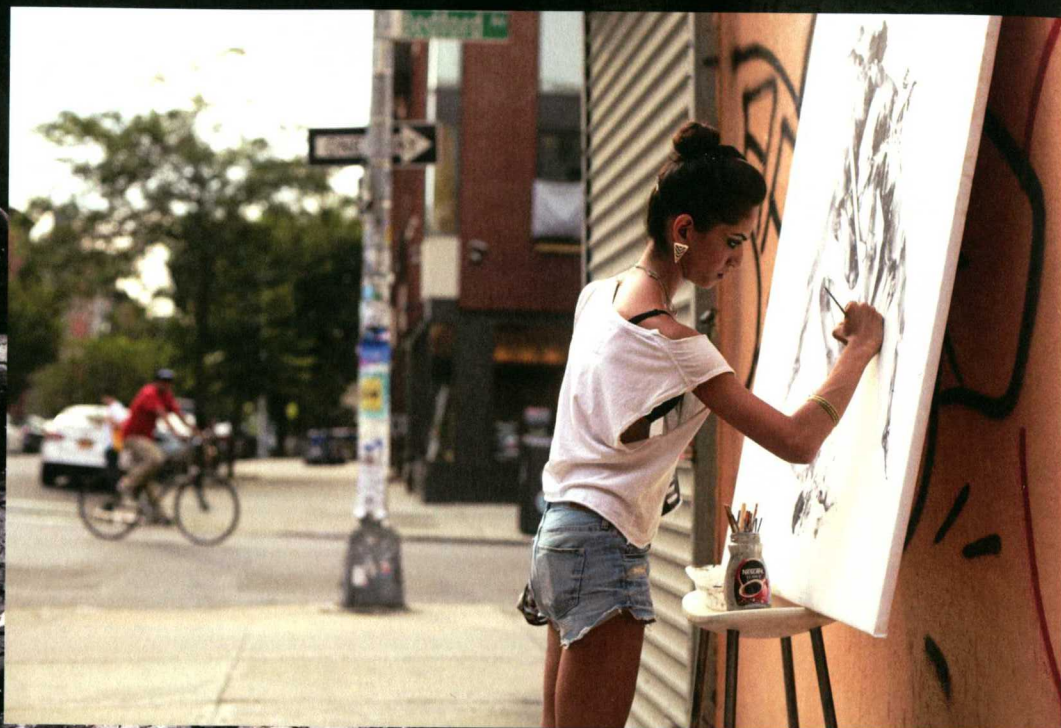


NAVEEN SHAKIL KHAN





Photograph: Julian Walter

In 2015, Naveen Shakil Khan took a canvas out to the corner of Bedford Avenue and South 2nd Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, just outside her new apartment where her bedroom didn't have a window, and worked on a painting called *Sleeplessly Embracing*, from her 2014 series, *Vascillating Paradigms*. At the time, Naveen, an architect by formal education, and a self-taught artist and graphic designer, was designing and painting on the side; she had decided to stop working for a world-renowned architectural firm to further pursue her passion for street art.

It is on this corner that Naveen built her Williamsburg family. In the past two years, Naveen has painted several canvases against the wall of her apartment building as well as murals around Brooklyn. There is the old man who always gives her the art supplies that he finds; the neighbor and best friend who shoots photographs and videos while she's working; the locals who often drop by to watch her paint; the little boy, living across the street, who brings his chalk outside to draw alongside her; the baristas from Oslo Coffee Roasters who have her caffè lattes ready to fuel her for the day.

It is also on this corner that I did my interview with Naveen, over a drink at the Lucky Dog tavern, with her neighbor, which quickly turned into a family affair. It's not uncommon to hear that a sense of community in New York, even in Brooklyn, is fast diminishing as neighborhoods gentrify and families and long-term residents are replaced with young hipsters. However, this seemed untrue at this little Williamsburg corner, where the same people who stopped to watch Naveen paint two years ago were now here, clustered around a table in the backyard, with kids and dogs, and a Connect Four board—an entire block party happening in a bar where Naveen and the bartender have a ritual of taking shots together every time Naveen is closing out her bill. "The best decision I ever made was to move from Manhattan to Brooklyn," she said.

"In Manhattan, you're always on the rush,

and you feel like you can't breathe. I moved to Brooklyn, took my canvas out to the corner, and now I feel that with every piece I've done, these people have seen it from start to finish. They've become a part of me. They've become a part of my art. That's the best bit about street painting—you engage with the community."

Born in Karachi, Pakistan, Naveen studied architecture in Scotland, and worked for leading architectural firms in Australia and Pakistan before transitioning into graphic design. She then moved to New York City and began working for the Estée Lauder group of companies. Immersed in graphics, illustration and canvas painting for over four years, she describes her creative work as a "cocktail of graphic, traditional and surreal art topped off with a hint of street graffiti grunge." "I was working full time as an architect in Melbourne, and I never had time to paint, but there was a lot of creativity on the streets, and I was absorbing a lot of street art. And when I came to New York, it all just gushed out of me," she said.

As a British citizen, Naveen had been encouraged to move back to the UK where she has friends and family. "But it would have been too easy," she said. "It didn't excite me. I can do it anytime." After coming to New York for a friend's wedding, Naveen changed plans.

"She came. We went to the wedding. She said she'd stay an extra week. Then she stayed for another ten days. And then she was just like, 'I'm staying,'" Naveen's friend recalled, laughing.

"Do you have any money?" he'd asked her incredulously when she told him her plan.

"No," Naveen replied.

"Do you have any friends?"

"Just you!"

"Do you have a visa?"

"Nope."

"Do you have a job?"

"No."

"What do you have?" he questioned.

"Me," Naveen answered.

Photograph: Adil Sheikh



Every morning between 4.30 and 5, Naveen wakes up and sits either on her roof or her fire escape, listening to music, doing yoga, and watching the sunrise. "It's my...you know in Islam, you have fajr ki namaz—prayer before sunrise. This is my prayer. I just look around, and I remind myself that I'm here." Naveen got through her first few difficult weeks in New York by relying on friends, and the faith of potential employers, after leaving the world of architecture where she had experience and recommendations, for full-time graphic design, a field in which she had no formal education, and no experience. "Sunrise is my favorite part of the day. It's a new day. Anything can happen," mused Naveen.

This is the attitude that she brings to many of her interactions, including job interviews. "I don't really have bad interviews, *mashallah*," she said, touching the wooden table lightly. "People generally just like the energy I bring I think. My first job here, at a small PR and tech company, was for a husband and wife who petitioned for my visa. I didn't have any money, so they paid for my application, and called it a down payment for a painting. I don't work there anymore, but I'm still in touch with them. I will never forget them—they believed in me. It was hard. Everyone said, 'Why do you have to go through this? Just go back to the UK. It'll be easy.' Blah, blah. I hate doing things just because they're easy."

"That's funny," I replied. "I was just telling someone earlier today that when I travel, I like to make it difficult for myself, and go to places where I don't know anyone or anything so that I have to learn things on my own."

"Exactly!" Naveen said.

'Me-time' is an essential part of her art and her life. Sometimes, Naveen will just disappear; she'll book a flight to a place she's never been, and tell no one. "I've gone on holidays with friends, and you're not on your own time," she explains. "No one else wants to wake up at 5 am. Travel is my alone time. I don't even ask for recommendations from people. I just get to places, walk around, talk to the locals, and discover things on my own."

“The people who see you when you're your true self, covered in paint, dirty, crying, vulnerable, and still accept you—those are the real people. I recognize family.

Naveen sees interactions with strangers as special connections; she's not afraid to allow new people into her life for brief and magical moments. One of her recent projects was a mural for a Maybelline video ad, part of the company's #MakeItHappen global campaign. But, the best part of her trip, she recalled, were the people in the low-income Karachi neighborhood where the shoot was happening—a neighborhood she admitted she would have never stepped foot in had it not been for this project: here, there were the young boys who invited her to play cricket in the streets; the elderly woman who consoled her when she was exhausted and crying at the end of the day; the family who immediately sent down ice, in a little pulley, from their balcony when they saw she spilt hot chai on her hand. “This is a community,” she said. “The people who see you when you're your true self, covered in paint, dirty, crying, vulnerable, and still accept you—those are the real people. I recognize family.”

Catharsis means release, and also a kind of purification. Naveen's last canvas series *Catharsis* is about the crisis of self. “There were always three bodies [in the paintings in this series],” she explained. “The architect, the graphic designer, and the artist in me—they're always fragmented. These three things that I have inside me were coming together, and at the same time, they were not.” One day, in September of 2016, the last canvas on which she was working on for this series was stolen from her street corner; as a result, the series remains incomplete, and until December that year, she didn't draw or paint at all. She started doing wall murals, and this is all she has painted ever since. “I was





upset, but the next day, I just told myself that maybe I wasn't meant to have that piece. Maybe it was never meant to be finished. But when that piece got stolen, I said, I am not doing canvas anymore. Let's see if someone can steal a wall."

Veda, the little girl who was playing Connect Four at Lucky Dog, and whose family lives next door to Naveen, stretched her palm over Naveen's heart, pleasantly distracting her. "I need a picture of this. I love kids," she told me as Veda climbed into my lap. "They're so pure. And they're the only people who can match my energy."

Naveen's first mural was in Karachi, after leaving Australia, as part of a new restaurant that her friend, another architect, was designing. Her friend is a partner at a boutique architecture firm in Pakistan called Studio Subtractive where Naveen also worked for a while. She took on a

design-oriented role in the firm, making huge graphic murals as part of the clients' designs. This crossover has long been a part of her work since her days in college when she would do her final proposals as large paintings and concept sketches, rather than models or diagrams. Naveen's relationship with walls has only intensified since then. Now, as she walks through the streets of any city, she looks at walls and sees potential murals, almost obsessively.

"A few months ago, I was offered a promotion, and a higher salary," Naveen said. "My career as a designer would be set if I took on this role. But, in between, I went to Karachi for the Maybelline campaign, then back again for another mural project, and then to Montreal for the mural festival. I came back and told them, 'I don't think I can take this.' The universe is knocking on my

door! It's saying, artist, artist, artist. I believe that every person has a calling. You just need to listen to what it is. I can't do my calling part-time! Monday-Tuesday, mein apna calling kardoongi, aur Wednesday-Thursday-Friday, mein apna soul bhechoongi? Yeh kya matlab hai? ("Monday and Tuesday, I'll follow my calling, and Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, I'll sell my soul? What is the meaning in that?")

Since September of 2017, which marks a year since her canvas was stolen, and three years of being in New York and working as a graphic designer while juggling painting on the side, Naveen is now finally working as a full-time artist. "I need time to breathe. I'm grateful for the Estée Lauder companies because they never treated me like a corporate; they always saw me as a creative individual, and supported my passion for life and

my art. They allowed me so much flexibility to do the things that I wanted to do. And if I hadn't worked there, I would have never realized that this is what I want to do—be an artist, full-time."

As we left with some of her friends, Naveen said, "Bye, love," to the bartender, kissed him on the cheek and whispered something in his ear. He looked at me, grinning. She waved goodbye as we walked out the door. Just around the corner of the building was the first wall mural Naveen painted in the Williamsburg neighborhood. "You should do another one here soon!" her friend remarked as we walked past.

WORDS BY APOORVA TADEPALLI
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