

Alex Kuznetsov

*drawn to an idea



Graffiti, as a form of expression, is not often thought of as reserved. Yet in a blank white gallery, Alex Kuznetsov has filled the space with more unreserved vibrancy than any of his former work in graffiti ever held.

written & interview ABIGAIL HART

ALEX KUZNETSOV
through the eyes of Zoe Volkova
in Studio and private, 2021



The more involved process of choosing a canvas, mixing paints, layering and finishing pieces creates more opportunities to imbue an entire life into a piece. Born in Minsk and currently based in Moscow, Alex Kuznetsov spent 15 years traveling the world creating graffiti before transitioning to abstract painting and other media. Kuznetsov became internationally renowned for his work in spray paint and pioneered the graffiti scene in the CIS (the former USSR). Through graffiti, Kuznetsov learned the skills of color combinations and working in large formats, as well as numerous life skills. He credits his years mastering the craft of graffiti as "an education I would never be able to get in a regular school or university". Kuznetsov sees his transition into abstract painting as a progression of expression. With an international education and an eye for color, Kuznetsov applies his skills to works

with more depth, more permanence. A work of graffiti will only last as long as the building it is on and will inevitably be affected by the elements so that it is never quite the same again. A painting will last, and can be passed through changing hands, sent across borders, and displayed anywhere it lands. It will gather those experiences as part of its story and will interact with different surroundings as it is moved.

Kuznetsov's progression is expressed in color and shape as well as permanence. Drawn to the idea that artists create through art what they lack in reality, Kuznetsov creates curiosity and calm, harmoniously blended through color, texture and shape. Abstraction brings balance to the noise and grit of daily life, and Kuznetsov brings a sense of play to his art which is a refreshing relief to the seriousness and stress found all around us.

.artist talk *alex kuznetsov

What inspired you to become an artist? What about yourself do you see reflected in your art?

If we talk about the process of art creating in general, I was always somehow related to it. At school, I did a lot of decorating and collages then I got really interested in graphic design. The landmark turning point happened in 1997 when I decided, while being on a trip, that I want to master graffiti fonts in order to be able to leave my signatures. At that time, I was living in Minsk, where I'm originally from. There was no graffiti culture at all and all the information I could find was from some music magazines. I liked the idea itself and I saw at that moment what can be done with it.

Since then I had existed within that culture for almost 15 years of my life. Not only as an artist but also as a mastermind who developed graffiti on the territory of the CIS (former USSR).

It was an interesting period, that reminds me of one big adventure in which the process of art creation was closely connected with a big amount of some side skills and constantly moving from one city to another. When your art studio is not inside the building but somewhere out in the street. There's a certain romantic appeal in it but there was a moment when I decided that I don't want to do art just for the sake of the process of creating, after all, graffiti is most often a process, and eventually some photos which are left as the result of your work. All the graffiti live in the photos which will never be able to create the same effect like the real work does when you look at its original version. So I decided to move further. I exchanged the street to the studio, spray-paint cans into spatulas and acrylic ones, and instead of painting on the walls, I began using canvases. At that moment besides the changes in my technical approach, I felt the urge of changing my style approach as well, and instead of fonts and figurative art, I started to do abstraction.

If we consider my style of working with fonts it was always more reserved while in my abstract works I expressed myself much more dynamically and emotionally, which is more about me. I believe that this way in art is at the same time the way to yourself. As time goes on you know yourself better, understand yourself better open some new facets of your personality.

Tell us about your early career working with graffiti. How did your graffiti work influence your other work as a painter?

Over this period of 15 years, I was quite a globe-trotter. I'd visited different countries and interacted with different cultures. I met lots of people and learned English. I mastered the skills of working with big formats, color combinations, making decisions fast (especially when I needed to make up a story of some legal justification of our painting for the police). Graffiti for me is a great school, education which I would never be able to get in a regular school or university in the country existing on the remains of the USSR. It's worth mentioning that I was still a student in the middle of the 90s the scariest time when the country was falling apart.

There was neither culture nor principles and experience even among the representatives of the older generation. There was nothing but crime, economic shock, and poverty. That's why I'm very glad that after a regular university in Minsk I've graduated from another "international" one with classes all across the world. I think it was that solid basement that gave me the opportunity to develop as an artist with cosmopolitan views on life and culture.

Also, my experience of communicating and visiting the studios of some other artists gave me an opportunity to borrow a lot of interesting life-hacks which I have been using in my studio up until now.

Graffiti is a very location-bound art form. How does your art now interact with space and location?

I never liked the fact that my graffiti works stay outside and anything could happen to them. I often wanted to come back to the place where it was created and to observe in the daylight, to see how the work matches the environment, how the paint laid on the surface, how the size of the letters is working.

But I should say that most of the halls of fame in Russia and Belarus are situated in some abandoned places where the space would have so-called dirty aesthetics. Moreover, you would have never guessed how this particular work would look like in a different location. This is what I really like about painting, where a finished work, a painting can end up in absolutely different places and within totally different circumstances: gallery, museum, some private collection, a studio.

Perhaps, a different country, some different language and sounds, scents. If we compare with graffiti where an artist travels around the world himself then here I set my works off on a journey. Of course, I don't see a very big part of them but I'm sure they end up being in very interesting places. I like this concept much more. Besides unlike with graffiti people will be able to see the paint, volume, format, and texture originally but not in the photo.

Your approach to abstract art seems very intellectual, you even include a quote from Freud in your bio. How do you translate intellectual concepts onto the canvas or vice versa?

During this 10-year period of doing abstraction, I've been observing. I've been observing myself, my art, how everything is changing. As I'm getting older I start having some fundamental questions. I've always had a lot of questions about art. I was always longing to find out the essence and the reason.

Interestingly I'm not the only one as the biggest part of abstract artists of the 20th century was in the search of the essence. But in my case, this process happens post factum. I analyze what happened after the work has been finished. In this case, Freud's theory regarding the artists really appeals to me. According to this theory, they form the world which they lack in reality. I strongly feel the lack of abstractionism and cleanliness while living and working in Russia. There's too much context, conceptions, and noise visual and noise generated from the news.

That's why I'm creating my own unique world in which I feel comfortable. I think this situation is applicable to many countries now. If we take a look at the boost of the internet and the amount of information which is



flooding our minds every day. After that informational tsunami, the only thing you want is to sit in front of the canvas in silence watching the play of colors and shapes.

Your use of color blocks and contrasts really POP off a canvas. They almost create a texture out of color. What inspires you about color and how you see it in the world?

I think I should be grateful to graffiti for that. As the colors in spray cans are already mixed during the production process, there's no such option left for the artist to mix them delicately by himself. I'm used to it I'm changing gradually. I like more and more this neat contrast in neighboring colors instead of sharp bright color combinations. But at the same time, I'm good at combining bright colors between each other as well as some more delicate color shades. Where do I get my sense of color from? I don't know may be my strong proclivity for aesthetics in every sphere is to blame for it. I can use it, I can find the harmony, to find it not only in the color but also in the texture, volume, or composition.

Is there anything about popular culture that your work engages with?

The music is always here beside me, even despite being in the process so I hardly listen to it. I'm not sure though it can be referred to as popular culture as it's more of some delicate electronic music and contemporary classics. For instance, I'm very much inspired by Nils Frahm and I'm grateful to him for his music as it often brought me in the right state of mind, revived me.

What are you working on now and what are you looking forward to?

This July I finished the repairing process and I'm moving to a new big studio. It was a difficult period connected with some great inner level of stress. I can get really emotionally attached to a place but I also believe that it's necessary to change the location from time to time. That's why now when all the logistics are done, I started working on a new series of paintings. A new feeling of space creates an interesting effect of novelty and lightness [...] I will start getting ready for my first solo show in Paris in the Speerstra Gallery which we had to postpone due to the pandemic from last year.