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# JUXTAPOZ

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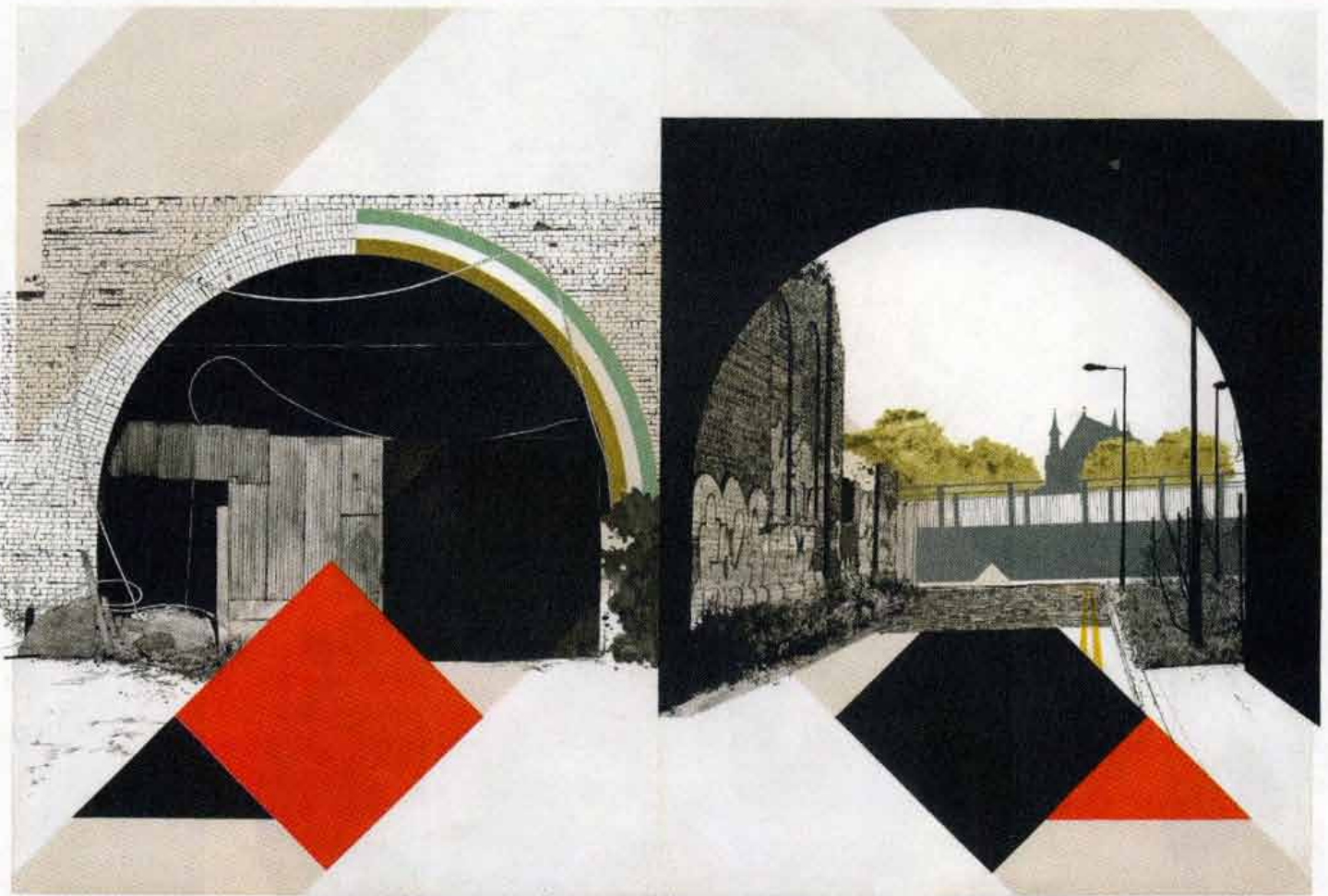


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## JUXTAPOZ 138

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# KENJI NAKAYAMA

TEXT BY CALEB NEELON / PORTRAIT BY JOSH FALK

KENJI NAKAYAMA LEFT JAPAN  
IN SEPTEMBER OF 2004 AND ARRIVED  
IN BOSTON TO GO TO A SCHOOL EVEN MOST  
BOSTONIANS, WHO GIVE DIRECTIONS BY WAY  
OF THE CLOSEST DUNKIN' DONUTS', HAD NEVER  
HEARD OF. UNFORTUNATELY, BOSTON'S BUTERA  
SCHOOL OF ART IS SHUTTING ITS DOORS, LEAVING  
LA TRADE TECH THE ONLY FORMAL SIGN-MAKING  
SCHOOL IN AMERICA. BUT KENJI CAME JUST IN  
TIME TO BECOME ONE OF THE SCHOOL'S LAST  
STAR STUDENTS, THROWING HIMSELF INTO  
LEARNING HAND LETTERING  
AND PINSTRIPING.

- 1 Kenji Nakayama came from Japan to attend Butera School of Art in Boston, and was one of its last sign-painting students.
- 2 Kenji uses the 'hand-over-hand' method of sign painting, rather than a mahlstick.
- 3 He shares a studio in Boston's Distillery Building artist hub with friend and frequent collaborator Dana Woulfe.

Educational ambition flows in the water system of Boston, a defining trait of the town where so many people come to distinguish themselves. Every day, rain or shine, parents who've come from all over the globe position their children halfway up the steps of the imposing buildings of great Cambridge institutions like Harvard and MIT. As parents step back and cue a photo, one can almost see in that precise moment the end of childhood draining away from their faces as they grasp the raw aspiration of the souvenir.

Kenji bore none of that crude archetype of the foreign student: he had seen Butera cited on a Japanese website about custom motorcycles. "Butera was the reason why I picked Boston. I had no idea about Boston: I didn't know

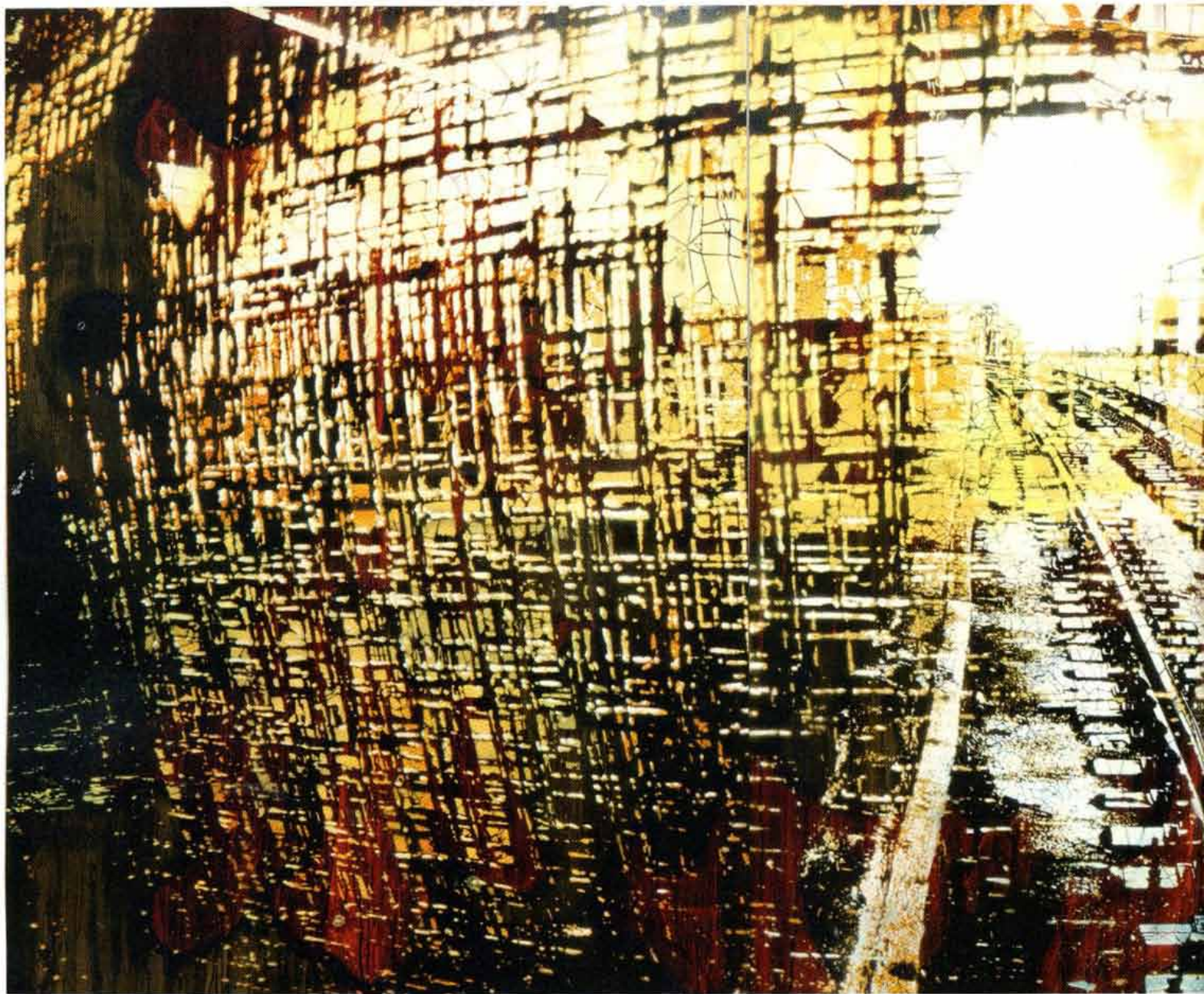
anybody, and my English was very poor," he explains. "I almost felt like all the noise had gone out from my life anywhere I went, I barely understood what people were saying, so I felt like I was deaf. It was good and bad: I missed being able to communicate without too much effort, and I missed being able to understand everything that radios and televisions were saying like I was used to in Japan. But I think that frustration ended up making me super focused."

Kenji found a mentor in Butera teacher Jimmy 'Spike' Birmingham, who introduced him around and took him to dive bars. "It was a good and important time," Kenji recalls, "after breaking away from everything to move to Boston and learn sign painting. Leaving

jobs, Japan, friends, family, and so on was definitely not easy, so I really wanted to make sure that I would make up for the things I had to give up to come here. And being a foreigner who had few friends helped me to focus on developing my new career skills. I just worked and worked non-stop."

Kenji was 25 years old and had made a radical change in his life. He'd grown up in Tomakomai, a small city in Hokkaido, the north island of Japan. He liked to make things when he was little, and his father—acting on a sensibility common to the generation of Japanese who grew up in the lean years after World War II—encouraged him to fashion his own toys out of things he could easily find. As an elementary schooler, Kenji learned how to burn things.





First he used a magnifying glass and the sun, then realized that mechanical pencil leads were good at conducting electricity. He jammed a pair of them into the two slits in a classroom electrical outlet, then set a third lead cartridge across the other two to complete the circuit. It gave a satisfying enough pop and spark and melted the outlet entirely, and Kenji repeated the experiment on as many school outlets as he could find.

The young engineer soon became an engineering student in Tokyo. Growing up in the small city of Tomakomai, where paper and cars are the local products, things seemed fairly straightforward. "It was also hard to imagine having life as a creative individual, but it was easy to imagine myself

working for a factory in the future." Tokyo was an eye-opener as he met people who made a living doing creative things they loved. Still, Kenji found himself heading down a road with a predictable end. He got a marginally creative job, the company was bought and closed; offered a design job at a car company, he accepted only to find himself transferred to accounting, and years started to pass. His innovative fiddling with friends' motorcycles was becoming his only creative outlet, but it did lead to Butera.

In the next two years, Butera produced many other connections in the Boston arts community, through openings, bars, or community-centered stores like Proletariat, Artist and Craftsman, and Bodega. In 2005,

Kenji met and joined the Boston-based artist collective Project SF, which encouraged collaboration between Kenji and members Josh Falk, Ryan Lombardi, Mr. Never, Fish McGill, Evoker, Stephen Holding, Nick and Matt Zaremba, and Dana Woulfe, with whom he now shares a studio. Kenji began to participate in some of his first local shows, and to build a structure for what it entailed to be an artist working in Boston. "Since it's an expensive place for what you get, I feel like we need extra hustle to survive as artists. We also need to ignore the fact we always get shit from people who moved to New York or another bigger city. But, it is less distracting than a bigger city, I don't need to hustle to go out for events and shows, and I don't feel that I'm missing out on anything even if I stayed home



working one Friday night. We keep it quiet and we stay humble—basically Boston makes us strong and we all need to have thick skin to survive as an artist and get through the cold winter. Unlike California, though it may not seem welcoming at first, once you get to know more people, there are lots of kind and loyal folks watching out for you."

He'd need them, as a personal tragedy was about to hit. One morning in 2007, Kenji said goodbye to his then-girlfriend before she left Boston for a cross-country road trip. Later that day, Kenji, who been making elaborate photo-based works with spray paint and stencil, and was on the lookout for new material and took a photo of a Back Bay alleyway, a huge puddle reflecting the buildings above. As he worked,

weeks passed, and upon hearing nothing from his girlfriend, worriedly began the process of filling out a missing person's report. Some weeks later, Utah police found her body at the bottom of a cliff.

Along with this massive shock and his grief came another, albeit lesser blow: the loss of his sign-painting job. This threw his American immigration status into question and left the unappealing option of returning to Japan and trying to start over in a country where career do-overs aren't nearly so easy. Luckily, with the help of friends, Kenji was able to resolve his immigration status. In the worrisome meantime, he was compelled to complete what might have been his last artwork. Taking the photo of Back Bay alley which

he had shot the day his late girlfriend had left, Kenji decided to make one of his intricate, many-layered stencil paintings.

"Even though my earlier stencil work was all based on photographs," Kenji explains, "those photographs are all personal to me. It is because most of the places I took photos and made into stencils were alleyways where I used to walk home from Butera, places where I spent a lot of time back then. Also, I passed a lot of hours looking and hand cutting the image, so every time I see my old work, it reminds me of the time I was working on the piece. It is like music. When you listen to the songs you were playing all the time when you were a teen painting graffiti, it brings you back those memories."

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He couldn't help but notice that staring back at him in the image he was now working on was a large white cross. "I am not Christian," Kenji explains, "but I went to Catholic kindergarten and I had to pray to Jesus every morning, and there is a cross in my parents' house. Working on this piece was the only way I could step away from huge depression and fear for the unknown future, and crazy overwhelming sadness. And it was the only thing to help myself, since my girlfriend couldn't follow her dream, I just wanted to make it happen for her, while I still had a chance to pursue my art career. I kept telling myself that the best thing I could do for her is doing my best for what I believe in. I wish it was just a nightmare, but like the other things, you cannot go back and change fate. All I could do was, in the end, save myself by making the piece dedicated to her. And I was trying to hold onto that white cross."

Kenji kept the painting and his grief close: many of his friends will only learn of the tragedy that occasioned it from reading this. But after completing it in a state of grief, the uncertainty that surrounded his visa status cleared, and he lit into a new series of works. "I changed the subject from a pure image base to an artificial image, a mix of New York cityscapes and images of the forest," he explains. "I thought about living in

Tokyo, where everything is moving very fast, everyone is too busy with their own business, and sometimes there is no time to stop and say hi to others. Sometimes I felt like being left alone, just like being in the forest, but on the other hand, there are so many opportunities to grab in the city."

These more abstracted cityscape works have in the past two years led to cityscapes filtered through a cobweb of shattered glass. "The city is all filled with noise, and you can not escape from the noise unless something we never want would happen," he explains. "But there are all sorts of noise and some noise is not noise to some people, like graffiti. They would rather enjoy it as art. In this series, I create noise and add to it. I am shifting towards more and more abstract, abstracting the city with the image of broken glass to glass tiles, I have a lot to consider to use as the "noise," but for now, I really like how shattered glass works as the noise."

It's of course tempting to think of stencils exclusively as a way to save time—Banksy possibly comes to mind—but witnessing Kenji's process will disabuse you of that notion. Among Boston artists, he's widely regarded as one of the most diligent among them. Boston's globe-trotting graffiti star KEM5, no stranger to flawless technique himself, laughs that he refers to Kenji as "the Japanese Beaver, the hardest working creature on the face of the earth," and means it. "Knowing the sacrifices he has made and his undying passion for his work sets Kenji in a league of his own," continues KEM. "Being a writer I am a big fan of his process—most individuals on the outside don't realize the amount of effort that's involved. When visiting Kenji's studio, you'll find him hunched over one of his stencils for weeks cutting each image out by hand, and a plotter could not match the guy's control and technical ability."

The countless hours of hand-cutting stencil layers, Kenji concedes, "sounds painful.

### Reflection Return

Hand cut multi layer stencil with aerosol, enamel on canvas  
44" x 32"  
2007

People often tell me that I have 'patience' but it's really not that. It is definitely a pain in the ass and takes up so much time from my day, but it is kind of like spiritual meditation, I just get zoned into the process." Maybe so, but Kenji's studio mate at Boston art hub, the Distillery Building, and day-job co-worker at Converse, Dana Woulfe, says admiringly that "Kenji has an amazing ability to stay motivated day after day, coming to the studio after putting in a nine-hour day at Converse, then painting till after midnight. I can't help but feel schooled every time I walk in the studio—it's been like two days and there is a pile of new work on the floor!"

That new work is divided between the laborious stencil work and Kenji's looser and freer sign painting and pinstripping. He's been at the forefront of a small resurgence in hand-lettered signage in Boston—small because it's largely the work of two people: Kenji and San Francisco transplant Josh Luke, who learned his craft on the job at New Bohemia Signs. "Kenji's genuine love for lettering and art is apparent in each stroke of his brush," says Josh. "It's great to watch him letter something; he's super smooth, effortless, and makes hand lettering look fun." The two became fast friends, talking shop all the time, and watching the two work side by side is a study in the two coastal schools of sign painting. Josh Luke uses a mahlstick—a two-foot pole with a ball at one end to hold with his non-painting hand against the wall at an angle, giving his painting hand a steady place to rest. Kenji, Josh explains, "uses a 'hand over hand' technique, which involves resting your lettering hand on top of the other to ensure a steady stroke, and using a card to palette out your paint."

While he's made signs for businesses across the city, he's also taken his signs in non-commercial directions, painting carpentry jargon ('cunt hair' was a quick if juvenile favorite—a unit of measurement for carpenters, and you can look that right up)





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on antique hand saws and other old wood shop ephemera. Kenji's shown these and other light-hearted sign and pinstripe works at San Francisco's Guerrero Gallery, as well as Boston hotspots Lot F Gallery, Fourth Wall Project, and Orchard Extension. "I used to think sign painting and pinstriping were just commercial art and trade crafts," Kenji explains, "but now I think it is important acknowledge that sign painting and pinstriping can be presented as fine art."

And Kenji feels, that may be a necessary path for the two crafts. "Like any other dying crafts," he says, "sign painting can no longer survive as just a trade. I think there will always be demand for hand painted signs and pinstriping, but not quite enough to feed all the traditional old school sign painters, to be honest." Not that he counts himself in that number: "I don't consider myself as a true sign painter, but I do know how to paint letters and gold leaf, and I can pinstripe."

Over the past three years, Kenji's sign painting and pinstriping skills have slowly been incorporated into his hand-cut stencil pieces as well. "Applying these skills for my own work and to present them as fine art is something I can do to support this (hand painted signs

and pinstriping) culture." In May of 2012, Kenji had his first major solo show at Woodward Gallery in New York City. "I never had a chance to present that many works in one place before, and it was a great opportunity. Also, I have been trying to combine the sign painting and stencil work over the past few years, and I had a few pieces in that show that have sign painting elements. But I need to spend more time to get to the point where I can be more comfortable combining both things into one piece."

In a testimony to his popularity in Boston, the crowd at the Lower East Side Woodward Gallery space felt like a substantial show, with dozens of Kenji's Boston fans and friends making the trip down. Kenji certainly appreciated it. "I can't even tell you how much it was important for me to come to the States. It's the best decision I've ever made and I have to thank my family and all my friends who encouraged and supported me, and let me go eight years ago. I am a pretty optimistic person, so I don't want to think like I would have been miserable if I was still in Japan or if I didn't come to the States. I would have had just another different life, not sure what it would've been like though. It would have been more difficult to change and start over

my career in Japan—unlike what I had to go through in America."

"This is the place where I started and built my art career with a lot of support," he says, "The fact of not knowing the area and people, as well as a different language and different culture was a challenge, but a good way to reset my mindset. It made me focused and kept reminding me where I'm coming from: I got to see my country from the outside and with a different perspective, and I have more respect for my country and the culture and people in Japan than when I used to live there. At the same time, I got to know a different culture—the American East Coast culture. But probably the best things I got from coming to America were the people that I've met. I'm just so lucky to have so many amazing friends here. I have gone through so many difficulties since I came to Boston, but my friends are the ones who kept me moving forward and got me through all the difficulties, and here I am for all my friends, my girlfriend, and my family."

For more information about Kenji Nakayama, visit [Kngee.com](http://Kngee.com)