

FEATURED

How Manchester's Sarah Lomas rejected for arts funding as it's "not culturally significant"

The globetrotting northerners who beat cancer twice and spent lockdown in the woods - visiting 36 countries along the way

Living on top of the city: How Manchester's Sarah Lomas sees Manchester differently from above

93 wins, no title shots: How City's greatest boxer was stopped from becoming a champion

Manchester Mind: The charity fighting for better mental health, 30 years and counting

The glory and the goodbye: Why this week was the most defining in Oasis history

The man behind the murals: We spent the day with Akse P19

BY GARETH LLOYD 6TH DECEMBER 2019

A Smiths fan, a doctor, a chemist, a vinyl collector, a Breaking Bad enthusiast, a family man, and a humble intellectual. We spend a day with Akse P19 and discover what shaped one of the greatest modern artists in Manchester.

"The Jack Nicholson one is just back there," our driver tells us, jerking a thumb behind his shoulder. The sphinxlike Manchester street artist, Akse P19, is whizzing us through a rain-whipped Northern Quarter in his car; spray cans rattling at our feet whilst his iconic mask rests on the backseat alongside me. He's generously offered to transport us through the monsoon-like weather to see his latest painting, answering questions about his urban graffiti whenever a mural flashes into view beyond the blurry windows. It's only a five-minute journey, but we still manage to pass three of his paintings en route, proof that Akse is ubiquitous and Mancunian heroes. He has spent decades colouring the city's red brick walls with dazzling, lifelike murals of musicians, athletes, poets, actors, fictional characters and Mancunian heroes. It's the kind of art that strikes a chord and makes your chest puff with civic pride. His decades' of work - coupled with the explosion of Instagram, Facebook and Twitter - has seen Akse earned rightful recognition as one of the most important creative figures in the region. However, until now, his backstory has remained something of a mystery. This is the man behind the mask.

Paint gets on everything...

With such a hybrid background, Akse could have settled almost anywhere in the world. So, we should be grateful he chose Manchester as his canvas. Despite his Vietnamese heritage, a syrupy French accent and a Basque-speaking family, Akse has built a connection with Mancunia that runs deep - as his murals help to shape the atmosphere of the city. The artist arrives at Teacup Kitchen for our interview in his familiar specs and paint-splashed trousers... but also a jet-black hoodie sporting a giant gold bee. "I thought, for The Manc, this would be a great choice," he chuckles. The only thing that's missing is his mask which he eagerly straps to his face before our photographer starts snapping away later in the day. Akse is eager to keep his personality separate from his work. Preserving his image - cap, glasses and mask - is important to him. He wants the images to speak for themselves and retain the enigmatic aura that has helped him gain so much attention in the first instance. As we talk, Akse catches me eyeing the crispy outer shell that's wrapped around his phone. "Masking tape," he clarifies. "To protect it from the paint. You see, here..." He flips the device over and runs his index finger over an invasive purple smear on the casing. "Paint gets on everything." "Mess is par for this occupation. But it's only when we quiz Akse on his working hours that some of the additional challenges of artwork become clear. "There's no 9-5. You can't really have a routine in this job," he explains, a thin smirk spreading across his lips. "Sometimes, I'm able to go to the shop and get things to eat, but often there are no breaks. "I should bring my own lunch, really. But I'm just not organised enough to do that. "You can't always choose your hours, either. If I'm doing a personal mural and it starts pissing down, I can just go home and come back again another time. One day doesn't really make a difference. "But if it's commissioned, I have to finish it by a certain date. You have a deadline. "With the Harry Maguire one, for example, it rained all day and I was completely soaked through. When it gets wet, the spray paint dries out quickly, too. So working in the bad weather can be very difficult. "But it is worth it. This is me."

Now, 40 years later, this is what I'm known as...

Akse's amazing artwork invites all kinds of questions. But there's one burning query we have to resolve before going any further into the aesthetics. Where did that name come from? "Golden Axe," the artist explains, taking a long sip of his latte. "It was a video game in the eighties. "At the time, my English was not very good, but I liked the way it sounded. I just switched the 'X' for the 'ks'. "I never thought people would actually call me by that name. It was just for flow and style of the tag at that time. "But now, 30 years later, this is what I'm known as." But what about the P19 bit? "That's the crew I am part of," he explains. "A graffiti artist called PEST formed it back in the Paris suburbs - which is where I grew up. "There are about ten to fifteen members of the collective. Most of them still work in Paris today. "In the late eighties/early nineties I got into hip-hop - which introduced me to the graffiti scene in France. "I moved to the UK in 1997 to study chemistry - which actually comes in useful, working with paints! I went to MMU and did an MSc and PhD before I found a job in science. I worked for 15 years as a project manager after that - but I kept painting all that time. "When I arrived in Manchester, I was on my own and didn't know much about the graffiti scene. "But soon I got involved with Euroculture, a festival organised by Spearfish taking place by Oxford Road Station that invited artists from all around Europe. "That's how I ended up doing more street art." It was back in 2012 that Akse met the curators of The Out House - an organisation that provides space for artists around the Northern Quarter. This encounter, combined with the rise of social media, saw the Akse name spread further and wider than he ever could have hoped for...

As a chemist, I really enjoy Breaking Bad, so doing Heisenberg was quite special.

The Out House is an organisation that guarantees there's always a space for artists to flex their creative muscles. "You don't choose who will be painting with you," Akse's explains. "The scene isn't that big, so you know all the other artists, more or less. You meet many of them at events. If they are local, you're likely to work with them at some point." Akse also does his own personal artwork in the city, obtaining permission from the owner of the building, the landlord and/or property management companies before he shakes up his spray can. He specialises in photorealistic portraiture, but out of the hundreds of pieces he's composed over the years, is there one he's particularly proud of? "The Heisenberg piece was really popular. As a chemist, I really enjoy Breaking Bad, so doing that one was quite special for me. We ask if there are any murals he'd like to make in the future, and Akse doesn't have to think long about his answer. "I have a list of a few subjects I've been wanting to paint for a long time," he confirms. "One of them was Marvin Gaye - which I have just finished. "I did it as commission for Soul Coffee which is opening in Ancoats." He asks us if we'd like to see it. A few minutes following a resounding 'yes', we find ourselves climbing out of wearing his trademark hat and stepping into a cafe under the ceiling. On the left wall is an incredible monochrome 'yes', we find ourselves climbing out of wearing his trademark hat and stepping into a cafe under the ceiling. Before posing beside the sketched singer, Akse retrieves a huge stack of Marvin Gaye vinyls from his car and starts flicking through them, thinking carefully about which one he should choose. He picks one, raises it slowly, puts it back, plucks another record from the pile, and then returns to his original choice. "This one, I think, will be better," he mutters. He wants the picture to be perfect. Like Walter White, Akse doesn't do half-measures.

This is a great place to be a part of

Since touching down in Manchester many years ago, Akse moved around the outskirts of the city whilst finding his feet, juggling his painting with a career in project management. Today, he's settled with a young family and pursuing his artwork full-time. "Manchester is a good size, it's convenient to get around. I'm a fan of the music scene here. I always used to like The Smiths - and that was before I even came here! "The city has everything I need, really. Except the weather. "The last twenty years it has kind of boomed, bringing in a lot of new businesses and creatives. "There's a lot here now. It's a great place to be a part of." Great to have you here, Akse... Make sure you follow Akse on Instagram to keep up to date with his amazing work.

Like Follow Twitter Instagram

A snapshot in time: Photographer shares images captured in 1970s Manchester

Living on top of the city: How Manchester's Sarah Lomas sees Manchester differently from above

No laughing matter: Iconic comedy club Frog & Bucket rejected for arts funding as it's "not culturally significant"

