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### Obama Joker artist unmasked: A fellow Chicagoan

August 17, 2009 | 6:29 pm



When cryptic posters portraying **President Obama** as the Joker from "Batman" began popping up around Los Angeles and other cities, the question many asked was, Who is behind the image?

Was it an ultra-conservative grassroots group or a disgruntled street artist going against the grain?

Nope, it turns out, just a 20-year-old college student from Chicago.

Bored during his winter school break, **Firas Alkhateeb**, a senior history major at the University of Illinois, crafted the picture of Obama with the recognizable clown makeup using Adobe's Photoshop software.

Alkhateeb had been tinkering with the program to improve the looks of photos he had taken on his clunky Kodak camera. The Joker project was his grandest undertaking yet. Using a tutorial he'd found online about how to "Jokerize" portraits, he downloaded the October 23 Time Magazine cover

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of Obama and began digitally painting over it.

Four or five hours later, he happily had his product.

On Jan. 18, Alkhateeb uploaded the image to photo-sharing site Flickr (shown at right). Over the next two months, he amassed just a couple thousand hits, he said.

Then the counter exploded after a still-anonymous rogue famously found his image, digitally removed the references to Time Magazine, captioned the picture with the word "socialism" and hung printed copies around L.A., making headlines.

Alkhateeb's original [Flickr page](#) surpassed 20,000 views. The Times found his Flickr site last week thanks to a tip left by a loyal reader of The Ticket. By Friday, the page had been taken down.

On Alkhateeb's page, a [manipulated image](#) condemning fellow Chicagoan and White House Chief of Staff **Rahm Emanuel** (captioned "epic fail") was mixed in with parodies of the "Guitar Hero" game franchises -- dubbed Quran Hero -- and of [Napoleon riding a motorcycle](#) (pictured after the jump).

Flickr had removed the Joker image due to copyright-infringement concerns, Alkhateeb says the company told him in an e-mail. A Flickr spokeswoman declined to comment due to a company policy that bars discussing inquiries about individual users.

Alkhateeb says he wasn't actively trying to cover his tracks, but he did want to lay low. He initially had concerns about ...

... connecting his name with anything critical of the president -- especially living in Chicago, where people are "very, very liberal," he said.

"After Obama was elected, you had all of these people who basically saw him as the second coming of Christ," Alkhateeb said. "From my perspective, there wasn't much substance to him."

"I abstained from voting in November," he wrote in an e-mail. "Living in Illinois, my vote means close to nothing as there was no chance Obama would not win the state." If he had to choose a politician to support, Alkhateeb said, it would be Ohio Democratic Rep. **Dennis Kucinich**.



Possibly becoming a villain in his home city wasn't his only worry. Time's cover and the Joker obviously aren't Alkhateeb's copyrights to fool around with.

Concerned about a lawsuit, Alkhateeb, an unnamed superstar whose nationally recognized artwork had stunned friends and family, was relieved that the situation had floated for months without any major news organizations discovering that he was the man behind the paint.

After we contacted him, he hesitantly agreed to an interview.

If it's any consolation, the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit organization that defends digital rights, says Alkhateeb has a strong fair-use defense if Time or DC Comics decides to take him



Chicagoan | comment by David

**RE:** Obama Joker artist unmasked: A fellow Chicagoan | comment by Stewart

**RE:** Obama Joker artist unmasked: A fellow Chicagoan | comment by philbeddoe

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## Comments

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Hope Firas Alkhateed doesn't encounter a backlash over his identity being uncovered.

**Posted by: Chicago Garden | August 17, 2009 at 07:15 PM**

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This is interesting. Is it "racism" if the perp is also a minority? Of a different minority?

**Posted by: chotii | August 17, 2009 at 07:16 PM**

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When those from the "Middle East" can come here, utilize our resources to achieve their personal agenda openly without shame is truly the end of life as TRUE RED BLOODED AMERICANS once knew...

**Posted by: Patrick Hamilton | August 17, 2009 at 07:18 PM**

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Terrorist.

**Posted by: bob | August 17, 2009 at 07:24 PM**

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Wannabe "artist" Firas Alkhateeb can kiss Le Grande Tookus. It's one thing to be a fool, another to be an idiot and still another to claim that you're an "artist". This guy takes the prize. Good luck with your career at McDonald's.

**Posted by: Bucky | August 17, 2009 at 07:26 PM**

Funny, "There isn't much substance to him".

But we know that.

**Posted by: P. Aaron | August 17, 2009 at 07:45 PM**

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Nothing about socialism is immature...its destruction to any country..read your History..History Teacher. Great Obama poster...got tea shirts ordered and posters..if they can kill Bush off in a movie and call him Hitler...hey we can call Obama what he is...pure evil and he is a joke.

**Posted by: Terrylee | August 17, 2009 at 07:45 PM**

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Socialism is evil because it inherently takes the earnings from the productive members of society and gives to those who are not, and suppresses the liberties of individuals for collectivism. Socialism was the core principles of Hitler and Mussolini. That's why its wrong.

**Posted by: Danile Hubbell | August 17, 2009 at 07:46 PM**

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I dont get it, they removed it from flickr, but left all the pics with ACTIVISIONs logo on them?

Laughable, they removed it because they're Obamabots.

**Posted by: John Scott | August 17, 2009 at 07:47 PM**

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This photo to some is very controversial. It's not. There is some truth to the messages in this photo anyway.

**Posted by: Corve DaCosta | August 17, 2009 at 07:47 PM**

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This photo to some is very controversial. It's not. There is some truth to the messages in this photo anyway.

**Posted by: Corve DaCosta | August 17, 2009 at 07:47 PM**

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Socialism is evil. Look at how the Oligarchy took control of countries using socialism. Obama is a Marxist. Look at the people he was around while in the Ill gov and as senator and now with all the Czars. The one that needs to grow up is this student that created this picture.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kL9ZxjD8LXA>

**Posted by: Terry | August 17, 2009 at 07:47 PM**

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So there we have it. This right-wing propaganda is nothing more than a joke! They don't understand who the hell made this, why, and how their message has NOTHING to do with the art.

Typical mainstream bastardization of art someone did over the internet for their own personal trail to make a nonsensical point. Thank you average Americans who actually think you're actually going somewhere with this. You've just cemented your own average IQ that proceeds nothing more than following the guy in front of you.

**Posted by: Mikael Mtz | August 17, 2009 at 07:47 PM**

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Artist from Chicago? What is so hard about "photoshoping" and image onto a picture. I dont think any person in the art world takes midwest philospny seriously, because they are big fish in a small frozen pond, or in this case a lot of small frozen lakes

**Posted by: Joe | August 17, 2009 at 07:49 PM**

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Oh, kid...you have made a grave error. You have upset the czar of humanity...the black jesus...he will send ACORN after you--watch your back, kid! Liberals have no morals...they will do ANYTHING to get you. Don't drink anything you haven't seen made or you have made yourself. I mean, think--if you get poisoned, no one would help you under Obama's health care plan--you are a "lost cause". BTW, socialism is evil--because it leads to communism--and that has NEVER, EVER, EVER worked as a final solution to problems. NEVER.

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/washington/2009/08/obama-joker-artist.html>

**Posted by: Jerry | August 17, 2009 at 07:49 PM**

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Awesome....I'm a Firas Alkhateeb fan!! Firas you are now enemy #1 with the liberal media. Stay strong my friend you are a brave man!

**Posted by: Gary | August 17, 2009 at 07:50 PM**

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I say it: socialism is evil.

**Posted by: Thomas | August 17, 2009 at 07:50 PM**

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You are Brilliant Dear Sir!!!! You have inspired thousands upon thousands - you should put a signed copy up for sale on eBay!

**Posted by: Kelly | August 17, 2009 at 07:50 PM**

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please look and join! meko

**Posted by: meko | August 17, 2009 at 07:51 PM**

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Next time around, we need to elect people like Kucinich or Paul. I don't care anymore if they pretend to agree with my positions, I want someone who has principles.

**Posted by: Gabriel | August 17, 2009 at 07:51 PM**

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Whether the Joker analogy is right or not, at least it raises awareness of Obama's Modern Liberalism and the resulting Socialism.

On the other hand, Obama's poll numbers are dropping so I guess people are figuring it out for themselves.

**Posted by: Alz | August 17, 2009 at 07:53 PM**

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First of all, who said being a socialist is evil?"

really? you honestly want to ask that question? try history for instance

**Posted by: blkm109r | August 17, 2009 at 07:54 PM**

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"First of all, who said being a socialist is evil?"

I said it.

**Posted by: Anne | August 17, 2009 at 07:54 PM**

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THANKS, MAN.

I ORDERED 25 BUMPERSTICKERS WITH THE "OBAMA JOKER" ON IT !!

**Posted by: jamie | August 17, 2009 at 07:54 PM**

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The artist's identity has been at this website for some time. This is the first interview I've seen, but this is not an unmasking.

<http://bedlammagazine.com/o6news/mystery-obamajoker-poster-appears-la>

**Posted by: Frantz Fanon | August 17, 2009 at 07:54 PM**

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