doing with their lives. He believes that learning graffiti can be very meaningful, as it helps students find their life goals.

Another graffiti artist, whose tag is "Uncle", takes up graffiti decorating jobs and shopping mall demonstration shows from time to time.

However, such jobs are not regular, and Uncle only gets to perform in large demonstration shows once every two months. "Like a lot of other artists, I struggle to sustain a living relying on an unstable income," he said.

Recently, Uncle was invited by a shopping mall in Tsim Sha Tsui named Granville Identity Plus, more commonly known as



“gi+”, to help with the design of Hong Kong’s first indoor remote control car racetrack inside the mall. He got a small space to set up his own shop in “gi+” for free in return.

“I took this opportunity to promote graffiti,” he said. “Graffiti artists have been inactive for a very long time, I think now is the time for us to take action.”

“What I am trying to do is to bring graffiti culture to the public, as Hong Kong people still have misconceptions about graffiti.”

Uncle was also invited to draw graffiti on three of the walls of Tuen Mun police station. He was asked to base his designs on three themes, “anti-drug campaign”, “China’s success in obtaining numerous gold medals in the Olympics” and “suppressing triad societies”.

He was disappointed that the media did not report on the project, even though it was a rare collaboration between two parties who are usually in a predator-prey relationship. He hopes media reports could help give graffiti a more positive image.

Although things might not have turned out the way Uncle wanted them to, these one or two specific cases did not put him off. “What I am trying to do is to bring graffiti culture to the public, as Hong Kong people still have misconceptions about graffiti.”

Unlike Uncle, others who also use graffiti painting in a relatively commercial way may not think that promoting graffiti culture is necessary. Instead, they think the most important thing is to be enthusiastic about what you do for a living.

Kaman William has drawn graffiti for 11 years and got his first graffiti-related job at the age of 17. He is a computer

game designer, who does not have to rely on income from graffiti. Though he has been interested in graffiti since he was young, he never promotes it as he believes that people who are interested will take the initiative to learn.

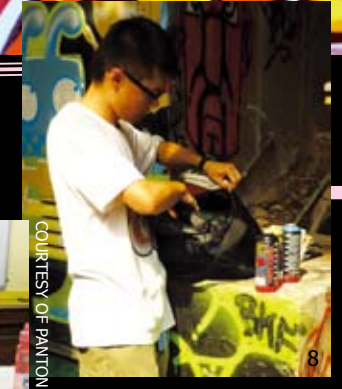
Kaman William is an active graffiti artist who decorates shopping malls and shops by spraying colourful paint on their walls. He has also given graffiti demonstrations in shopping malls, for which he is paid HK\$2000 to HK\$3000 for a half-hour show.

“Being zealous about graffiti is very important, you should not merely focus on the benefits you gain from it,” he said.

But even the enthusiastic Kaman William has faced tough dilemmas. Once, he was invited to make a piece of graffiti promoting environmental friendliness. However, he was challenged for using non-environmentally friendly spray paints to promote the message.

The criticism made Kaman William stop drawing graffiti for over a month so that he could think thoroughly about whether he should continue working in the graffiti field. Eventually, he still decided to pick up the spray cans again because he deeply believed that drawing graffiti has a positive impact on both the graffitist and the audience.

“I am proud of myself every time I finish a piece. The confidence and happiness I’ve gained are my motivation for drawing graffiti for so long.”



- 1 Uncle decorates the wall of the indoor racetrack in the shopping mall – “gi+”.
- 2 Uncle’s shop in “gi+” has a specially designed graffito as its logo. This logo is symmetrical as half of it is reflected from the mirror.
- 3 The completed graffiti piece in Hong Kong’s first indoor racetrack for remote control cars.
- 4 A large amount of colourful spray paints in Uncle’s shop.
- 5, 6 Graffiti drawn on the exterior wall of Granville Identity Mall which is a predecessor of “gi+”.
- 7 Kaman William practises painting graffiti in a youth centre.
- 8 Pantone shows *Varsity* the spray paint he brought with him.
- 9 A student of Pantone shows her self-written name in graffiti style.
- 10 Graffiti of Chinese characters are seen on the walls of streets.
- 11, 12 Traces of graffiti drawn by foreign graffitists can be found in Hong Kong.

GRAFFITI CAN BE FOUND ANYTIME, ANYWHERE...

1 TSUEN WAN



2 MONG KOK



3 TAI PO



7 KOWLOON TONG



6 MID-LEVELS



5 CENTRAL



4 TSIM SHA TSUI



Graffiti Glossary

- Tag** – the signature of graffiti artists; tagging is the fastest way to write their names next to their pieces
- Piece** – short form of the word "masterpiece"; the most complicated, complete and labour intensive form of graffiti
- Throw-up** – words drawn only by a mono-colour outline and a mono-layer of fill colour; usually written in the form of "bubble letter"
- Bubble letter** – a style of graffiti; a font with smooth and round edges
- Wildstyle** – a style of graffiti; a three-dimensional font with pointy edges
- Bomb** – a great amount of tags and throw-ups used to cover a large area
- Go over** – to cover someone else's piece with your own