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To many, street art is the signature of East London. Walls, street poles, roller doors, footpaths, patches of gutters and even the summits of roofs are splashed with colour, tweaked with quirky design elements and stencilled with outlines and expressive figures.

It can be found in ubiquitous spaces and places that only a curious eye will explore.

Ben Slow is an artist of the street who, among a growing tribe of alternative thinking, creative daredevils, is busy painting his message on the canvas that is East London. And with news of his inspired work spreading, the streets from San Francisco to Soweto have begun to call.

This scholar of the arts may be carving out a life full of risks and vulnerability, but as he sees it, there's no other way. "You have to take risks and step outside of your comfort zone to be heard and to be witnessed. That's the definition of an artist. Someone who is prepared to evolve, change and grow. If you don't, you submit yourself to a semi kind of life. Not the real thing," he says.

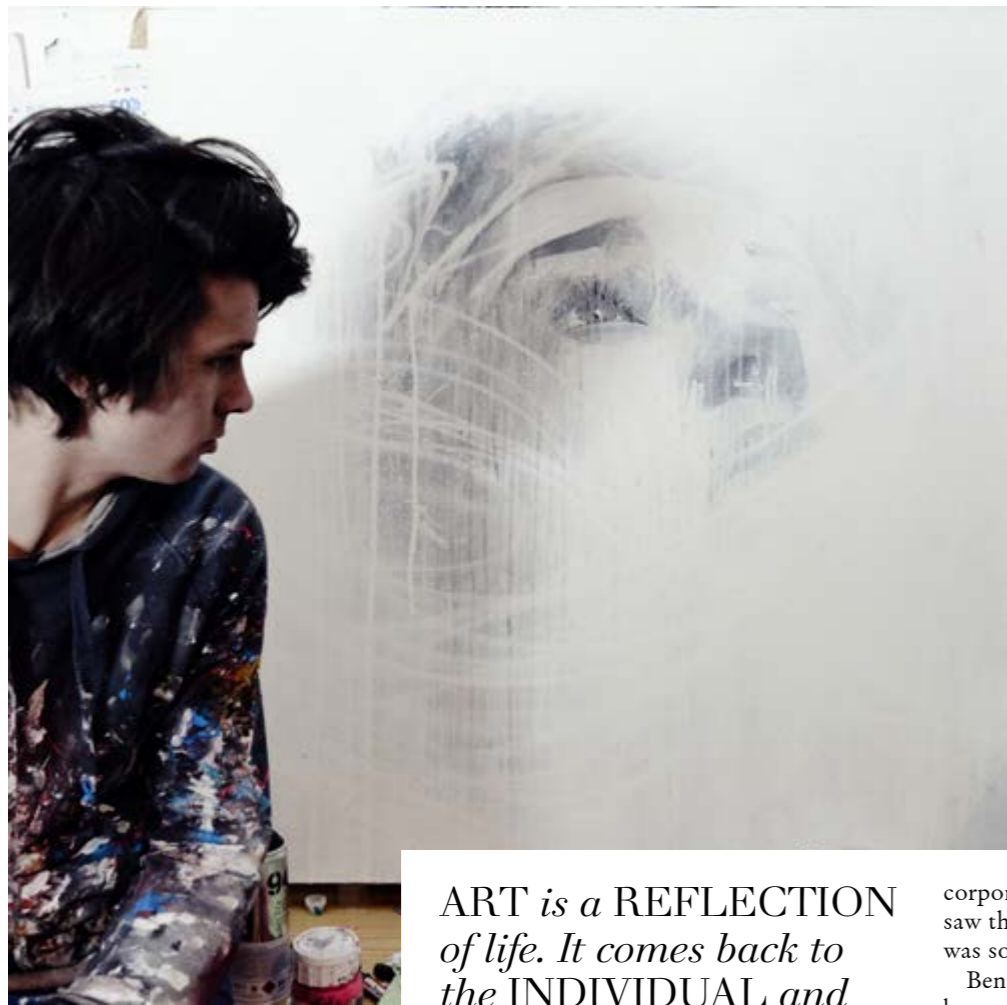
Ben's relationship with the paintbrush dates back to when he was a child. It was a tool that aided his insatiable curiosity and allowed him to capture the world through a different lens. But his story also has its dose of trials and tribulations.

He came out of his Fine Arts degree in 2006 completely disillusioned, uninspired and directionless. "The vibe I got back then was that there was very little room for painting. My tutor in fact told me that painting was obsolete," he says. >

the artist in **RESIDENCES**

WHEN BEN SLOW *finished his Fine Arts degree, a lecturer told him painting was OBSOLETE. Now, after a CAREER CRISIS, he's found his MEDIUM – and his VOICE – on the streets of East London.*

WORDS: LEAH DAVIES



ART is a REFLECTION of life. It comes back to the INDIVIDUAL and whatever you take from it personally.

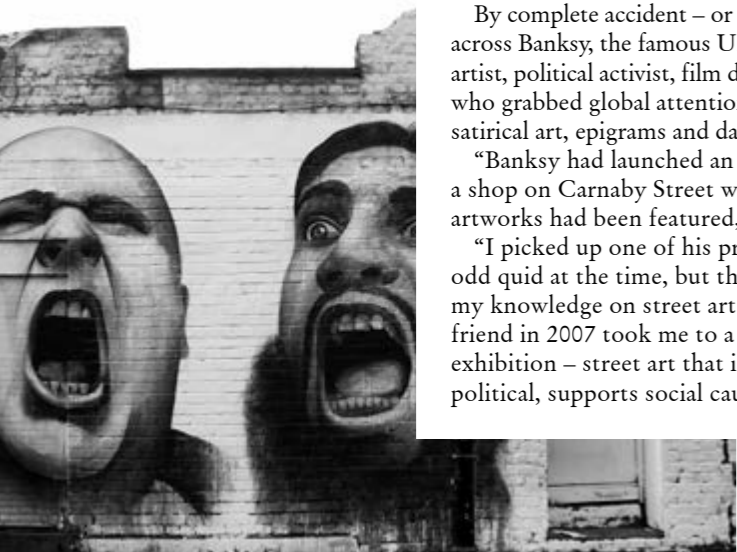
Following his studies, Ben strayed from his craft and entered the world of a nine-to-five, which swiftly silenced his creative inclinations and that special zing that had set him apart. Unique. Individual.

"I wasn't happy. It wasn't me, and so with time I found my way back to my brush and back to me," he says.

By complete accident – or fate – Ben came across Banksy, the famous UK-based graffiti artist, political activist, film director and painter who grabbed global attention through his satirical art, epigrams and dark humour.

"Banksy had launched an exhibition below a shop on Carnaby Street where a few of my artworks had been featured," says Ben.

"I picked up one of his prints for 50-odd quid at the time, but that was as far as my knowledge on street art went. Then a friend in 2007 took me to a Shepard Fairey exhibition – street art that is distinctly political, supports social causes and opposes



Ben has been commissioned to produce pieces in the UK, France, Italy, South Africa and the US, and has gigs lined up in South America.

He says his style is simple: he combines what he knows of fine art with modern-day street art, recognising them both as legitimate forms of expression, but with a different appeal.

"It's funny looking at what I was doing back then," he says of his early days painting celebrity subjects and the like.

"But it was part of my development; it has led me to where I am now," he ponders.

"Nowadays, I am much more aware of everything around me and make a conscious effort with my street art to talk about various issues, circumstances and people. To get people thinking and shifting."

Street art was a by-product of the graffiti surge of the 1960s and '70s, executed usually in public locations outside of traditional art venues.

"Art is a reflection of life. It comes back to the individual and whatever you take from it personally. Street art is more accessible to the everyday public and its intention is to make people feel a little bit uncomfortable and get them thinking," says Ben.

The key to developing a following, he says, is taking the plunge and being your biggest fan.

"You have to get your work out there, be it painting on the streets or showing your pieces in public spaces. I was almost instantly known as the person who painted drippy portraits of pretty girls, so having a kind of style that people recognise helps (and then changing and challenging your own style!)."

"Attending festivals has also been a considerable leg up. I did my first-ever outside piece at the Bristol Upfest festival, which not only boosted my confidence but made people aware of my work and connected me with other artists."

ART GIVES ME FREEDOM. It has opened me to different PEOPLE, alternative IDEAS and dissimilar EXPERIENCES. I've learned that LIFE isn't fair and NOTHING is going to be HANDED to you on a plate.

Recognising your strengths and weaknesses and asking for help when you need it are keys to making it big, says Ben.

"The business side does not come naturally to me and in the beginning I made a few mistakes. But I would like to think I have learned from them and still am. It's a critical part of what I do but I am lucky that I work closely with someone who has helped me tremendously in this department.

"Connecting and building partnerships is crucial for moving forward. Everyone has their skill set and we can learn from each other's talents if we just ask."

He says personal growth has been key to being a better artist (and businessman), adding that acknowledging, reflecting on and embodying the lessons of the past have allowed him to expose his heart and mind to new perspectives, stimuli and muses; to live and paint with virtuosity.

"When I was living a 'normal' existence, I was a completely different person," he says.

"Art gives me freedom. It has opened me to different people, alternative ideas and dissimilar experiences. I've learned that life isn't fair and nothing is going to be handed to you on a plate. You need to continue to push yourself if you want to be successful.

"Finally, and very importantly, there's no point in being jealous of other people's success. Learn from it, celebrate with them and let them inspire you." ■

IMAGES COURTESY OF BEN SLOW. PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL GRAY (1.), SHAFIUR RAHMAN

