



PHOTOS: LABIBA IBNATH ALAM

A walk through the art of custom-painted sneakers

RAIAN ABEDIN

The most important feature of an artist is perhaps their way of viewing any surface as an empty canvas. It is in the hands of visionaries who find a canvas in everything they see to find new ways of expressing beauty. With the recent explosion in the popularity of sneakers custom-painted by local artists, I find myself drawn to this newer form of artistic expression that take the shape of fashion items.

The idea of customising fashion items has perhaps been around since the inception of fashion as a concept. Sneakers being custom-painted has also been the reason behind many brands' success over the years. Yet, in Bangladesh, the passion the artists put behind these custom-painted sneakers makes them stand out in their own way. Labiba Ibnath Alam, a 24-year-old artist better known as Labaeba on social media, shares her story with us.

"I was never sure if people would buy stuff like this, so I started this as a hobby in 2020 when the pandemic started. I posted a few pictures on my page and that attracted a lot of people and they were very interested. I've been in love with painting since I was a child. So, this has been very rewarding," she said.

Even still, for Labiba, the journey has not always been easy. As artists slowly move towards turning their hobbies into a business, pitfalls and obstacles follow one after the other.

"If you go through my page, you'll see that I posted pictures and videos of

sneakers every day. I've struggled with suppliers giving me the wrong product, and with explaining my whole process to customers. My prices can be high, but they're always a product of a lot of time and effort, and the paint I use is always a special sort that has to be imported. Many people don't realise that regular acrylic does not work on sneakers," she added.

Similar thoughts were echoed by Venessa Kaiser, a 26-year-old professional artist and one of the founders of Grey-Lo – a company focused on providing custom-painted sneakers.

"When we were just starting off about three years ago, even finding the right paint was a trial-and-error process. Nowadays, on average it takes at least five hours to finish one pair, but the time can differ if the design is much more complex," said Venessa.

According to Venessa, client feedback and communication is vital for artists to grow. As customers slowly come to terms with this new form of fashion, artists are



also trying to develop themselves, and the need for a community has become very apparent.

Both Labiba and Venessa agree on the need for more artists to pick up on this new boom and share their excitement. After all, communities allow artists to work alongside each other, contributing

to the simultaneous growth of both the artists and the world of custom-painted sneakers in Bangladesh. And yet, as the artists themselves have declared, the journey is an arduous one.

In this regard, Labiba stated, "New artists should primarily focus on delivering quality work. There are many artists who might be doing this just for the clout, but that's never going to be a good idea in the long run."

Recently, in Coke Studio's music video of the song "Deora", Pritom Hasan was spotted wearing a pair of custom-painted sneakers that was prepared by Labiba herself. The rise in popularity of these new fashion items has clearly been rapid, but it is only with the passion of these artists that such a thing exists. In the future, it will be exciting to see what new artists have to bring to the field of custom-painted sneakers.

Raian's current favourite activity is shouting at the top of his lungs.