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Mumbai

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Wallflower Brazilian artist Nina Pandolfo brings the street into the gallery

For graffiti artist Nina Pandolfo, every brick in the wall deserves some spray paint, says **Deepanjana Pal**.

Some bored teenagers write morbid poetry to kill the time or watch terrible television shows. As a 15-year-old in Sao Paulo, Nina Pandolfo found entertainment in a spray can. "We didn't have so many things to do here and this is one of the reasons we have a lot of graffiti," said Pandolfo in an email interview from Sao Paulo. Also, the city "has a lot of walls", she pointed out. Since then, walls around the world have been given makeovers by Pandolfo. Today Pandolfo, 32, has evolved her anime-esque street art imagery to be versatile enough for walls and canvases. An exhibition of her works, which includes a wall, will open this fortnight.

Street art first went respectable in 1960, when a gallery in Rome organised a graffiti show. But though the divide between art and pop culture has become increasingly blurry in modern times (Andy Warhol turned poster and commercial art into statements about the

postmodern world), respectability for street art has been a slow process. There's a whiff of deviance about graffiti art, which was often used to voice anti-establishment slogans. However, in recent times, street art has become a bona fide part of high art. Among those who have contributed to the blurring of the line between pop and contemporary art is American artist Barry McGee, who took his

Pandolfo made Kelburn Castle look like it was out of *Alice in Wonderland*.

elaborate spray paintings to the Venice Biennale in 2005. Last year, British artist Banksy's stencilled images, which pop up mysteriously on walls across the world, made a killing at a Sotheby's auction.

Detractors question whether creations spray-painted on public spaces can make the transition into galleries and auction houses. Some also raise doubts about whether graffiti has the formal complexity

to earn itself the tag of art. For artists like Pandolfo, who takes her painting as seriously as her graffiti, the first question is irrelevant because few graffiti artists pick up spray paint cans with the intention of making a profession. "I just wanted to show my work to everyone," she said. "When I looked at some [graffiti] outside, I thought it's amazing because this way the people don't need to go into a gallery to see my work."

Through the 1970s and '80s, the spray-painted drawings that spread across peeling walls in the western world were considered vandalism. As street artists became more confident, the rough scrawls became more aesthetic. Care went into the lines and how colour was used. Graffiti glowed at improbable heights and corners, often turning derelict areas into striking spaces. In Mumbai, graffiti found support from owners of bars and clubs, such as the Ghetto in Mahalaxmi, which is famous for its graffiti-rich walls. In 2007, Aviral Saxena, Dhanya Pilo and Prateek Sethi started The Wall Project to add some tasteful splashes of colour to the city.

Pandolfo is among the club of Brazilian artists, which includes Nunga and the duo of Osgemeos (one of them is Pandolfo's husband), who are imprinting a little bit of Sao Paulo's dazzling graffiti tradition all over the world. Pandolfo has had her drawings emblazoned on trains and metros for Brazil's Wholetrain Project (2005). Last year, she painted over Kelburn Castle in Scotland. "It is one of the most traditional castles in Scotland and it is older than Brazil," said Pandolfo who put her bug-eyed characters and bright colours all over the turreted castle, making it look more like something out of Alice's wonderland than Scotland. The acorn-shaped faces and wide-eyed creatures in Pandolfo's work are reminiscent of Japanese artist Yoshitomo Hara's little girls. Pandolfo also counts among her influences animators Hayao Miyazaki and Aleksandr Petrov.

There is no doubt in Pandolfo's mind that graffiti, despite its deviant background, is technically as challenging and demanding as any other artistic genre. Lines, colours, shading, texturing and other painting techniques are used and works need careful planning. Aside from considering how the artist's tools (in this case spray paint) will work with the chosen surface and the way the drawing will occupy that surface, the street artist also has to keep in mind the space in which the work is being created. "People engage with these pieces, have a life around them," she explained. It becomes important for a drawing to have a meaning. Pandolfo doesn't go for political messages and instead focuses on creating images that are cheerful as a childhood dream. "When I'm painting in the street, sometimes it's good to protest because image is one way to directly communicate with another but also, it's very important to make the people happy," said Pandolfo. "Life sometimes is so hard and a happy message is important."

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