



# NICK WALKER

From the streets of Bristol to the galleries of New York, Nick Walker has championed the rise of urban art. We spoke to the man behind the can over Sunday lunch at The Galley

WORDS AND IMAGES: **JOE MORTIMER**

It's a bright spring afternoon when I meet Nick Walker, one of the world's most successful and sought-after artists, at a small Bristol restaurant. Families and couples are strolling along the city's historic waterfront as he arrives at The Galley, wearing his trademark hat, a plaid shirt and black jeans. The only thing missing to complete the archetypal graffiti artist look is a spray can. Instead he's holding a hardback book, a copy of *The Art Of Nick Walker*.

"I brought you a book," he says simply as we shake hands, and he apologises for being slightly late. We'd met briefly in Hong Kong last year, a few days before his new exhibition, *Entropy*, opened at Above Second Gallery. Then, as now, he was affable and comfortable in his surroundings, but he seems somehow even more at home in Bristol.

The man who once sold US\$1.5 million of art in a single day now spends much of his time on the road, launching exhibitions and discussing new projects with like-minded artists and cross-genre collaborators. He's had sell-out exhibitions in New York, London and LA; he's worked with brands and bands ranging from Royal Doulton to The Black Eyed Peas; and he's done a stint as artist-in-residence at New York's achingly cool The Quin Hotel.

The man and his art are in high demand, but life on the road is taking its toll, and he's exhausted. "Living in New York is OK, but it does smash you up a bit," he says as we take a seat by the window. "I live out of a suitcase. It's been a bit better recently, but sometimes it gets to the point where you want to hide the suitcase away and stabilise a bit. There's something about staying still for a while."

Staying still is something the Bristol-born artist has never done for long. Born in 1969, he moved between London, Australia and his hometown for much of his youth, but now spends most of his time in New York. He's in Bristol for a two-week break to spend time with his daughters, aged 12 and 16, before setting off on another hectic trip, with stops in Paris and Tokyo, before a quick holiday in the Philippines.

For all his globe-trotting exploits, his aspirations are far more modest. "My dream is to own a nice house somewhere a little bit rural. I've always had this vision of a really nice garden that's a bit unkempt. Half way down the garden there's a load of trees, and at the back [I'd] have an Airstream caravan; just a little place I could disappear to. I'd set it up as a little office; a cave to misbehave," he grins before pausing to reply to a text from his daughter.

Disappearance or escapism is at the heart of Walker's life and work. Growing up in Bristol in the 1980s, his circle of influence included many of the musicians that formed the foundations of the UK's most vibrant music and arts scene of the day: the likes of The Wild Bunch (now Massive Attack), Roni Size and Tricky, who pioneered a musical revolution that gave birth to modern British drum and bass and trip-hop.

"You chose your weapon back then. At first I was mad into breaking [breakdancing]. I went from that into wanting to be a graffiti writer," he recalls as we skim the menu.

His artistic inspiration came from comic books and the works of illustrators like Alex Nino, Todd McFarlane and Jean 'Moebius' Giraud, whose fantastical worlds appealed to the young escape artist. But the transition from comic book fan to aspiring graffiti writer was sparked by another medium: the music video for Blondie's *Rapture*, which introduced him to some of the pioneers of the American graffiti scene, like Lee Quinones and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

"Then there was *Buffalo Gals* by Malcolm McLaren. That showed a really raw and gritty part of New York culture; people at Times Square breakdancing and body popping," he says, excited by the memory. "It showed a graffiti writer who later became known as Dondi White. He was outlining the words 'Buffalo Gals'. The way he did it with such accuracy and immediacy was amazing. I wanted to be able to do that."

Previously, Walker had told me that The Galley was home to the "Sunday lunch of champions". We both choose a venison carpaccio to start, then the slow roast shoulder of beef. "Can't go wrong," he declares with the confidence of experience.

Between his formative years – honing his craft on the streets of his hometown and his stepfather's garage – and making it big in the new world of urban art, Walker pursued his other passion inspired by an early love of movie posters: working in set design for film studios. During stints at Pinewood and Shepperton, he designed sets for films including *Judge Dredd* (1995), and Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), for which he created replicas of New York's graffiti-covered streets.

By the '90s, the signature Nick Walker style had emerged, combining traditional graffiti with detailed stencil work to deliver



thoughtful, ironic and sometimes provocative messages, which were painted on canvas as well as bricks and mortar. When he was given an opportunity to produce a body of work for a solo show in London, he jumped at the chance. "It went well, and I thought, right, I can paint and people will buy my paintings. That's amazing. I kind of went from there.

"I had a few curve balls and left turns along the way. Around about the time I had my first kid and it was important I got my money in, so I worked in a hospital for a while just so I could pay my mortgage and pay for living. You just have to hustle and do what you have to do."

The venison arrives; a colourful medley of rich, earthy meat with crunchy yellow and pink radishes, crimson beetroot and bright cress, on an unctuous pea mousseline and horseradish cream. It's a plate that bursts with artistic flair; and the artist himself obviously approves.

At this point it seems prudent to introduce the third persona at the dinner table, a London gent wearing a pinstriped suit and a bowler hat, known as The Vandal. He's present insofar as he is Walker's alter ego; a kind of superhero who can get away with things that your average street artist never will, and the protagonist of many of his paintings.

"If you think about the archetypal graffiti writer; he looks kind of messy, covered in paint, wearing a hoodie. No one expects him to be dressed up like a city gent. [The Vandal] was able to paint graffiti and then slip into a whole sea of other people who looked exactly the same as him in London Town."

In the wake of the world's sudden acceptance of urban art at the end of the '00s, the irony was prescient. "He's dressed like the people who now buy his work – the people who buy our particular genre right now."



In the context of Walker's own career, The Vandal was born a few years before the event that changed the art world's perception of street art forever; catapulting it to the main stage. In February 2008, prestigious British auction house Bonhams hosted its first ever urban art exhibition, featuring works from Walker and other street artists including Banksy, Paul Insect and Takashi Murakami.

The first Nick Walker piece was entitled *The Morning After: London Version*, the first in a series of paintings that feature The Vandal looking back at cities drenched in colourful paint. Since then, The Vandal has reappeared in works featuring Tokyo, New York, Hong Kong, Paris and Moscow cityscapes, to name a few. After taking part in the Dubai Walls project earlier this year, Walker says he plans to do a Dubai version.

His other piece was called *The Moona Lisa* and it sold for ten times what Bonhams had predicted, netting more than US\$100,000. "Then it went crazy," he recalls. "My show in LA sold out the next day. Half of it was sold on the first night, but the day after that it was gone – everything." He still seems incredulous.

A few months later, at a solo auction at the Black Rat Gallery in Shoreditch, London, Walker sold US\$1.5 million of paintings in just a few hours. Street art had landed on the art scene with a bang and in doing so, changed the lives of many artists almost overnight. Those whose artistic careers began in the back streets became respectable celebrities in the world of high art. Ironically, following the economic crisis that came soon after, those in pin-stripped suits soon became the bad guys.

The success and commercialisation of urban art has been well documented; something the movement's protagonists never saw coming. "I never realised it would become mainstream. As a genre, street art has become so much less of an underground phenomenon – it's so commercial," Walker says, giving his slightly frosted beard a thoughtful scratch. "People are just painting anything. You've got people out there who have never hit a wall in their life and they go straight into a gallery structure. You see it and you're like – a street artist?"

Two plates piled high with golden roasted potatoes, bright veg and a generous chunk of beef appear. Walker calls it a "ridiculous monstrosity" and digs into the beef. It's moist and aromatic,



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accompanied by rich gravy, tangy braised red cabbage and sweet caramelised carrots, with a pot of light, creamy horseradish sauce on the side.

As we eat, we look out on Hotwells Road in the direction of Walker's standout Bristol mural: an eight-storey image of The Vandal pouring paint down the side of a building. It was while painting this piece at the 2011 *See No Evil* exhibition that Walker met New York street artist Bio. "He just jumped on [the crane] and said, 'I'll help you do it,'" he recalls, mopping up some gravy with a chunk of giant Yorkshire pudding.

It was a fortuitous meeting: this year he's teaming up with Bio and fellow Bronx-based artist John 'Crash' Matos to launch a series of exhibitions featuring paintings created by all three artists in collaboration. The first will take place in Zurich this month, followed by shows in Paris and New York.

Perhaps the most profound indication of how far street art and this artist in particular have come is the collaboration with British manufacturer Royal Doulton. To celebrate its bicentennial, the company, which has been making chinaware for the British royal family since 1815, launched a new street art collection of limited-edition ceramics featuring designs by Walker and fellow artist Pure Evil.

This parallel evolution of urban art as a modern genre, and Walker's emergence as a mainstream artist whose work is coveted from LA to Tokyo, must have had an effect on him as an artist, I wonder out loud.

"I am who I am. I paint because I love painting. I paint art so I guess it's art for art's sake. It was never about making crazy money. I used it as a form of escapism; I went into a different world when I did it. Now it's different. It's the only thing I know really, so you have to take care of it and nurture it and be careful about how you do certain things."

He's talking about living up to expectations of collectors and fans. "I can't do just anything and sell it. People pigeonhole you a bit and they don't like change. Change is hard for collectors. I get the impression that everyone expects me to keep doing the Vandal character; They want to know where's he going next and what's he doing."

We order a couple of desserts – homemade strawberry shortcake – and two coffees, and conclude our lunch discussing ways in which he could kill off The Vandal. "There's numerous ideas I've had to dispose of him, but I don't know..." he trails off. "I tried to move on but it's difficult because he's my bread and butter at the end of the day."

Reading through his book that evening reveals more of the artistic process of the thoughtful character that is Nick Walker, a man who is unerringly sympathetic to his craft. A touching foreword written by Crash sums up the conceit of the graffiti-versus-art paradox and Walker's alter-ego, the man in the pin-striped suit: no one capable of work as skilled and poignant as his can ever really be labelled a vandal.

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## THE BILL

2 Venison carpaccio US\$14.30  
 2 Shoulder of beef US\$34.60  
 2 Strawberry shortcake US\$14.30  
 2 Coffee US\$5.80

**Total: US\$69**