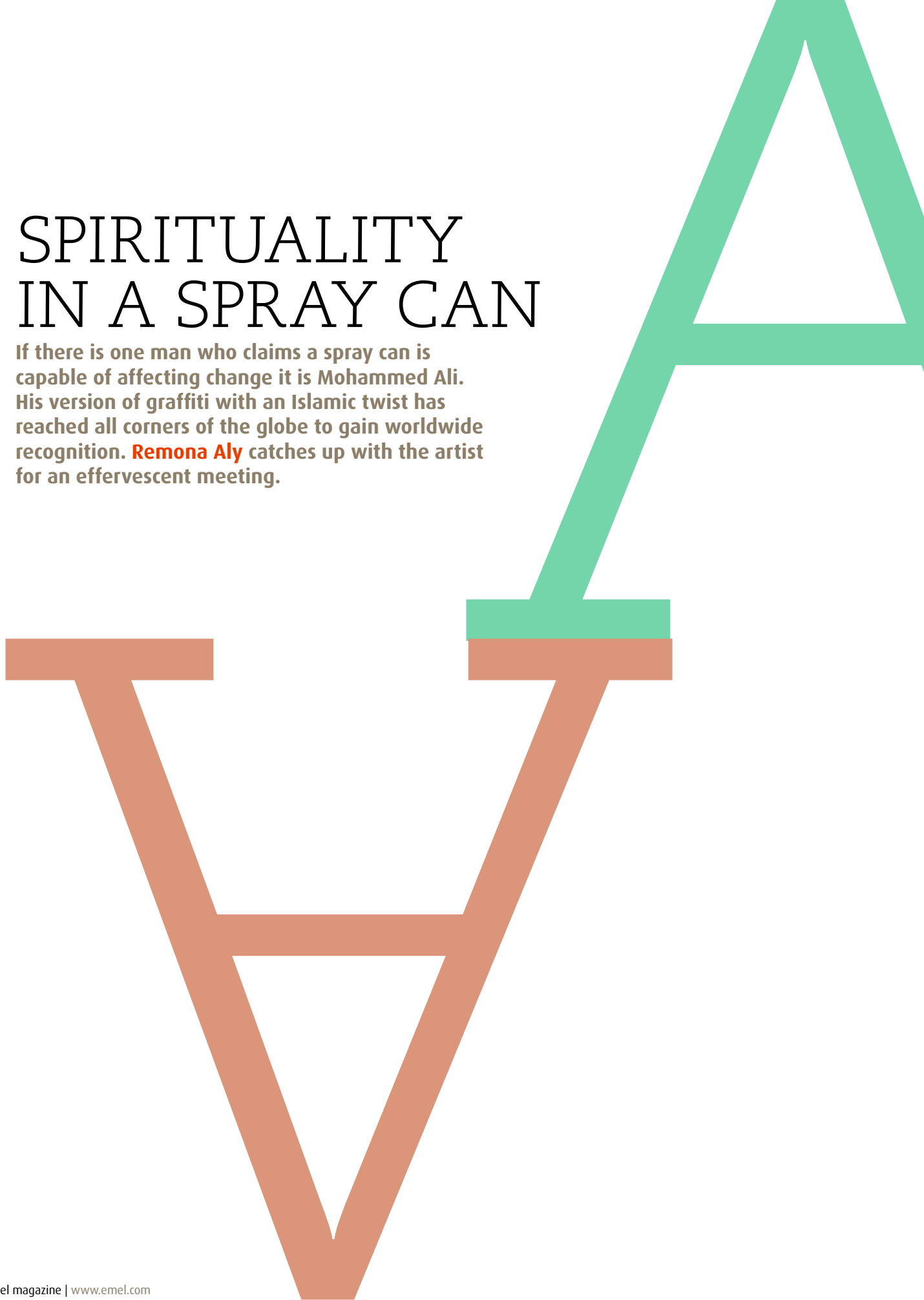


SPIRITUALITY IN A SPRAY CAN

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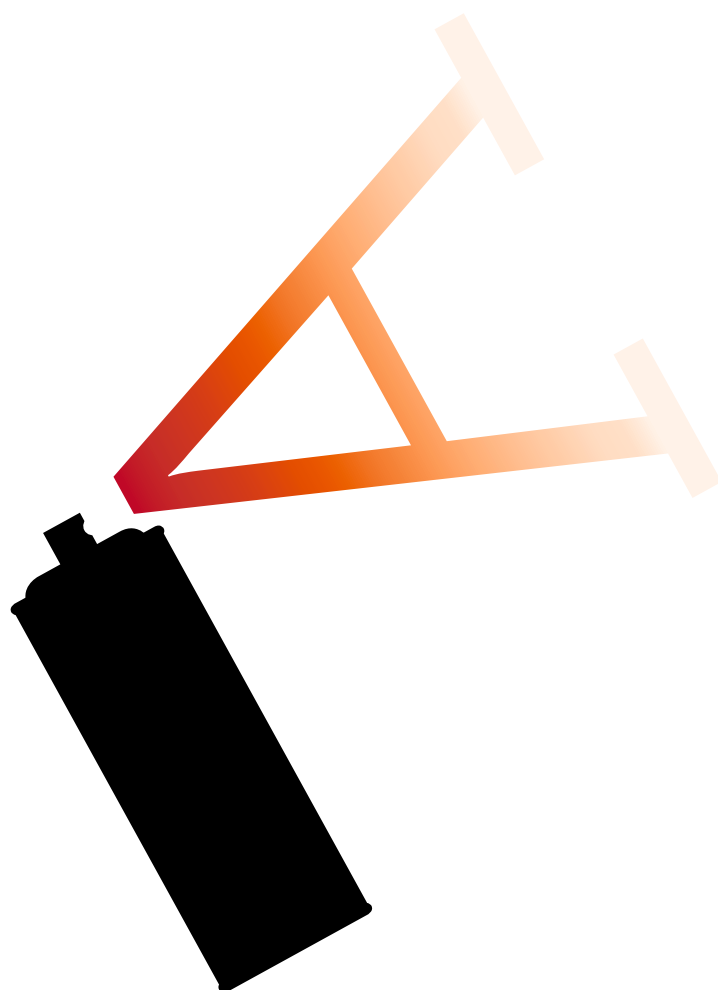


**“I WANT MY
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The phone is ringing. And ringing. It's my third attempt that day and the person I am trying to reach finally picks up, but I have no monopoly over his attention as his second phone begins to buzz. He politely asks if I mind him answering it, and I overhear him asking James from Bristol to call him back. A few minutes later, his phone rings again. This time it's the BBC. Mohammed Ali clearly is a very busy man. "Actually", he says to me in his thick Birmingham accent, "could I call you back later, I'm spraying a wall and my hands are covered in paint at the moment..."

Many people would already have heard about Mohammed Ali of Aerosol Arabic fame. The 30 year old artist from Birmingham has become something of a household name across the Muslim community. Some of his accolades include exhibiting to the elite in Dubai, painting murals in Melbourne's alleyways, and more recently winning a diversity award at the South Bank Show Awards televised at the end of January this year.

We arrange a convenient time to meet face to face and our chosen place is Bethnal Green's arty Rich Mix studio in London's East End, where Mohammed is later to give a talk. He's running late, but it's to be expected. He eventually enters the doorway which frames his commanding stature as he brandishes a spray can in his hand. I grin at the cliché, and he is quick to perceive it. "It looks so staged doesn't it?" he says walking over to me, quickly putting the can down. "I was literally just being filmed and they asked me to spray something for the camera."

Mohammed settles down on the sofa opposite, his trademark puffer jacket rustling as he does, with a black hooded top peaking through. I hardly begin before he gets another call, which he apologetically says he has to take. "Do you feel a little thinly spread?" I ask as he puts his over-used mobile away. He laughs it off rather nervously and talks of something else. Of course, we both know the answer.

Mohammed is in a chatty mood; in fact he is a very talkative person. He launches straight into how he has always wanted his work to have a dynamic affect from Day One, that he wants his work to "scream out" to people saying, wake up and think. He moves effortlessly through conversation often flitting around in a verbal stream of consciousness.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

BROTHERHOOD: PAINTED DURING MUSLIMFEST 2008, ONE OF THE LARGEST FESTIVALS IN CANADA. MOHAMMED'S TRIP WAS SPONSORED BY THE BRITISH CONSULATE IN CANADA

MURAL IN A SCHOOL PLAYGROUND, WITH THE THEME OF SEEKING KNOWLEDGE

ETERNAL: AS-SAMAD PAINTED IN SYDNEY AT THE AL GHAZZALI CENTRE, DURING MOHAMMED'S TOUR IN AUSTRALIA

MOHAMMED PAINTING ONE OF HIS MURALS IN HIS HOME TOWN OF BIRMINGHAM

Before we get too submersed, I guide him back to where it all started to flow for a young lad from Birmingham. Mohammed was seven when he saw his first book on graffiti, brought home by his older brother. Three years later he got his first spray can. He admits, somewhat hesitantly, that he used to do illegal graffiti, spraying his first wall at the age of 14. But to him, it was adding colour to an "eyesore" as he would often seek out the ugliest walls in town that were covered in tags. He describes his experiments with graffiti then as "mindless fun", yet as he



“MOHAMMED ALI HAS COME A LONG WAY SINCE THE HEADY DAYS OF HIS YOUNG APPROACH TO GRAFFITI TO FIND HIS CALLING IN CREATING AN URBAN-ISLAMIC ART GENRE.”

become a part of my life because of you'. When I told him about my work, he was surprised as he had never heard of anyone doing anything Islamic or even religious on this scale in graffiti. He told me about his attending an Iraq war demonstration, and about his films on Palestine. He is 69 years old and is really in tune. I told him about some of the ongoing projects I have been doing with Islamic Relief and he said, 'Yeah, I know Islamic Relief. I donate to them'. I felt the link with him from the start. And now we are discussing the same issues that affect us. I have so much respect for this guy. It's almost like finding out that your hero was an undercover Muslim all his life."

Mohammed has come a long way since the heady days of his young approach to graffiti, to find his calling in creating an urban-Islamic art genre. Fusing Arabic calligraphy, Islamic sayings and street art, his unique work has appealed to many, and he tells me how his messages have expanded over the years. "I'm an artist first and foremost. I never really used to focus on political messages, but I don't

matured, so did his graffiti, and it evolved into nothing less than mindful art.

Growing into his 20s, Mohammed's work was picked up slowly by the media. After graduating with a degree in Art & Design he worked in video games design. But he wanted, and needed, more. He made an important and difficult decision – of leaving work permanently to become a full time artist. "I used to get calls from the BBC about my work and I used to have to call them back at lunchtime. I realised it was going to be too much to handle so I left work. I made a sacrifice. I know very

few artists who have had the gall to do that. I hope and pray that I don't become one of those who just disappears off the scene because I would be letting a lot of people down."

If there is one person who has made an impact on Mohammed, it is Henry Chalfant who he dubs the "godfather of graffiti". "Anyone who knows Urban Art Culture knows Henry Chalfant. His book *Subway Art* is a cult book that photo-documented his whole movement of graffiti. I have built up a relationship with him over the years and told him 'Graffiti has





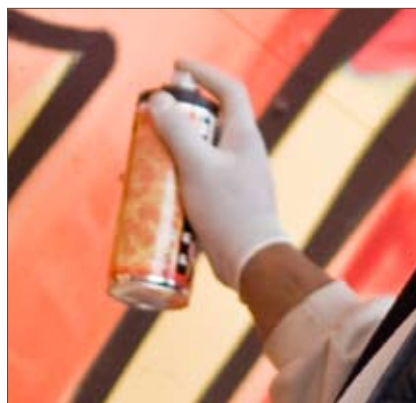
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
MURAL PAINTED IN THE BRONX, NEW YORK, AS A TRIBUTE TO 10 MEMBERS OF THE SAME FAMILY WHO DIED IN AN APARTMENT BLOCK FIRE

FEED THE POOR MURAL, A GIANT MESSAGE ON ONE OF THE BUSIEST STREETS IN BIRMINGHAM

RISE UP, FUND EDUCATION NOT OCCUPATION, PAINTED ON CAMPUS, SPONSORED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO, CANADA



THIRST FOR CHANGE, A MESSAGE OF WATER PRESERVATION, PAINTED AS PART OF MOHAMMED'S RESIDENCY IN THE MELBOURNE INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL, SPONSORED BY THE BRITISH COUNCIL AND THE CITY OF MELBOURNE.



shy away from that now. Perhaps I played it safe at the start because I didn't want to be just another angry young Muslim. I don't think I would be sitting here in the Rich Mix now if I had done that stuff back then. With anything, you have to take it easy and not overload people otherwise they will just lock up on you. Yeah, I can talk about Guantanamo Bay or the War in Iraq, but that's not all I talk about. I also say peace, but I don't want to be labelled as a peace artist either. That's not what I'm about." So what is he about? "Everything. Everything we face as human beings today: struggle, life, faith, peace, reconciliation, identity."

Certainly Mohammed

Ali has come to mean more as an artist now. His work has been picked by Reuters, the BBC, Al Jazeera, CNN and the *New York Times* to name a handful. And it is obvious that both his hands are full, but are his feet firmly on the ground? "I am not an artist who has his head in the clouds," he assures me. "I am not one of those airy fairy artists. Islam keeps me grounded, and I think that's what graffiti is about as well."

For a man who used to shy away from being photographed, it is a sweet irony that he has had to come into the public eye more than ever now, though he still has some reservations about being the focal point. "I was conscious of this whole idea of one individual becoming the focus of attention as opposed to what they were doing, which we see in the Nasheed scene now. I'm really wary of that." He leans back, his jacket rustling again. "Even

this photo shoot for *emel*, I was thinking 'look at me, I'm really posing for these nice pictures.' But I prefer being captured doing something because then the attention diverts from me and it's the art that's the focus."

Really wanting to touch others with his work, Mohammed relates his time in New York which he describes as "the ultimate experience". He was there to paint a memorial mural as a tribute to the nine children who had died in a fire in the Bronx. The wall read the Islamic adage 'To God we belong and to Him is our Return', and included the names of everyone who had lost their lives in the fire. "I get goose bumps just thinking about the vibe that day," Mohammed recalls, and it is clear to see it is an experience that continues to affect him and one that always will. "There were Muslims, non-Muslims, white people, Afro-Caribbean people, and they were all just watching me paint.

"I AM NOT AN ARTIST WHO HAS HIS HEAD IN THE CLOUDS. ISLAM KEEPS ME GROUNDED, AND THAT'S WHAT GRAFFITI IS ABOUT AS WELL."

Everybody had respect for the message and the art, and I actually got some people to join in, so we were all painting together. There were local guys from that street who told me, 'We're going to protect this. This is our work and we are going to make sure nobody touches this.' And no one has defaced it to this day. I didn't know what to expect when I was there, but the kids from that area were so happy that I, a Muslim from Britain, came over to do this. I was glad to bring art to where they were. I only want to do art that reaches everyone."

He continues, "Going to America, for me, was going back to the heart, where graffiti was born. Going to New York was also sensitive as it was where the Twin Towers fell. So having this mural that combined an American genre with Islamic ethos was quite a statement."

Since his time in New York, Mohammed has been taking his work



LEFT
 MOHAMMED'S MURAL TRIBUTE TO THE MOUGASA FAMILY IN NEW YORK, WAS PART OF HIS THREE-CITY TOUR OF THE USA, NEW YORK, CHICAGO AND BOSTON. THIS MURAL WAS PAINTED ALONGSIDE THE SURVIVING MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY, INCLUDING THE MOTHER WHO LOST HALF OF HER FAMILY

abroad even more. His spray can has left its indelible mark in Canada, Denmark, Dubai, and even as far as Australia. As resident artist at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, Mohammed had a mammoth task ahead of him. "When I got there they took me to the wall I was to paint – it was a 30 ft wall at the end of a narrow alleyway that had four levels of scaffolding. My first thoughts were 'Oh my God, how am I going to do this?'" It was a windy area, right in the heart of the city." But Mohammed rose to the task, and began first to research what he would paint on his larger than life canvas. "Whenever I visit a place or a community, I talk about and paint issues that affect them. I did some research in Melbourne, walking through the city and absorbing it all. I saw a news story about a drought which was affecting everyone. I looked at the hadith instructing us not use water extravagantly, even if you are in front of a flowing river. I had found my concept. I titled the mural 'A Thirst for Change' with the words themselves looking like they were dripping with water."

Being in Melbourne for an entire month afforded Mohammed an insight



“GOING TO AMERICA WAS GOING BACK TO THE HEART WHERE GRAFFITI WAS BORN. THE MURAL IN NEW YORK COMBINED AN AMERICAN GENRE WITH ISLAMIC ETHOS WHICH WAS QUITE A STATEMENT.”

into a city he had thought little about, only to discover a vibrant and exciting urban art scene. Weaving through alleyways garnished with graffiti while tall skyscrapers enclosed around them was an eye opener for the Brummy artist. “Once I was walking around the streets to find urban art, and I turned a corner and was shocked to find a bride and groom posing for their wedding pictures in front of graffiti in a dingy alleyway. That just blew me away. You hear the same old debate about graffiti – is it art or vandalism, but here,

look at what’s happening, look at the mindset.”

Australia left quite an impact on Mohammed. Although he says he felt detached from the rest of the world, he felt an instant connection with the indigenous people he met there. “I was so inspired by the people I met. While I was there, I was taken to a performance by Aborigines, and the whole audience was white. I was absolutely in awe at the power of the performance by a group called Black Armband. It was so emotive, proving that unheard voices will be heard.”

Mohammed mentioned other unheard voices in a speech earlier this year. It was at an awards ceremony, the prestigious ITV South Bank Show Awards. Mohammed was up for nomination for the Arts Council’s diversity award and was “gobsmacked” to win it. “It was all so surreal. There were paparazzi at the door of the hotel, and just an hour before I was on a train coming down from Birmingham, and looking at the graffiti out of the window remembering all the stuff I had done as a kid, and here I was at an awards ceremony in the Dorchester

amongst film directors, actors and artists like Andrew Lloyd Webber, Tracy Emin and John Hurt.”

In his speech, Mohammed dedicated the award to the children of Gaza, and to all the unheard voices suffering injustice around the world regardless of background or faith. “No one had mentioned Gaza the whole evening, and people came up to me saying they were really glad and relieved I had. Grown men even told me that I had brought tears to their eyes. People congratulated me, and I didn’t know who half of them were. My wife said to me – ‘Do you know who that was? That was Sophie Ellis Bextor and the other one was Vic Reeves’ wife!’ But I had no clue.”

Against the glitter of recognition from the mainstream, I notice a creeping cynicism in Mohammed about support from the Muslim community that was not apparent in our conversations before. “There is definitely more appreciation from the non-Muslims,” Mohammed admits. “I think it has something to do with the mindset – often we neglect art in the Muslim community. A full time Muslim artist is a bit of an alien concept, since art is regarded as more of a hobby. But Muslim artists need support and facilitation otherwise they have to go back to another form of full time work to support themselves which can limit their art work. We need to open doors, so more artists can go forward.”

Mohammed is both pensive and passionate. His mood has kept the last hour on a constant buzz, and you get the impression that even fatigue wouldn’t change that. Clasp his hands and leaning forward, he adds, “Art is the way to transform and affect people’s hearts and minds. For me as an artist, I think art is the only way you can really cross boundaries. It heals wounds and knits communities together. That is what I am about.”

After talking to Mohammed Ali, you are left with a clear sense of his zeal and commitment. Like his spray can, it is full of vibrant energy that is released when pushed. And Mohammed has certainly pushed himself to aim high without ever looking down. ●



FAR LEFT
BASED ON THE HADEETH “TAKE BENEFIT OF 5 BEFORE 5”... ONE OF THOSE BEING GOOD HEALTH BEFORE SICKNESS. MURAL PAINTED IN BURNLEY, LANCASHIRE, WORKING ALONGSIDE YOUNG PEOPLE, SUPPORTED BY THE PRINCE’S TRUST

LEFT
KILL WAR, ANTI-WAR MESSAGE PAINTED IN ONE OF THE SUBURBS OF BIRMINGHAM, BASED ON THE CHARACTER OF LORD KITCHENER, BUT WEARING A GAS MASK