

The Many Faces

of



How the
renowned
graffiti writer
and futurist
balances
fame and
identity
security in
the digital
age.

Let's begin with this: KATSU is a graffiti writer, not a graffiti artist. "Writer" has been the designation of choice since the earliest days of New York City graffiti culture. The 1970s pioneers writing their name and street number on neighborhood walls—writers like Taki 183, Tracy 168, and Stay High 149, now considered founding fathers of the culture—would have scoffed at the very idea that they were making art. By the city's graffiti heyday in the '80s, when "wild style" pieces covering whole subway cars with vibrant, complex calligraphy caught the world's attention, "writer" was still preferred, even when the downtown gallery scene caught wind of what was happening and began giving shows to writers like Lee [Quiñones] and Fab 5 Freddy. The term artist? High-flown, effete, antithetical. Writer was pragmatic, honest, sincere.

For KATSU, the terminology is axiomatic. While he now balances a multifaceted existence as a prominent visual—dare I say—artist, exploring concepts such as surveillance technology, artificial

intelligence, and hacker culture, he still self-identifies as a vandal and an outsider. Be it his portrait series *AI Criminals*, which uses images created by a generative adversarial network (the backbone of machine learning), or when he demonstratively sprayed the wall of Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art with a fire extinguisher loaded with paint to make a 30-foot-tall, 60-foot-long tag in protest of a Jeffrey Deitch-curated show about "street art" (a term reviled by the graffiti community), KATSU sees all of his work as inherently political and oppositional, with clear parallels connecting graffiti to hacker culture.

"I think there's a direct correlation between cultures whose value system is really not monetary, and is based on respect and risk," he says. "There's [the same] partial existence under aliases—having an avatar. There's a respect and honor system—it's one-to-one. You're risking the same things."

Considered to be among the vanguard of the NYC graffiti scene,

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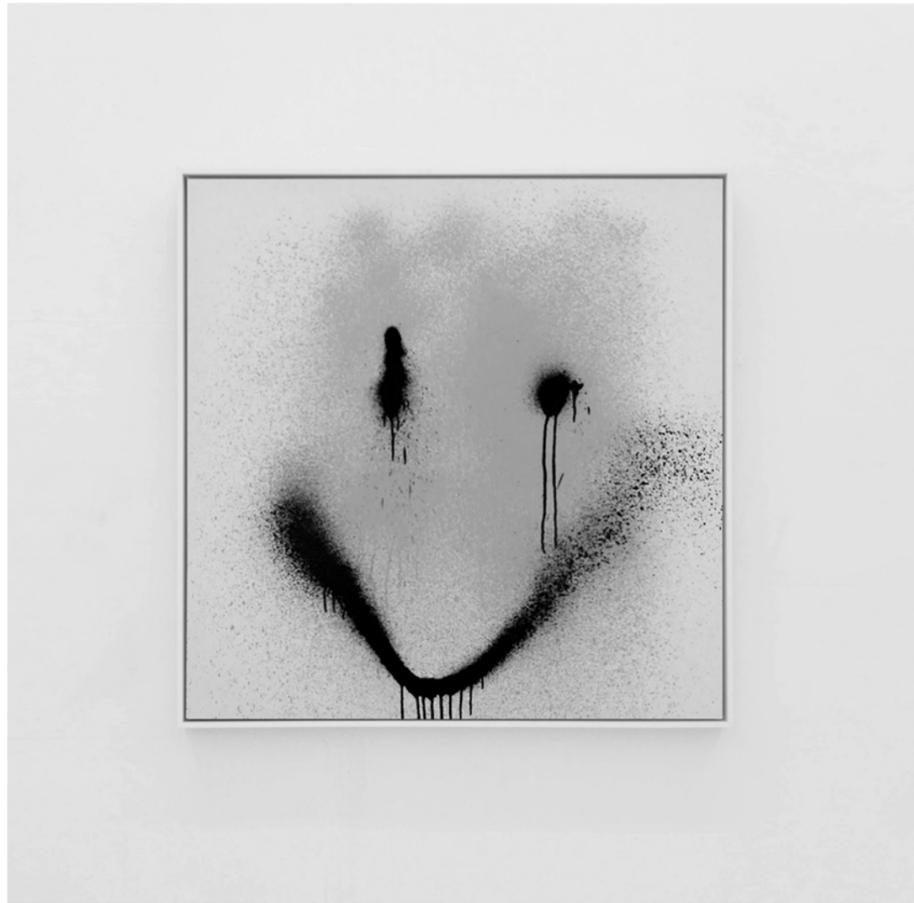
KATSU has the undivided respect of the global graffiti community and is a member of BTM (Big Time Mob), an international all-star crew of premier graffiti writers. He has explored drone graffiti in order to be able to paint bigger and more inaccessible walls, and created open-source software, named Icarus One and released via Creative Commons, to pilot a paint drone. He also created a digital graffiti app called Fat Tag, which lets real-world writers practice bombing (the term for getting your name up as widely and frequently as possible) on any surface they can imagine and source an image of, all directly via their device.

KATSU's prowess in both technique and self-promotion is on abundant display in the short film *The Powers of KATSU* (the title references Charles and Ray Eames' *The Power of Ten*), in which he renders his skull tag first on a grain of rice at 1/20th of an inch and then in scalar increments culminating in a 120-foot-tall rendition created with a paint-loaded fire extinguisher on an NYC rooftop, an

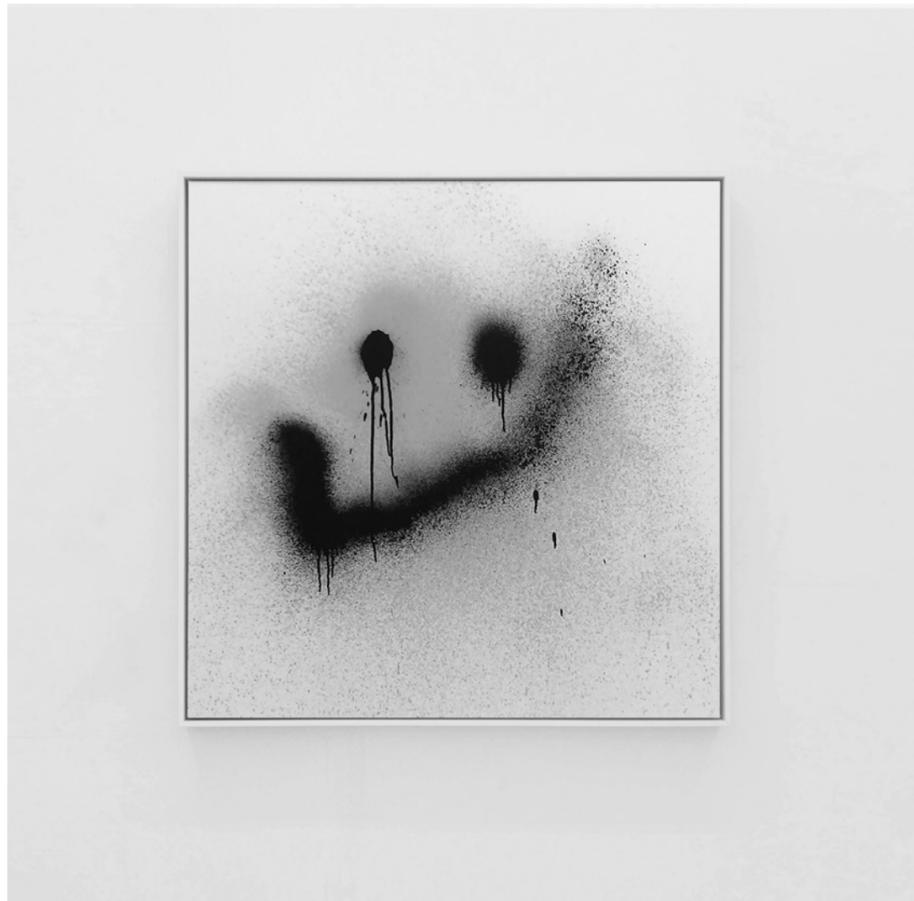
image that is visible on Google Earth. In his embrace of scale, and of what scale can mean for a piece of visual art, and the ways in which it can impact and transform its environment, KATSU calls to mind artists like Robert Smithson and James Turrell, but when I make this comparison, he refuses to be drawn in, saying, only in true techno-futurist fashion, that mentioning those names will be good for the SEO of this article. Duly noted.

KATSU's work, though, is by no means purely digital or conceptual, but rather rooted in traditional, tangible formats. In 2011 he hijacked approximately 100 phone booths around New York City, removing the advertisements and replacing them with his own posters that mashed up famous faces and randomized brand logos—one piece juxtaposed Steve Jobs with a Nike logo, surmounted by KATSU's bubble-letter "KA" tag. Another series, *Shitheads*, is a triptych of portraits executed in KATSU's own feces.

Most importantly for a graffiti writer, he still gets up, which



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means he still paints where he has not been invited. A native of the Pacific Northwest, KATSU first encountered graffiti on freight trains. These freight trains were how the network went nationwide, and this was how he met his destiny. He saw those trains and followed them back to their source.

Modern graffiti was birthed in the 1960s in Philadelphia by formative writers like Cornbread, Cool Earl, and Topcat 126, but its claim on the broader culture took hold when graffiti migrated to New York City with its extensive subway system. Here, the wall a writer wrote their name on was mobile. It went everywhere the subway system went, and a writer could achieve renown if they applied themselves. Legends were built on volume and ubiquity, and name recognition was everything. It was, essentially, the social network of its day—cliquey, insiderish, highly visible yet arcane and subversive, simultaneously brashly public and intensely private. That social network expanded virally beyond the five boroughs as new

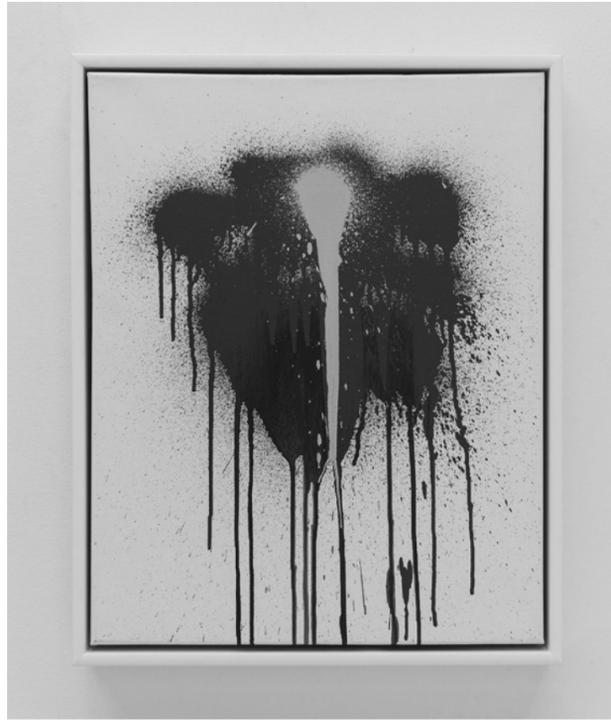
initiates outside of the city discovered its rituals and sought rolling walls of their own.

"I made my way to New York and got really intoxicated and consumed by graffiti culture in NYC in early 2000," KATSU explains. "I spent around 15 years painting in New York and getting to know the city and all its facets and connected cities and the rest of the world." What was the pull? "The combination of stealth behavior, the self-sufficient tool-making component. When I got into it, the internet wasn't as it is now, and tools and the culture were spread word of mouth via small magazines and VHS tapes. That was the subculture I've fallen into and fallen in love with."

That illicit, rebellious urge continues to motivate him. Despite the considerable regard in which he is held as an established artist (whether he likes the term or not), the simple pleasure of heading out with a spray can under the cover of darkness continues to thrill. "I'm still very excited by very, very low level, under a bridge, sharing



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a can with a couple of crew members," he says. "Just not using our brains whatsoever. Then I'm very intrigued by new and advanced technologies and how those can be applied to vandalism and graffiti."

Unmistakably, there's a certain paradox unique to graffiti. The writer's chief goal is celebrity—to be known and respected by the entire community. Yet by dint of it being a criminal act, anonymity is key if one values one's liberty. That combination, with its heady blend of rebellion and reputation, its ability to birth outlaw heroes, is alluring to the mostly teenage, mostly (though not exclusively) male community of would-be writers seeking underground status and name recognition. KATSU has endeavored to quantify those qualities through a crypto-street currency he terms "fame tokens." A fame token is a unit of prominence representing the repute a graffiti writer derives from the internet, traditional media, or street credentials.

The whole concept of fame tokens is deliberately tongue-in-cheek, a send-up of the measures through which artists achieve

recognition and by which their work increases in value. But KATSU's thesis is that in the digital age, where analytics are everything, worth can be measured by data—determined, Bitcoin-style, through a blockchain rather than via messy subjective gauges like what a buyer is willing to pay in a gallery or at auction. It's one artist—or writer, as he prefers—giving a sardonic take on the capricious nature of who gets anointed by the establishment and who does not. Like everything else he does, it is an act of revolt and subversion of the given, and a rejection of the art world's arbitrary assessments of worth and ability.

"I am in no way a special graffiti writer," KATSU says. "I have friends that don't get as much attention who are way more profound than I am, funnier than I am, and stronger and better. I just happened to have fallen into this whirlpool. I don't really have a process to finding balance. Right now, being able to distill my creativity in a super-pure way in a gallery setting is amazing. It's a rush. ... But it will not replace graffiti. It never will."



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- 1
Selfie: Feng Shui 2
2014
Oil on canvas
48 x 48 inches
(121.9 x 121.9 cm)
- 2
Facial Recognition Cops
Did Not Notice
2015
Enamel on canvas
36 x 36 inches
(91.4 x 91.4 cm)
- 3
Facial Recognition Just
Released From Jail
2015
Enamel on canvas
36 x 36 inches
(91.4 x 91.4 cm)
- 4
Cookie Monster
2016
Enamel on canvas with
wood frame
36 x 36 inches
(91.4 x 91.4 cm)
- 5
Mickey
2014
Enamel on canvas
48 x 48 inches
(121.9 x 121.9 cm)
- 6
Untitled (Drone Flower)
2018
20 x 16 inches
(50.8 x 40.6 cm)
- 7
Untitled (Drone Flower)
2018
20 x 16 inches
(50.8 x 40.6 cm)
- 8
Untitled (Drone Flower)
2018
20 x 16 inches
(50.8 x 40.6 cm)
- 9
"Memory Foam"
Installation view
Jan 6 - 28, 2018
The Hole, New York
- 10
Video / TV
2015
Television with digital
after effects montage
30 ½ x 53 ¼ inches
(77.5 x 135.3 cm)
- 11
"Remember the Future"
Installation view
Jan 8 - Feb 22, 2015
The Hole, New York
- 12
Dronescape I (Night)
2014
Enamel on canvas
48 x 60 inches
(121.9 x 152.4 cm)
- 13
AI Criminal I
2018
Print on matte banner
96 x 96 inches
(244 x 244 cm)
- 14
AI Criminal II
2018
Print on matte banner
96 x 96 inches
(244 x 244 cm)
- 15
AI Criminal III
2018
Print on matte banner
96 x 96 inches
(244 x 244 cm)

All images courtesy of
the artist and The Hole,
New York.