

## ALOFT WITH CROFT ONE LAST TIME

Final instalment of Tomb Raider origin story plays like an action film

> GAMING P5



## YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY

The ever-changing landscape of working-class bastion Yau Ma Tei

> SOCIETY P5



## A BUCKETLOAD OF BEDFELLOWS

Big brands join forces with designers to win over mainland youth market

> FASHION P5



This mural in Chiang Mai by Piyasak Khieosaard takes a swipe at construction magnate Premchai Karnasuta who was caught up in a poaching scandal.

# SPRAYING WHAT THEY MEAN

Fed up with corruption under the military government, Thailand's street artists are turning political and plastering their anti-establishment messages across the country

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There are many ways to fight the establishment, and Headache Stencil does so with graffiti. The Thai street artist, who uses a pseudonym for safety reasons, engages in hit-and-run attacks of subversive street art, producing stencilled murals on various public surfaces around Bangkok.

And not just any artworks. In one piece of graffiti he depicted Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha as a street artist wielding a spray can with the number 44 on it. That was a reference to Article 44 of Thailand's interim constitution, which grants absolute powers to the former army chief who heads the National Council for Peace and Order, the country's ruling junta.

In another cheeky piece on a pedestrian overpass, Headache Stencil sprayed the face of an alarm clock with the likeness of General Prawit Wongsuwan, Prayuth's second-in-command. It was a dig at the deputy prime minister, who was discovered by eagle-eyed social media sleuths to have worn 25 different luxury watches in public despite his modest government salary.

**Clockwise from below: works by Headache Stencil of a Thai soldier with a water gun, and Deputy Prime Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, who has a penchant for luxury watches; Alex Face's Mani character wears a black cat costume as a protest at February's poaching scandal.**

Prawit dismissed criticisms of his watch collection by insisting they had been loaned to him by a friend, who has since died.

"I don't know if he's guilty [of corruption] or not," Headache Stencil says. "But I wanted to show we're alarmed."

Alarmed, that is, by what anti-junta activists see as endemic corruption under the military regime. The army seized power in 2014 from a democratically elected government ostensibly with the aim of eradicating corruption and restoring social harmony after months of fractious street protests.

Recently, Headache Stencil produced another piece, this one on a concrete support for an elevated road. It shows a Thai soldier in combat fatigues taking aim with a plastic water gun of the kind revellers use during the Thai New Year known as Songkran.

"It's the fourth year we've had Songkran under military rule," Headache Stencil says. "That's what I wanted to say with it."

The authorities clamp down on dissent, so presumably Headache Stencil does his graffiti furtively at night? No. He works in broad daylight. "Why would I do it at night?" he says. "It's dark, bro. I couldn't see a thing."

Dressed in overalls, he dons a face mask and shows up at preselected locations with his stencils and paints. "I look like a workman," he says. "No one realises I'm going to do graffiti. Passers-by think I'm there to repaint a wall or repair something."

Headache Stencil dresses in a casual hip-hop style, is covered in impulsively acquired tattoos and speaks fluent English peppered with American slang.

"I've always been a bad boy, bro," Headache Stencil says. "Look at the tattoos of opium poppies on my arms, man." They complement a portrait of Diego Maradona that takes up his left shoulder.

The Thai street artist had the retired Argentinian soccer star's face inked into his skin in homage as much to Maradona's dribbling skills as to his reputation as a devil-may-care party animal.

A former creative marketing professional who worked in the entertainment business, Headache Stencil also used to party hard. He does less of that now. He also tries to guard his anonymity. "It's dangerous for me, bro," he notes.

Shortly after his tongue-in-cheek take on the deputy prime minister's penchant for luxury

watches went viral on social media, municipal officials white-washed the image and a dozen police officers showed up at the graffiti artist's condominium. Headache Stencil gave them the slip just in time.

From hiding, he reached out to his tens of thousands of followers on Facebook. Saying he feared for his safety, he stressed he was no criminal. "All I did was express my views through art," he wrote. "I didn't kill anyone. So what's the point of this harassment?"

Several young pro-democracy activists staged a protest in his support at a Bangkok landmark and were promptly detained for violating the law against political gatherings without permission. "It's not about graffiti. It's about free speech," says one activist who studies at a university in the Thai capital.

In the end, the authorities backed off. Headache Stencil remains jittery, though. He speaks freely to a reporter but asks that details like his family background be left unmentioned, even if they're known to the police.

But he won't make apologies for his art. "I've called myself Headache for a reason, bro," he says. "I want to give some [powerful] people a headache."

He's not alone in that. In recent months street art has turned into a potent form of social commentary in Thailand. While most local graffiti has long existed in the usual no-man's-land between vandalism and artistic self-expression, much of it now carries overtly political undertones.

The recent killing of a rare black Indochinese leopard in February galvanised the artists. A story broke that a hunting party headed by Premchai Karnasuta, a construction magnate, had been detained by wildlife rangers inside a World Heritage wildlife sanctuary in central Thailand. Premchai was discovered with the carcasses of several freshly killed animals, including a leopard.

The mogul was taken briefly into custody where he was photographed receiving deferential treatment from a senior police officer. To Thais, long used to a culture where the rich and powerful can get away with murder, it seemed the case would become yet another in which the



Many of my friends and relatives don't get it. They don't want me to rock the boat

PATCHARAPOL TANGRUEN (A.K.A. ALEX FACE)

A mild-mannered man with a ponytail and a wispy goatee, Piyasak once sold noodles on the street. He now spends his time spray-painting imaginative animal-themed images onto walls to critique the maltreatment of animals.

"We have to keep reminding people of environmental and social issues so they don't fade from view," he says. "I try to make my paintings eye-catching, but it's their message that matters."

The construction billionaire, who is facing charges related to poaching, has denied any wrongdoing or killing the leopard.

"I didn't do it," he told Thai media. It was business as usual, he added, for his conglomerate, which has worked on several lucrative government projects over the years.

"I called all the bureaus and ministries, and everyone felt sorry for me," he said.

But Mari, a world-weary, doll-faced cartoon character in a rabbit costume, doesn't buy his denials. He's the brainchild of Patcharapol Tangruen, a 37-year-old artist who goes by the moniker Alex Face, who has decorated numerous walls, facades and other surfaces around Bangkok and other cities with his trademark creation.

Recently his character appeared on a concrete fence, wearing a black panther costume with a pointy Pinocchio nose. "Liars gonna lie," the artist says. "The killing of the leopard isn't just about poaching. It's also a matter of justice," says Petch Manopawit, a prominent Thai conservationist.

"Graffiti artists have helped keep the focus on this case. They've definitely made an impact."

In the process, Headache Stencil, Piyasak, Patcharapol and other street artists have become celebrities in their own right. "Everyone in my area knows me, bro," Headache Stencil says. "The security guards, the papaya salad sellers, the street cleaners."

Not everyone is pleased with his new-found fame, though. "Many of my friends and relatives don't get it," he says. "They don't want me to rock the boat."

But he'll carry on. "If people see my work and start noticing that things are not fair, I have achieved my aim," he says.

