

## Final Copy

Before local East Village artist Ian Dave Knife had his first cup of coffee, he had finished painting a mural, smoked a couple American Spirits, argued with a man who was probably the owner of El Camion Cantina, and completed an interview with me around noon. Knife, 49, had suggested we meet at his mural-in-progress on the corner of Ave. A and 12th St. The mural is located on the outdoor dining apparatus at El Camion Cantina. I was curious to watch him at work. It was a cold but bright blue morning in New York City after days of rain had shrouded the neighborhood in gray. Approaching the mural, which featured layers upon layers of the words Amor and Knife in yellow and violet and green and bright pink and teal hearts, was like walking into the rainbow after the storm.

The allure of the mural goes beyond its entrancing aesthetic, though. Street art is often an act of rebellion as much as it is an engagement with the community. Knife's work often reflects his activism, and as one can imagine, breaking the rules in such a public fashion sometimes lands Knife in challenging positions.

Activism is how I found Knife. I once went for a run with the usual current of joggers down 10th street past Tompkins Square Park and the Riis Houses to the waterfront East River Park. I noticed a few stickers that read something like "Save East River Park" posted angularly onto the railing by the river. *I like East River Park*, I thought. *I should look into that.*

When I did, I saw that there was a recent event at the park called Art Attack that had been organized by Knife in partnership with a community activist group called East River Park ACTION, after ERPA had invited Knife to a meeting. ERPA was formed with the intention to stop a controversial plan to practically demolish the park in order to build a seawall. The wall is meant to mitigate the effects of rising sea levels. The plan was passed by city council in October 2019, and in February 2020, ERPA, in tandem with over a dozen other community groups, filed a lawsuit to stop the plan from going forward. The suit was then dismissed by the New York Supreme Court in August. Originally planned to begin this fall, demolition was postponed until Spring 2021, leaving a small window of hope for groups like ERPA and activists like Knife.

Knife often starts and ends his day at the East River Park, and the park is more to him than a worthwhile cause. It is a spiritual place where he goes to clear his mind, meditate, exercise, and connect with nature, he said. Still, he was incredulous that the group wanted him front and center.

"I said are you guys kidding? You're going to give me the microphone?" Knife laughed. His self-deprecation would make more sense to me later. Knife has a deep voice and speaks from that high-up creative place brimming with inspiration. Freckles dot his face as if splattered by paint.

When the event took place in October, messages like "Back Off City Hall" and "Save Our Parks" and colorful depictions of flowers and trees saturated the concrete in the amphitheater area of the park. Additional street artists such as Brandon Sines, aka Frank Ape on Insta-

gram, Sean Slaney, aka Angry Red, and Delphine le Goff, aka Spoutnik, joined the Art Attack as well. Next morning, the art was power-washed away by the Parks Department. Knife pointed out that, although the artwork was a form of protest, it was peaceful. He was surprised at the department's swift response.

“And I think they went and destroyed the protest because they didn't want that message that we wrote to be seen by others,” Knife said.

He said this as if it were a matter of fact, a testament to the intuition he has honed since he was young. Knife knew he had an interest in art from the age of six, and said his father was the one that encouraged him to own his passion. Knife would return from school to find his work—which he had attempted to hide as if hiding a forbidden treat—presented on the walls of his home in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. Presented by his father.

Zimbabwe is also known for its Shona sculpture, a modern artistic movement native to Zimbabwe rooted in the Shona tradition of stonework. This is the craft that Knife would become most well-known for throughout his career. (He now teaches stone sculpting classes in Chelsea.) But his practice had faded by the time he reached high school at 14, and at 19, he was forced to flee the country. In the two decades leading up to Knife's immigration in 2000, Zimbabwe had suffered from corrupt leadership that, among other problems, destroyed its economy. Knife wouldn't elaborate further than to say he disagreed with the government's policies and feared retaliation. He sought asylum in the United States.

“It's the worst thing in the world because you're running from home. Home is a place that you want to run to when things go bad,” Knife said.

When he came to the states, Knife first lived in California, then Michigan, then New Mexico, then Colorado. All the while he worked on his art, his sculpture in particular. He had a studio-gallery in Taos, where he lived for 14 years, and frequently exhibited his work. He never received a formal education in art. While living in Colorado, however, Knife had decided to get what he called “a regular job.” Although it paid well, he wasn't selling his art, and he was less than fulfilled.

“I was the angriest guy in the world. I was always angry. I could never maintain a relationship, my mind was always thinking all over the place,” Knife said.

Knife packed up his artwork and supplies in his pickup truck, and left Colorado for New York City early one morning in 2017.

“I didn't have anywhere to go in New York,” Knife said. “I just knew in New York is where I'm feeling the vibe. And this is where I think my art's gonna thrive.”

For a year he lived out of his truck all around the East Village. Soon, he met other artists who invited him to their gallery openings and introduced him to collectors. He maintained his vision to focus on nothing else but his art, and it was starting to come to fruition. Now, he said, he's the happiest he's ever been.

What dawned on me as Knife and I talked, standing in the middle of the multi-colored mural, dodging bikers and traffic and shuffling our gear out of the way of pedestrians, is that despite its ephemeral life, for a brief time, street art is omnipresent. It embodies freedom. It is free to view, free of the walls of a gallery and free of the standard form of a canvas. Whether and where the art *belongs*, and to whom, are open questions that street artists such as Knife have fought with opponents about for decades.

The one substantial protection that street artists have is the Visual Artists Rights of Act of 1990 (VARA) which stipulates that property owners must give artists 90 days to remove the art if it is painted on their property and unwelcome. *Castillo v. G&M Realty L.P.*, also known as the 5 Pointz case, affirmed in February 2020 that even if street art is illegally placed, it is still subject to protection from destruction unless certain stipulations outlined in VARA are met, establishing a clearer precedent for street art. Property owners could face hundreds to thousands of dollars in fines if an artist successfully tries them in court—in this case, a group of street artists in Queens won \$6.75 million in statutory damages.

I asked Knife about a situation this summer involving the restaurant August Laura on Ave. A and 6th St. that relates to this tension, though on a much smaller scale. All year, Knife had been working on an initiative to carve tree stumps into faces and other things around the East Village to foremost bring awareness to the slow process that ensues when sick or dead trees are first cut down before replaced. The tree stumps are eye-catching. Faces that represent victims of police violence, flowers, and animals have all appeared through Knife's tools. His initiative has gotten lots of attention from local press. What is especially intriguing about them is how the layers of carving interact with the layers of the tree. Both enhance the natural texture and dimension of the sculptures. Knife says the neighborhood can feel the loss of the trees.

“You walk around, and a tree that you've been seeing for several months, several years, you show up one day and it's cut down. It just leaves this void,” Knife said.

Knife says when they are replaced it is with saplings which take longer to integrate into the environment and contribute to the ecosystem in a significant way. Knife intends to also beautify the neighborhood by carving into the stumps. Much like his stone work, carving the tree stumps is both a cultural and spiritual process for Knife.

“My culture, we believe that when a tree is cut, the roots at the bottom of the tree don't yet know that the top of the tree is cut. So everything at the bottom is still continuing the process, it's still alive. It's sucking in water through the roots, and expiring it out through the cut part. So the tree's not aware of what's going on, so there's still life inside the tree. And that's when I like to carve them, right as soon as they're still healing from that,” Knife said.

He goes through a process of tuning into the tree stump before he carves. He observes the stump, talks to the stump, sits on the stump, smokes next to the stump and lets the tree stump tell him its information, almost as if the stump is sentient. He prefers to work with natural materials, and more than once commented that he disliked using toxic spray paint as he worked on his mural. He sees his role in the creative process as the tool that assists his art in coming forth from the spiritual realm and into the physical world.

Of one such tree stump was borne a crocodile head that became the center of the conflict between Knife and August Laura. The restaurant's owner had decided to paint the crocodile green, much to Knife's ire. As reported by Village Sun, and confirmed by our conversation, a feud ensued in which Knife made death threats. Knife maintains that he was expressing his anger, and that threats weren't made toward a specific person. The Village Sun notes as well that the stumps are city property anyway—so who is in the wrong? The argument could have been an infinite back and forth. Knife seems to think of confrontation as a first step toward healing. Confrontation is part of activism as it is a part of street art; it asks us to go deeper than the surface.

Soon after we moved on from the subject, I watched another version of this tension between art and property unfold during my encounter with Knife. El Camion Cantina was setting up tables and chairs for lunch as a line of people waited at a cafe across the street. A man from the restaurant had wanted to speak to Knife when he was done. We wrapped up ten minutes later.

“Let me see what this cat wants real quick,” Knife said.

He walked around the apparatus as I packed my notebook and pen and met the owner of the restaurant at the front. He spoke in a hushed voice as I approached and stood two or three feet behind them. It was clear there was a problem. *Oh fuck*, I thought.

The owner said that he did not like Knife's mural, that it was all about Knife and not about the restaurant, presumably because Knife's name is layered in with the rest of the piece. I could understand his point until Knife said he had not been commissioned or given anything in exchange for his work. The owner said he would paint over it. Knife motioned for the owner to walk with him to the front of the mural.

“What is there not to like about Amor?” Knife said, gesturing to the vibrant words and hearts painted onto the wooden frame.

A tense argument ensued. While the owner stood and crossed his arms as he talked, Knife was much more expressive, walking around the mural and incorporating his hands, making his case as if he were a lawyer.

Knife said a brief conversation was had that gave him a degree of creative freedom, and that the restaurant's logo would go in the center. The owner disagreed about the content of this conversation, in fact, he disputed that it happened at all. Knife said he had used over \$200 worth of paint. The owner asked if Knife knew how much the dining apparatus had cost.

“Fourteen-thousand dollars,” the owner said.

Since the piece was done, Knife continued, he asked how could they move forward. The owner kept repeating that he was trying to reason with Knife, but was not conceding any solutions, from what I could tell. Sensing that the back and forth would not give way to a resolution, Knife explained the Visual Artists Rights Act, then told the owner he could do whatever he wanted. He stormed away down the street without looking back, leaving me to follow. *Does this mean the interview is over?*

I had a couple more questions for Knife, and decided not to further agitate the store owner by asking him for a comment. Knife had told him I was a journalist, and warned him this would be in the paper. He said he did not care. I had this strange feeling then that my cover had been blown, though I had no cover to begin with. *I should follow before I lose him.*

Knife is of course aware of the perception of street artists. When I caught up with him, he wanted to get a coffee at Starbucks, remember, his first that day. He scraped the wet paint off of his fingers on a stone marker outside of Tompkins Square Park before we walked in. I noticed purple paint had covered a gold ring on his finger.

“I’m a vandal,” Knife said as we waited. He was only half-joking, if at all.

He ordered a large coffee and made conversation with the baristas. We then found a bench in Tompkins Square Park and he told me about his latest projects after lighting another American Spirit. He is planning art initiatives to raise awareness about the slaves that built New Amsterdam, a Dutch colony that occupied the southernmost part of Manhattan in early 17th century. Peter Stuyvesant, whose name is enshrined all over downtown, was the director-general of New Amsterdam. Knife wants plaques to be put up on historic buildings in the area that recognize the role slaves played in their construction, among other ideas.

“Art is always honest,” Knife said. “The artist’s work is always going to be honest. There’s no sugarcoating a piece of art.”