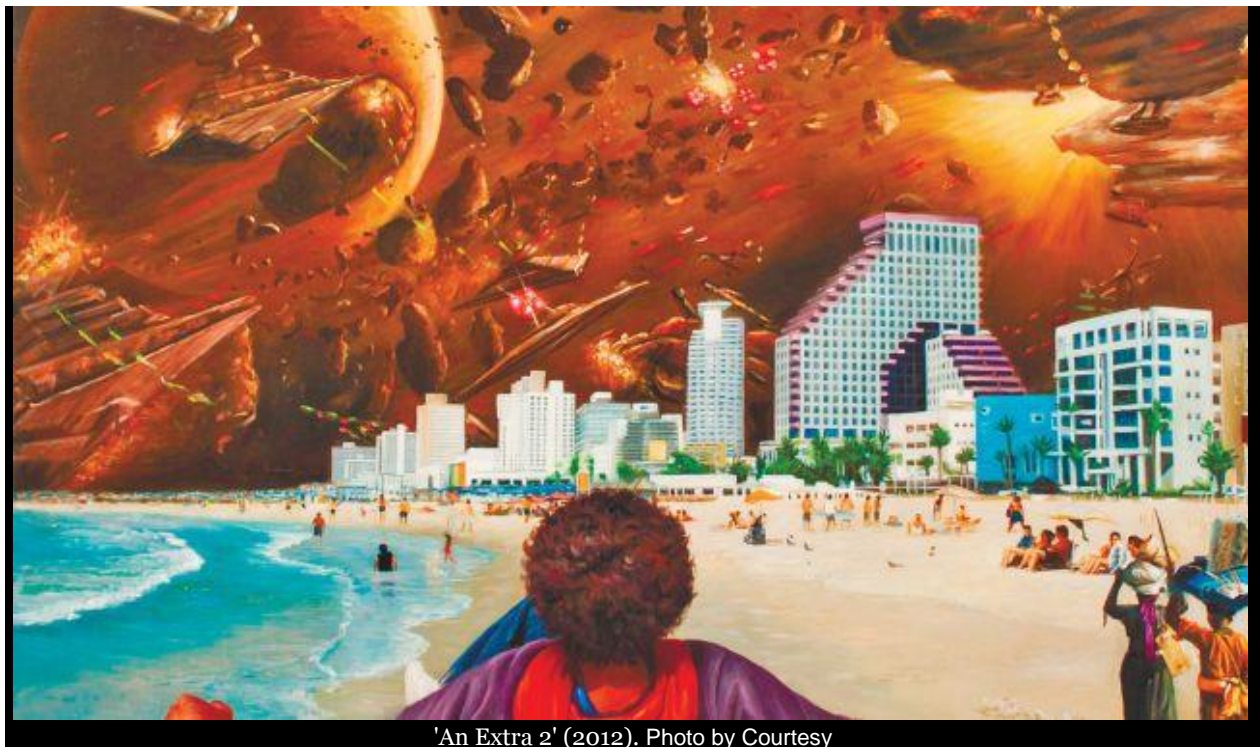


## Pop surrealist Shay Kun says the Holocaust is in his DNA

Spectacular, disturbing and teeming with detail, Kun's works are now on show in Tel Aviv. With his art selling for record sums, he reluctantly talks about his inspirations, his parents – both artists who survived the Holocaust, his fleeting optimism and sense of doom.

By [Tomer Ganihar](#) | Feb.16, 2013 | 11:27 AM



'An Extra 2' (2012). Photo by Courtesy



'An Extra.' Photo by Courtesy



'How We Used to Live' (2010). Photo by Courtesy

The story of Israeli painter Shay Kun is a strange and unconventional one. The quest to get to know him following his rapid international success provided not only moments of rare cultural pleasure, but also insights into the collective Israeli experience. It involved light and darkness, nostalgia and terror. And also meatballs.

I first encountered Kun, 38, and his work a little over a decade ago in New York. I had just arrived in the city, was looking for a studio to rent, and found myself at a loss in the impossible real estate situation there. Before leaving Israel, I had been advised to look up Kun, who had already been working as an artist there for some time.

When I walked into his modest, spartan studio in Queens, I was shocked. First of all, because in the sophisticated and high-speed world of new media, digital art, computerized concepts and so on, you don't see artists like Kun anymore: Hunched over a wooden easel, wrapped in a white cloak, clutching a rusty paintbrush and with absolutely total concentration fixing and refixing a tiny spot of paint on an old canvas. In all my years as an artist, I've visited many studios of other artists of all kinds, but this was the first time I saw the atelier of a real classical painter in action. I was certain it was a long-extinct breed. But for Shay Kun, apparently, time passes differently. In his pictures, too.

And this is the second reason for my feeling of shock: The walls of his atelier were crammed with huge, bewitching paintings of pastoral landscapes of ethereal beauty, brimming with bold, warm colors. But then suddenly the gaze of the mesmerized viewer alights on a small, out-of-place detail planted right in the middle of each one of these seemingly conservative landscape paintings: a burned, smoking overturned car in a lush green field; a stuffed bear lying plundered at the entrance

to a cave on the side of a soaring mountain; the shouting soldier from the poster for the movie “Platoon” crouched beneath an ancient oak tree; a menacing black combat submarine suddenly piercing the serene surface of a lake covered with water lilies.

This odd and first-of-its-kind combination of such divergent art disciplines – classic figurative painting and surrealist pop “shock art” – creates a profound viewing experience that is at once astonishing and disturbing. My amazement only grew when I began, right away, to question Kun about the origins of those dark and nightmarish images in his paintings.

Abashed, Kun shrugged and said he had no idea, that he had no answer to my questions. He just paints what he has to paint. That’s it. He appeared to be genuinely struggling with this attempt at self-analysis that I’d imposed upon him. So I had to back off, and so my journey toward an understanding of Kun got stuck right at the beginning.

### **A mother’s memories**

A few months went by, during which Kun generously helped me set up a studio of my own in New York. Throughout this time, he shared with me more new works of his, and, again, all of them were very aesthetic and at the same time cryptic and impenetrable.

This continued to bother me, and so I continued pestering him for an artistic analysis of his work. To no avail. When Passover came, I flew back to Israel for a short visit. The morning before the seder I got a phone call from a woman who introduced herself as Heddy Kun, the mother of Shay the painter, and asked me to come to her house right away, saying she had a big favor to ask of me. Before long I was standing at the door to her apartment in central Tel Aviv.

Heddy, a short and friendly woman, quickly invited me in for an early and quite sumptuous lunch. Saying no was not an option. As the heaping platters kept coming, accompanied by her musical laughter, I noticed that the walls of her lovely home were decorated with dozens of illustrated greeting cards with floral motifs, done by her, in every size and color: Super-optimistic paintings of blooming flowers, vast green landscapes, beaming sunlight.

Heddy Kun enjoyed telling me about the promising artistic career she had abroad, which was interrupted many years before when she came to Israel and started a family. But she still makes a nice living from selling her paintings to customers in Israel.

As the hours passed, our conversation shifted in tone. Now Heddy was telling me about happy childhood memories in the great outdoors, an idyll that came to an abrupt end with the outbreak of World War II. I also heard about the suffering in the Budapest Ghetto, about the long and desperate months she spent as a child all alone, hiding from the Germans in a dark pit, with hardly any food, with no sunlight.

The shadows on the walls grew longer. When she noticed my sadness, she hastened to change the subject and explain to me why she had asked me here in the first place.

She went over to the oven and came back with a steaming pot full of savory meatballs. Cheerfully, she instructed me to take the meatballs to Shay in America. Confused, I tried to explain that New York was filled with countless good restaurants where her son could eat, but Heddy insisted: Shay only likes her meatballs.

Protestations about my devout vegetarianism, and about how there was no way I could get something like this past the customs authorities in the United States, were dismissed by the determined mother with obvious disdain – the sort reserved for those who have survived immeasurably tougher challenges in life.

And so two days later, not without hardship, I found myself once again in Queens, at Kun's studio, armed with meatballs as well as new insights about his work.

On the spot, I offered an analysis of my own: His idyllic landscapes are a depiction of the idyll in which his mother lived before the war. The flower motif in his paintings are her flowers. His abundance of warm colors are an encapsulation of his eternally optimistic mother, who survived the war and thrived thereafter.

Kun is not convinced. An argument begins. He admits that he was very conscious of the technical artistic influences of his mother's nature paintings on his work, but not of their convoluted psychological meaning.

I asked him if he'd ever really pondered the way his mother's past had seeped into his own intellectual and emotional life, and Kun explained once again that he focuses solely on his own art and never on its origins.

During that studio visit, the barriers behind which Shay Kun barricaded himself were not breached. I wanted to continue developing my thesis with him and also to delve into the opposite, paradoxical side of the optimism in his work – the dark elements of destruction – but Kun was busy preparing for his first solo show in New York, and this was a hint for me to get going and leave him alone.

Six months go by and I'm about to make another trip to Israel. Kun asks me if I can take back some special medicine that he had bought in New York for his father. A week later, I meet Zeev Kun, at a café on Dizengoff Street. Zeev, who cuts quite an impressive figure even in his ninth decade, reacts with a dismissive wave when I ask him to share a few stories from his past. Silence descends. Nor is he very interested in talking about his own painting career. I take a quick glance at the number etched on his left arm, and Zeev gives me a searching, slightly distant and hard look, as if vast chasms separate us. But nonetheless, on this day I feel that I get from him something of great importance: another key to the questions that have nagged away at me concerning the art created by his beloved youngest son.

## **Canvas and matrix**

And now here we are in early 2013. After two decades of total dominance by the photography medium, the art world has rediscovered painting. The field of young figurative painting has joyfully taken over the scene. In the decade since our first meeting, Shay Kun's international career has blossomed at a dizzying pace. His works are shown in many galleries and at major art fairs around the world. With his virtuosic style, Kun was in the right place at the right time to break out and attract many admirers. The painter who initially made his way by working as an assistant to other artists now employs his own team of assistants. Billboards advertising his new show are plastered all over Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood.

Kun is a sought-after interviewee in the trendiest magazines in the field, one of which recently went so far as to dub his work "Holocaust-pop." This is an excellent time for me to see if Kun is ready to come to terms with his intense personal story, and to try to glean some more hints to help solve this riddle.

In preparation for this article, I met with Kun at his 37th-floor apartment at a prestigious address in Midtown, just a hundred meters from the Museum of Modern Art. Tall and broad-shouldered, Kun looks a bit embarrassed when he greets me in the ornate lobby with its three doormen in full regalia, as if apologizing for the grand ambience in which he and his wife Sharon, a real estate agent, have made their new home, and for his impressive professional success.

We conduct the interview on the balcony of his apartment, with its commanding view of the surrounding skyscrapers and the countless windows of New York's vast and famous Hilton Hotel, like a scene straight out of one of Andreas Gursky's spectacular photographs.

*Congratulations, Shay. This week a painting of yours sold for \$32,000 – a new record for your work.*

"Thank you, but I'm against this sort of dialogue. I don't see how it relates to my work. It diminishes our life to a rat race. I'm not one of those Israeli artists who measure themselves in comparison to Yaacov Agam or Michal Rovner, for example. A career in art is like running a marathon. It's not a 100-meter sprint."

*What are your professional aspirations?*

"My aspirations are basically no different than those of any other artist: not to work an office job from nine to five, and to have my work become part of important collections and shown in important galleries and museums. No more, no less. That's the game."

*When did you start to paint and exhibit your work?*

“I started too early, no question. All because both of my parents are active artists. When I was a kid, when the other kids were playing outside, I was collecting insects and turning them into painted objects. My parents encouraged me, and when I was a teenager I was already exhibiting at small solo shows in Tel Aviv, and people started noticing my work and buying things. On the one hand, it made me start appreciating the commercial side of art, and on the other, through copying the works of painters I liked, I understood that I had to find my own unique voice and polish it on a daily basis.”

*How do you define your style today?*

“I’ll try not to be clever and say that it’s a realistic style. I look upon a blank canvas as a kind of matrix. Art history always held a dialogue over questions of good and bad, allowed and taboo, progress and regression. These are themes I like when I come to place my agenda in the work. Sometimes I feel that painting is like magic – 99 percent of the time the trick doesn’t work, but you keep trying until that rare moment when the magic takes over. You don’t understand what is happening, or how it’s happening, but you’re hypnotized. When it works, you don’t ask any more questions.”

*If I may I’d like to ask, do you feel that being the son of Holocaust survivors has influenced your art?*

“At this point in my life I see that all my work is connected to my parents. My parents are definitely my heroes. They endured hardships in their lives that are beyond imagining, and they managed to overcome them and come out the other side as artists whose art enriches other people’s lives. My mother survived the ghetto in Budapest as a child, without food or shelter; my father survived the Janowska camp in Poland, Buchenwald in Austria, Flossenbürg in Germany and finally Auschwitz. For years, as a very young man, he had to contend with horrible torture, medical experiments, fear, and death and destruction. I’m full of admiration and awe at their tales of survival.”

*And what, out of all this, have you brought to your work?*

“Actually, it’s their art that seeps into my art. My parents design greeting cards. My father’s work looks at the breakdown of the landscape, at its collapse. It’s very dark and morbid. And my mother’s work concentrates more on the more festive side of nature, on things that are blooming, on the joy of this. In my work, I try to copy the style of their cards, which I find very attractive, but which also raises many questions. My growth process was an attempt to help my parents, and then to imitate them, and then to leave.”

*But your parents deal with nature itself, while you deal with art.*

“Correct. I don’t paint from real life. Everything I do is artificial. Most of my paintings are a ‘pastiche’ – a recycled work of landscapes.”

*Is it possible that this derives from a sense of despair, from anger at “real” nature’s betrayal of the world, as we saw in the Holocaust?*

“Maybe. I’m influenced more by magazines than museums. I’m not one of those painters who sits in Central Park, in awe at what’s around them. I like things that have been chewed over and over again, and copied hundreds of times. Only then do I want to paint them myself. Some of my images even come from 3-D computer games – from war games, urban warfare.”

*And these are the images of destruction that appear in all of your paintings.*

“Look, you don’t have to be a genius to understand that your clock is ticking and your existence is a consequence of a game between good and bad. Existence is a chain of events that you could be hurt by at any moment. I think my family roots are the reason for this feeling. That’s why I don’t try to hold on to anything too much. That’s why I could never be an art collector.”

*Because everything can be taken from you in a matter of moments.*

“Yes. I very firmly believe that. Otherwise I’d be fooling myself.”

### **Art world as chess game**

Perhaps it was this sense of life’s fleetingness that pushed Kun to enroll at the Bezalel – Academy of Arts and Design at age 20 and then, at 24, to continue directly to a master’s program at the prestigious Goldsmiths College in south London, where he was one class behind Damien Hirst, an artist Kun admires. Hirst’s teachers have said that during his studies, he was always focused on the marketing and financial aspects of the art world. Hirst’s works, too, without exception, deal with the extinction of the body and nature, with illness and the destruction of the existing order of things. One may assume, on the other hand, that Kun’s engagement with these same themes is not tainted by the same kind of cynical, blunt considerations of greed.

However, like Hirst, Kun is also mesmerized by the technical side of the apparatus of the international art world. Even now, in the digital age, it’s hard to find a bigger expert than Kun on the politics of the art market, on the mechanism of the big game this market embodies. His professional knowledge is quite vast and encompasses all art fields. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that this is the only world where he truly feels at home, or at least that he can remain hidden in.

*Explain to me, please, this tremendous interest of yours in the art world and its workings. Is the art world a more intriguing substitute for the – dangerous – real world? A safer and more protected world for you?*

“I think this interest of mine became stronger when I was studying in London, and then grew even more when I came to America. I wanted to know how things work, why they operate in a certain way

and who's behind it. Now that I'm more 'enlightened' in my knowledge of the field, I know how to get ahead and can avoid getting bogged down in things that could hinder or hurt me."

*The workings of the art world are often likened to a game of chess.*

"Precisely. But that's just an image. The knight on the board is just a piece that symbolizes the knight, and the queen is just a piece that symbolizes the queen. You're not really sacrificing or being sacrificed."

*No one dies in chess.*

"Never. It's like a loop that is constantly changing but is also eternal."

*Do you have a life outside the art world?*

"What do you call a life? I don't drink or smoke, I don't go out on the town. I just paint."

*Do you read literature that's not professional literature?*

"No."

*Parties? Movies?*

"I never know what to do at parties."

*You once told me that you were born an old man.*

"Yes, I feel that way sometimes. I just don't like to waste time."

*Do you like living in New York?*

"Yes, because this city symbolizes the center of power and influence and ..."

*Forget what it symbolizes. Do you like living here?*

"It's convenient for me work-wise. When I'm not working, I prefer to go to Israel to be with my parents."

*And you enjoy being in Israel?*

"No. As soon as I get there I want to come right back to New York."

*Will you stay here for the rest of your life?*



“I don’t know. I just had a show in Chicago, and it might be nice to live there for a few years.”

*Why?*

“Because Chicago reminds me of New York.”

*I see. And you’re in your studio most of the time anyway.*

“I like being in the studio and improving my technique.”

*You’re obsessive about your artistic technique.*

“Because it’s my instrument. It’s important to be meticulous and prepared. For years, when I was a kid and asked my dad to tell me about his past, he only talked about the technical things at Auschwitz: the layout of the barracks, the width of the paths, the outlines of the barbed-wire fences. I really wanted – I begged him, actually – to tell me stories with a more human touch, about his feelings, but he insisted on talking only about the objective aspects of the camp – the shape and structure, the length and width.”

*And you brought this into your work. It’s reminiscent of the paintings of Moshe Kupferman, in which the geometric cross-hatched lines etched with Herculean effort in all his works are said to symbolize the fences in the camp where he was imprisoned during the war.*

“But it derives from an existential need, not from some artistic whim.”

*Of course.*

“The Holocaust is in my DNA. It’s like a pair of eyeglasses that no laser operation can ever remove from my eyes. The Holocaust is not something I hide or am ashamed of, and I grapple with this face every day in my work and in my personal life. You don’t have to shout to be heard.”

### **A dead man’s suit**

Whispers, hints, images with dual meanings, symbolizing without symbolizing: the catastrophe is always present on the canvas, always alluded to, but never completely erupts. The truth is always elusive, the message obscured. In each composition, an escape route is always planted – a reflection, or cave, or pit, shattering raindrops in drenching downpour, hot air balloons floating above the ground at a safe distance – in Kun’s paintings, there is always somewhere to escape to, the option of flight will always be there. A way to bypass catastrophe.

Writer Etgar Keret, also the son of Holocaust survivors, always explains in interviews that he’s the only one in the world who doesn’t want to speak clearly. When writer Aharon Appelfeld, a Holocaust survivor, submitted his first stories to American publishers in the 1950s, he received rejections and

expressions of skepticism from editors because of the subdued tone of his war tales. He told them he wanted to whisper about the Holocaust, not shout.

Rumor has it that Appelfeld writes his marvelous books in the reinforced, protected room in his Jerusalem home. Shay Kun does not do his creative work from inside a protected space. Just the opposite. The cool evening breeze now sends us in from the balcony high over Manhattan, and we head to his study to continue our conversation.

But a chilling painting that hangs on the wall over his computer desk, an oil painting he made when he was 16 – depicting a frightening, sadistic surgery scene at a clinic illuminated with blinding neon light – makes me uncomfortable and makes it hard to hold the interview here. So at my request we move to the living room.

Shay settles in across from me on the sofa, the perfect synthesis of Heddy and Zeev Kun. He's dressed very casually, in brown. A few years ago, the fashion reporter for the Gallery section of this newspaper caught Shay at the opening of his exhibition in Tel Aviv, took his picture and asked him to describe what he was wearing for his big night. Interviewees for this sort of column usually take the opportunity to boast of their fancy designer labels. Shay replied that he was wearing "a dead man's suit" – a gift from a widowed art collector who gave him her husband's clothes. A dead man's suit – it would be hard to find a more apt description for the metaphorical cross that Shay bears on his shoulders.

*What is your position on non-Jewish artists whose work involves the incorporation of Holocaust themes, like the Chapman brothers, for instance? Do Jewish artists alone have the right to deal with the Holocaust? Do they have a monopoly on it?*

"I can only speak for myself, and I don't feel in any way that I am an authority on the subject, or a 'patron' in the field. The Chapman brothers [Jake and Dinos] did it in a brilliant fashion and changed the subject to a discussion about the mechanism of evil. They created a hell in which thousands of toy German soldiers from World War II are slaughtering and murdering one another in a kind of psychotic Nazi orgy, and they gave a formative interpretation of the Holocaust and its representations in real life."

*It impresses me that you can admire them like this. This is also an opportunity to tell the readers that you aren't some bleak and tragic figure. You have a great sense of humor, and you often break into loud laughter, even though I certainly can't quote your extreme Holocaust jokes. Even your works have a jokey feeling to them, too.*

"Look, what I find funny other people might not find funny. My works are a fusion of absurds. I paint in the style of the American Hudson River School from the 19th century, especially that of Thomas Cole. They painted with stunning virtuosity the exaltedness of the American west, the greatness of nature and the landscapes. I also paint these landscapes, but I can't free myself of the thought of what happens to these landscapes after they're invaded by tourists – the pollution they leave behind,

the fuel of their automobiles, the piles of garbage. The juxtaposition of the harmonious pathos of these images of nature, with all their portentousness and self-seriousness, with all this human dirt – it tickles me. Like when the Joker asked Batman: ‘Why so serious?’”

*Good question. You recently had a show in Germany, and your work was very enthusiastically received there. How did it feel to make your first visit to Germany? And how did it feel to see the interest the German art scene took in your work?*

“As you noted, it took me a long time to bring myself to visit the country that left such a mark on my family and me. But from the moment I got off the plane in Berlin, I felt like I had to change my attitude and give it a chance.

A few years ago, my parents returned to the camps to close the circle, while they still could. At the time I couldn’t muster the emotional strength to join them. The nice reception I received in Germany and the culture shock I experienced in Berlin helped me open up a little – not to always only be consumed with anger. But I can’t say I felt comfortable there, and I don’t think I’ll ever feel comfortable there.”

*Do you, like many children of Holocaust survivors, feel a “guilt syndrome” toward your parents? And do you feel any guilt about your success compared to your parents’ more modest success?*

“Not at all. I think my parents are very happy with their achievements, and they’re also proud of my achievements and that I can earn a living from my art. For them, having a family in the Promised Land, after all they went through, was the ultimate reward. I’m just trying to add my sound in life to their big symphony.”

*And meanwhile you, unlike them, are a wanderer. Jerusalem, London, Boston, New York – the cities you’ve lived in are all dreary and rainy, and yet your works are bursting with bold, warm colors. Explain the paradox.*

“The cliché that redemption comes from within is true. The same thing applies to art. If you acquire the right tools to create it, then the world can be good and bright, even if you’re sitting in a prison cell.”

## **Israeli Gypsy**

The epilogue of this interview takes place in Kun’s comfortable prison cell: his spacious new studio in Manhattan’s Chelsea neighborhood. A surprise awaits me on the walls. For his new solo show in Tel Aviv, Kun created a series of enormous paintings depicting the hard lives of foreign workers and African refugees in the southern part of the city. The dark-skinned workers look lost and confused in this landscape that is foreign and hostile to them. The effect is stunning. This is probably his first work to touch directly on such a volatile political theme.

Kun first encountered the plight of the refugees when he was working on his last show at the Hezi Cohen Gallery. Cohen's own amazing life story is well-known – a shawarma vendor from Ramat Gan who became one of Israel's leading gallery owners. In an admirable move, he decided to situate his huge gallery on Wolfson Street, next to Neve Sha'anun, where the African refugees are concentrated. Kun became aware of the serious problems facing Cohen's new neighbors, and decided to document them in his paintings in a brave and hard-hitting series. Standing beneath the paintings, with the paint yet to dry on some, Kun explains: "As the son of Holocaust survivors, two emigrant refugee artists from World War II, and being in constant movement myself, I feel like an 'Israeli Gypsy' who has lost his motherland. I think the African refugees in Israel feel exactly the same way. So how can I ignore that?"

And thus, with this lucid answer, my quest in search of Shay Kun has come to a safe, albeit temporary, stop. It certainly won't be the last. It's not the end. But everything is clear now, everything is right. I have just one more question for this master of painting, for this post-modern classicist.

*Last thing. Your mother asked me to relay this urgent question to you: When is she going to see some grandchildren?*

"Thanks a lot. You can tell her that it's a question I ask myself all the time. But I finally feel happy and whole, and all the credit goes to my wife. I certainly don't feel a need to see my biological progeny in the world. That's a responsibility I might not be up to. I breathe life into my work each day, and that's hard and rewarding enough. By the way, ask my mother to add a little more salt to the meatballs next time."

## MAGAZINE

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