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Turk AK-47

A renegade artist brings graffiti to the walls of Beijing

MARLAINE GLICKSMAN

START



Call him AK-47 after the tag he's scrawled illegally on dozens of walls in his native Beijing, China.

"If I use this name," says the capital city's lone graffiti artist, "I make people think about the Third World, the violence of cities, and the wild hooligan culture. That's not what people normally want to think about in Beijing."

A conservative-looking 36 year old with a round face and short-cropped hair, AK-47 dresses in polo shirts and Italian leather shoes. He has a wife, two children, and runs a small design business by day. For more than four years, though, he's been secretly spray-painting his signature piece—a large, featureless head outlined in profile—on walls all over Beijing.

While China's economy rockets skyward, its citizens are still living under what some categorize as an intensely oppressive state regime. In 1996, the Chinese Ministry of Justice executed 4,367 people—including a man named Chen Guangru, who was put to death for vandalizing strips of electric cable. Stealing cows, car theft, and "hooliganism" were other crimes deemed worthy of capital punishment in a country that has executed more people in the 1990s than the rest of the world's nations put together.

"When I do my art," says the secret scribe, "I don't think about my personal safety. If I thought about that, I couldn't do my work."

AK-47 got his first taste of graffiti on a trip to Italy in the late '80s. There, he saw walls covered in murals, tags, and incendiary slogans. (FUCK FASCISM! was one he remembers best.) What he found most interesting, though, were the responses from other artists—an active dialogue between people who had no other outlet for expressing themselves.

"Walls seal off the Chinese," he says. "They're afraid of others entering into their life. I go on these walls and enter their life. I open a dialogue with people. I assault them with the knowledge that this city is changing. I don't care if you take part or don't take part, you still have to look at me."

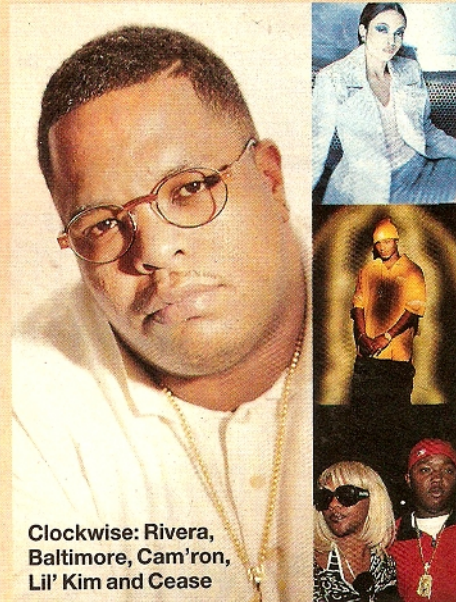
After returning to Beijing, AK-47 quietly began to turn the city into his own personal gallery. And like Keith Haring, the only other graffiti artist AK-47 can name, he started cataloging his work with photographs and silk screens. A trip through the city reveals AK-47's prolificacy: His work is everywhere—on highway underpasses and public toilets, kiosks and private homes. The simple black heads, vague and without expression, are subtle and understated; their sheer abundance blends them into the bustling metropolis.

"In the studio," he says. "Painting is just a style. On the street, it has *meaning*. It's part of people's lives. Asians always want to avoid expressing themselves, letting their thoughts get trapped in their heart. But your ideas—why do you want to keep them inside?"

David Shadrack Smith

He's Jugglin', Baby (Go 'head, Baby)

Operating two record labels at once, Lance "Un" Rivera has his hands full



Clockwise: Rivera, Baltimore, Cam'ron, Lil' Kim and Cease

COURTESY OF UNDEAS ENTERTAINMENT (3); ERNIE PANICCIOLI

Lil' Kim is happy nowadays—and when Lil' Kim is happy, Lance "Un" Rivera gets a big, cheese-grit-eatin' grin from ear to ear.

A former drug dealer, Un, 31, is the co-owner of Undeas Entertainment, a record company he started with his friend the Notorious B.I.G. in 1994. Undeas released Junior M.A.F.I.A.'s gold *Conspiracy* the next year and hit platinum with Lil' Kim's *Hardcore* in 1996.

In February, though, after months of intense negotiations, Kim signed a *new* contract that gives her an undisclosed wad of cash and her own Undeas subsidiary—Queen Bee Entertainment—on which the pint-size sextop gets to release her own albums and those of her

M.A.F.I.A. comember Lil' Cease.

For a while there, Lil' Kim had reportedly been mulling over a move to Sean "Puffy" Combs's Bad Boy Entertainment. At one point, she allegedly vowed never to record for Notorious B.I.G.'s widow, Faith Evans, who, as purveyor of Biggie's estate, coowns Undeas with Rivera. Controversy swirled further when Rivera started his own record label, Undertainment Records, last year—just after Evans was awarded Biggie's estate.

Rivera insists that he plans to operate both Undeas and Undertainment. "Both [companies] are going to get the same time and energy," he says, just waking up at home in New Jersey.

Sounds like a handful.

"Actually, it's not hard," says Rivera, who, with both companies under his belt, will oversee the release of seven albums this year: Lil' Kim's, Lil' Cease's, and Junior M.A.F.I.A.'s on the Undeas label; and solo rappers Charli Baltimore's and Cam'ron's, the R&B group Brotha's, and the soundtrack to the movie *Woo* on Undertainment.

"It's definitely challenging...but it's fun. I've had the Hit Factory booked out for twenty-four hours a day for the last four months. I go to the office from one to nine, then to the studio from nine to five. It's constant work, and it's paying off."

Hope so. 'Cause from running Undeas and Undertainment, Rivera is under-slept.

Denene Millner