

THE SICKNESS

MQ IN CONVERSATION WITH OCTAVIO ZAYA

We are proud to present a very candid and personal conversation with one of today's major graffiti artists: MQ. In the exclusive talk that he had with art writer and curator Octavio Zaya (OZ) – one of our regular collaborators – MQ goes back to the beginning of his activities, talks about New York, about his move to California, about his family life, and shares many ideas and thoughts about coping with the turbulent and unhealthy world in which we live and the possible changes coming.

OZ Hello, MQ. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to ask you a few questions. Please let us start from the beginning. Why graffiti?

MQ You know, some people ride bikes, play handball, or do graffiti. Graffiti is like a sport, in a sense, to the youth. You know, I was there, talking about the 1980s, and there was a graffiti explosion like every few years. It was like a golden era... When I was a child, it exploded. And it was beautiful. You know, the colors; there were a lot of colors going on. There was a lot of beautiful times, you know. Anything in the '80s, the music and the arts... It was a great environment for those things, especially in New York.

OZ What was it that didn't let you go into music or the arts, and instead made you decide to go into – let's call it – the streets?

MQ It was that the energy was right. There was a lot of artists in my family. When I did graffiti, it wasn't the positive graffiti that you see nowadays. It was a negative back then. If you did graffiti, it was a negative. It wasn't looked upon as, 'Oh, that's something!' It's like today people smoke marijuana. But if you smoked it back then, oh, well, it was illegal; it came with the negativities.

OZ Is that the reason why you didn't want to start in the trains and instead chose the streets to paint on?

MQ Not exactly. At fifteen I got arrested, I got a three-year probation, so if I painted the trains again, I was gonna get shipped away, or my parents would have moved me to another state. So for those years I couldn't actually paint the trains.

OZ So it wasn't really a choice?

MQ Yeah

OZ It was more that you were in the situation in which you couldn't do anything else, right?

MQ Yeah, yeah. Your parents look at you and say 'Well, this is not really a great thing.' And, 'Oh, this graffiti thing. Why can't you write on paper? Why do you have to write on the walls?' Things like that. But it was just the energy. Everything was changing in New York. The music was really exciting, rap and hip hop were beginning to take over, and the fashion was changing. But there was also a lot of crime. And a lot of graffiti was going on. The energy was so right and so perfect, that I thought everybody was writing graffiti in New York City. If you went to public school, it was everywhere... That's just how I fell into it, and I still do it to this day. With the same amount of energy. It works for me. I can't say it does the same for everybody else. Years later since it was conceived, it's in a different light than it was before. Now people

can buy graffiti paint in the store. You know what I mean? There is a big difference today. It is big in marketing. I don't do it for the marketing. I just enjoy it. It's like people that surf. People that surf, just go surfing, not to win a medal or to be in a surf contest. They just want to be in the ocean.

OZ Some of them are professionals, though.

MQ Of course, of course. But I didn't do it for that. And I'm going to still do it, no matter what! With or without art shows, with or without people. I was doing it before the internet and I'm still doing it after the internet. You know what I mean? It's a passion. But, it's hard to explain that part.

OZ Were you at some point looking up to some graffiti writers who you thought were better than others? Were you or have you been influenced by other graffiti writers?

MQ Definitely, yeah. I mean, if you were to go to the '80s, in '78 or '79, there was Dondi. Dondi was an incredible artist, definitely ahead of his time. Music wasn't ahead of its time, you know, rap music. Keith Haring is also from the '80s. He actually respected graffiti artists. And he didn't do graffiti on the trains. But he did his graffiti – or not graffiti – but he painted his stuff, you know.

OZ On the subway stations!

MQ Yeah, on the subway stations! Not actually on the trains.

OZ No, Not on the trains. I was already in New York by then. I arrived in 1978. I was in the middle of the whole cultural explosion. I was living on the border between the West Village and the East Village, between Broadway and University Place. And I got to know Keith Haring and meet him several times, and even party together with him and George Condo. Whatever the case, why did you decide to use MQ as your name?

MQ I just wanted, you know, to have something different than anyone else.

OZ Were you in New York when you adopted the name, or had you already moved to California?

MQ No, I'm from New York!

OZ I know. What I mean is whether MQ came up from the very beginning or was it a name, a tag, that you added later?

MQ I added it later, because I wrote different names. Before, when you are young, you write these names. And then you want a name that you know is yours, it's your name. You don't want a kind of name that everyone else has. So I got it, and then Manhattan, Queens, MQ or MKUE. My real name has a M in it.

OZ Eventually, you moved to California. Why did you move to California? In '95?

MQ Because New York is crazy. New York is crazy and New York will kill you. I needed peace. I put in a lot of years painting on the streets. You see a lot of friends go. A lot. And the streets catches up to you! Luckily, I moved, and, luckily, I was able to meet my wife, have children, and

enjoy life. New York is a fast place.

OZ I gather that many of your friends were already in jail. I'm sure you and they had lots of trouble. Perhaps you also saw danger coming your way.

MQ Yeah, exactly. In graffiti you have a good two years, maybe three, maybe five years. But you also know, when you're living that life, you see what's gonna come, and you know—you know people are evil sometimes, but just cause you do graffiti, doesn't make you evil. It's like, Hollywood, where you know it's like bad press! Press means you're not really doing too good! So when you do graffiti and you make a lot of noise, people react to it! But I don't paint for that. When I paint, I don't want people to see what I am, what I wear, or what I think. I want them to see the graffiti on the wall, what I leave on the wall. That's what I want them to see. That's why I don't like photos, posing, and all the usual things that people do, cause it takes away from what's on the wall.

OZ You are rather elusive and anonymous, you are not interested in your celebrity status, but, whether you want it or not, like it or not, you have become a very important figure in graffiti throughout the 20-some years that you have been in California. What has transpired from all those 20 years? What are your thoughts?

MQ I learned more graffiti. I learned how to do graffiti in California terms. They do a different type of graffiti, because they have gangs, and they have helicopters, and they have the laws which are more stricter. You can do three years in California. That's really crazy. What I've learned was the tactics, because they clean and buff the graffiti. So I started inscribing the glass. You pick up other techniques. If you go to anywhere on the planet, you will learn something new – about anything. It kind of worked out for me, because I picked up on so many other things, which you will never know unless you're there. You can only learn so much from reading and what you know through a computer. I learned the ways for California. They are natives to the place and they don't give a shit who the fuck you are. And that's why when you go there, you have to go with respect and to learn. It worked out for me. When I was a kid, twelve, ten years old, I always was able to look at it and draw it. You know you don't have to be in that crew. I got to absorb, and I absorb a lot. It was almost like when people go to school. It was like an education.

OZ Like a training

MQ Yeah, it's like training. In a sense, I got trained really well because I was quiet. I wasn't trying to be the top dog, anything like that, which a lot of people do. But, when you go there, your career doesn't last that long. Sometimes because then you become a target for the police or you know what I mean. For whoever does it, it's for their advantage, for enjoyment. But, you know, it's not.

OZ But you are still planning to stay in California for a while, right? I mean, that is your residency now.

MQ Yeah. But I have kids. I have children, so, you know, I have to take care of them.

OZ I get what you mean: They have to have a school. They need to have an education. They have to be in one place.

MQ Exactly. So what I'm going to do eventually this summer, I'm gonna travel. And, you know, I'm

gonna do tattoos part-time. I'm traveling around the whole planet with the kids.

OZ You have been traveling for a long time already. And the most interesting part that I have found, through the information I was looking at, was your trip to Tokyo. Could you tell us how you feel about their graffiti brands over there?

MQ Well, somehow, I think, in Asia, they are putting up with graffiti. And they don't have those repressive laws. Now they do, they are starting to pick up on it. But, when I was starting to go out there, they didn't and they didn't clean the graffiti. They actually let it run. As you know, in New York, they clean it. Everyone cleans it. So I stopped going to New York, and I started going to Japan. It was exciting, you know. It was, and it still is. And then, what happens is that, once you go there, and other people start painting, I cannot say it is a movement, but you can tell the influence and if they pick up on it. There, it's like a trend. It's kind of exciting. New York is great, but it's always nice to go somewhere where it's kind of peaceful, the people are really calm, and beautiful and nice.

OZ And you take what you do and they take what you do in a different way.

MQ And they accept it! They accept it kind of a red carpet way. You come to New York and the police will beat you up, and put you in jail for putting up a sticker, and things like that. Sometimes, in life, as you get older or whatever, you want to go to Hawaii or you want to go somewhere quiet. It's like you said: you were here in the '80s. And you saw the cultural explosion. I saw the same explosion with the music and the scenes. But, they don't last too long sometimes. They only last five or six years.

OZ And then comes the rules and regulations. And that is when all the creativity goes out the door.

MQ Out the door, yeah. It's categorized, and people want to buy into it. And you have twenty, thirty, fifty people doing the same, similar thing. New York is definitely the graffiti mecca! You know, it's from New York.

OZ But today, as you know well, graffiti is all over the place – in Madrid, in Rio de Janeiro, in South Africa, in London, in Buenos Aires. You find graffiti everywhere you go. As you said, in Tokyo it might not be a movement, but they have graffiti trends.

MQ Yeah.

OZ And trends that affect many things. Not necessarily only property. It affects people's way of seeing and understanding what their world is about, what the art is about. I mean in relation to all this larger spectrum of things. I was also reading someplace about your interest in creating some sort of – I don't know how to call it – trademark? Brand? And to create your own frozen foods, your burger joint, something like that – in Asia. What ever came of all of that?

MQ When you have a strong product, and it has something inside of it you know is good, you're entitled to mix it up and... I remember going to the Keith Haring store to buy my mom a watch for Mother's Day. I'm talking '85 or '84, I forgot exactly when. And when I walked in there, I saw Haze with stickers and all of this stuff that was branded. I was a fan of Keith Haring. I was a big fan of his. Then I thought it was illegal, like in the sense that you can even market yourself. Back to Japan, they do a lot of do-it-yourself of products by hand. So when I got

there I found all these American-like things, like American things made in a factory, that were made by hand in a limited edition. That's kind of how the punk rock movement was formed. Homemade like your new zine, things like that. I picked up on that, and I was like, 'Wow! This is kind of cool' Because I can't afford to go make thirty thousand copies of one product, but I like it when you can make a limited edition of things. So that's the Japan that got me.

OZ We can see a correlation with the commercial trends that have been developing in the 'high art' world in terms of editions and copies since the '60s. First it was marketed as a democratic alternative, to bring the works to as many people as possible, while questioning the fetishizing of the 'original piece.' But, since the '80s, the equation has been turned on its head. They have been restricted to a few copies at high prices to compensate for the lack of an 'original.' Now you have multiple editions of artworks, particularly in video and photography, but usually not more than 5 or 10 copies of each piece. I guess it helps in getting back the money the artist or gallery invested in the production of the work. It also helps distribute and disseminate the work in so many other places beyond the collector's domain.

MQ When I think of products I try, I don't think of products of mass marketing. I'm thinking of the organic ones. I have children. For the last ten years, I have three children and they are very young, and, in California, you start picking up on natural things and to what you're gonna leave the children of this planet. What are you bringing to the table? I have been doing graffiti, but I'm most of the time doing graffiti inside my home. And that's maybe why for the last fifteen years I've been doing a lot of stickers. Cause I'm babysitting my own kids. What I'm saying is that I believe a little bit more in organic things.

OZ I certainly believe it's an attainable alternative, perhaps in the direction we can take to replace this corrupted system. This capitalist system we are living in is imploding into itself.

MQ You can be a capitalist, but when you drain the whole planet, the planet is gone. And that's the end of the story. I'm not here to save the planet, but I'm here—

OZ To help—

MQ And to give back.

OZ Now let us focus on the exhibition. From what I know, this is your first exhibition in a gallery. Even though it's not a solo show, it's your first participation in the context of the art world, in the gallery system. Right? What do you expect from this exhibition?

MQ Umm – a lot of color, a lot of kids. Where it's being held at, it's a place for children, so what I am putting on the walls is a lot of color. I spend a lot of time with children. My wife teaches kids and I spend a lot of time with kids. And I work with a lot of nontoxic paints, so, you know. I love the idea that – whatever I put on these walls has to be kids friendly. You want to enhance their vision and maybe they'd want to paint one day or maybe they don't. But the beauty of it is that it is a nice environment. It's kind of my first show in New York. It's a group of us, but I'm having a good time. I'm telling my kids, 'Hey I'm in New York, and once you get out of school, we are all going back to New York.' They haven't seen New York. And I just think that sometimes things need to change, and if I can do this here... I think it goes hand in hand with children and life and positive things. The paint we are using first time ever is organic water-based paint, so there is no fumes from it. I never experienced that before, and I'm like, 'Wow!'

– that’s all I need to know...

OZ Your art cannot kill you. Otherwise, you should be doing something else.

MQ Exactly. And when you get older, kids look up to you. I remember when I was thirteen. You have to be careful with what you say!

OZ When you are thirteen or fifteen, you don’t have responsibilities. You don’t even care about your own life. It is just about the dangerous situation in which you find yourself in terms of the law. But you are also dealing with fumes, poisonous products...

MQ If you pull out a can of spray paint, to spray something on the wall, you put that into your lungs. You put that into your lungs when you are a child. These are things I learned about because I have kids now! I tried to point things out, I think people will pick up on it.

OZ How do you feel about the fact that you are bringing to the gallery what naturally belongs in the street?

MQ I’m excited. I had chances before and I didn’t do it for years. I haven’t done this fifteen years ago. People tell me ‘Hey, you’re missing out.’ But, I don’t feel like I’m missing out. I’m not racing.

OZ You also know very well that there has been a lot of criticism in many areas in relation to the way some galleries have marketed graffiti...

MQ Exactly.

OZ ... Graffiti artists the wrong way. What Hugo Martinez does is to give you the same type of walls that you use outside. They are inside the gallery, instead of the streets, but you are doing the same thing you do outside; you use the same means. Canvas is altogether a different thing. It’s bringing one dimension to another, and it doesn’t work and it has failed because of that. You take away everything that is inherent to graffiti. You are going away from your territory, from your own. What Hugo does is different. He gives graffiti writers the opportunity to do it the way they always do it.

MQ Exactly. It takes a certain quality and patience. Some people always go straight to the finishing line. But people need to be and have their time to explain themselves, the opportunity to present themselves. A lot of people just get paid.

OZ You present yourself the way you feel you should be represented, not the way somebody else wants to represent you. That’s why the L.A. MOCA exhibition of graffiti had so much criticism. It left out many important graffiti writers and included artists who were not from the streets. It included people who weren’t even graffiti artists. This is a very important issue to be discerned.

MQ All you can do sometimes is sit it out. It is just part of life; it happens a lot. At least they got some of it right.

OZ Yeah, that’s true. And it is not an issue of essentializing graffiti, but you cannot be opportunistic and take advantage of a culture for your own interests.

People learn. I do what I do. You show a peach, and they would draw it. They would draw a lot of other things. They are artists and there is nothing wrong about being an artist. I'm just a graffiti artist, and I'm not going to do anything other than graffiti because that's just what I do. But it's nice to get acknowledgement sometimes along the way. When you do this for thirty years and nobody pays attention, that's cool, but it's nice every now and then people giving you ... credit. I'm not here to promote myself and all these other things. I just like to do graffiti

OZ You accept to be successful at it. Not just to do it, but also to do it well and to have the recognition while you are alive.

MQ I also like to rub it off to my kids. Hahaha. I want to get somewhere they can see. I want to make them proud! That's a beautiful thing, children being proud of something. People giving you back recognition. I'm not saying I earned it. But you know it's kind of nice...

OZ It has been many years that you have been working at it. It shows because you have many, many followers. In that sense, from your own perspective, what is it that characterizes your style? Why is it that you have so many followers?

MQ Umm... I just do original New York graffiti. I left New York twenty years ago and I still do the same graffiti that I left with. And I think that's my power. I do original graffiti like from the '80s. Maybe? Of course you are allowed to do other things. But you know, I think maybe I have... an original formula? Or something like that – a formula that works. It's just basic and it's very simple. And sometimes people get upset. They might say, 'What's that? There's nothing there.' But that's what I do. I have dreams, too. You brought up the food before. I want to make food. But – I want it to be organic food. Maybe a hamburger bun with the MQ on it. There are other things, like water. Not just the same things that people always do. I don't want to be predictable. This is what is good for me, what works for me.

OZ So why does MQ have so many followers? Why are there so many kids and colleagues who want to work with you? Do you know anything about it?

MQ I'm not really sure. Maybe the marketing? I put a lot of time into my stickers. I make sure they are everywhere. I want people to see them. I put a lot of money in my stickers. Sometimes as much as what people spend on jewelry, I spend on stickers and the street team. I have a good team. A lot of people around me are good, strong people, like good strong artists, in a sense. And I work with a lot of people trading stickers around the planet. Little things that go a long way.

OZ All these people in the exhibition are a part of your team?

MQ Yeah, and some kids that I don't know. Our team is very good. We have a kid from Canada, people from New York... Cinik's from New York. We have me from California... We have an important mix of people. It's like New York, the melting pot of the world. California is beautiful too. There are more Mexicans there. But New York is the melting pot from everywhere! Asia, Africa, Latin America, Europe, everywhere. All kinds of music, food, 24 hours a day. I don't have any prejudice. I work with all kinds of people, I don't judge them, either young or old. It's—how do you say?

OZ Chemistry.

MQ It's the chemistry.

- OZ If you don't mind, I have a couple of more questions before we finish. I was chatting with Hugo and he was telling me about the exhibition title he was tossing around with the whole team. Apparently, you all started with *Indispensable*, and, I believe, you ended up with *Sickness*. From your understanding, how do you go from *Indispensable* to *Sickness*? Why these titles?
- MQ Well, at some point, you have to look at yourself and say, 'This is a sickness,' you know. But, I don't mean it as a bad thing. It's like poison. You know we are all addicted to poison sometimes: coffee, soda, or cigarettes...
- OZ You mean sickness as in addiction? Let's say I'm addicted to marijuana, and you are addicted to graffiti. That's what you mean?
- MQ Yeah, that's what I'm saying. At some point, it is like a sickness. It's like when you lick the frog, you know, those American Indians that lick the frog and they get high. Maybe we can't explain it, but we love it. Of course, I don't really smoke cigarettes – and, even if I smoke a cigarette every now and then, I know it's not healthy.
- OZ Definitely. It is not healthy at all.
- MQ Yeah. We do things in life, and I can't understand all those reasons why, but you need to do that, you need that little danger in your life. You don't need to throw a rock at a cop, but you need to say 'Fuck the police!' sometimes. You know what I mean. You need to experience that. I don't know, maybe it's the adrenaline. Maybe that's why graffiti is so much fun. We are not killing nobody. It's just a little thing on the wall. And when you think about it, it has been done since the beginning of humankind.
- OZ The difference I see here is that, on the one hand, when you are doing graffiti on the street, there is a confrontational activity regarding the law, and the graffiti writer may face a problematic situation. On the other hand, in the case of this exhibition, you are invited to a place to do what you really like to do the most. This new arrangement or this new situation raises broader issues. Is this the right moment for you and your team to start showing in galleries? Is it the right move?
- MQ Umm... I can't answer that fully, because this is my first big show. I wouldn't mind doing this again, if the environment is right. And maybe you can bring something new to the table, something new and different. I like that idea.
- OZ Also, do you consider what you do and your team does on the same level of art as what you would expect to find in a gallery show? Do you think my question is prejudicial?
- MQ I think the work speaks for itself. Art is up to the person who sees it and enjoys it.
- OZ Do you mean to say that it is in the eye of the beholder?
- MQ Exactly. I don't see anything negative in it. And I believe we create jobs: people who clean graffiti. There's a three- to five-million-dollar budget a year in every state to clean graffiti. Just imagine the amount of jobs we create!
- OZ Ha ha ha ha!

MQ Ha ha ha ha!

OZ That's also the other side of it.

MQ Yes, I don't know why people are complaining.

OZ Except that I'm sure you really wouldn't like to have your tags or your graffiti or stickers taken away.

MQ Many times, some people, even police, or in school, they go, 'Hey, if I go to your house to do that, how would you like it?' And I say, 'Hey, I wouldn't mind.' Seriously, I don't have that problem, and I don't know why other people do. I'm not trying to be funny here. I'm being honest.

OZ And yet, there are other people, as in this case at Martinez Gallery, who welcome what you do and consider it an important creative activity.

MQ It took maybe thirty years to understand it. Sometimes it takes thirty or fifty years to move from one place to another.

OZ Vincent van Gogh, considered a master today, died without selling a single painting. He sold a drawing to his brother, Theo. Now his paintings are sold at auction for over ninety million dollars. You can't ever give up. You have to continue with what you believe in. It doesn't matter if people like it or not. It doesn't matter if you are going to get arrested or not. But, of course, you need to take into account your responsibilities, your kids, your wife. There are many ways to continue what you are doing. And you're doing it very well. So thank you so much for taking the time to speak with me.

MQ You are positive and I need to hear that sometimes. Positive people. Emotionally talking positive about something.

OZ Thank you very much.

MQ Hey, God bless you, man! And thank you so much, Hugo!