

Interview

Photography by Fred Mungo

AGOSTINO IACURCI

Agostino Iacurci's vast, transformative murals have us totally under their spell with their compelling mix of bold colours and symbolism. We talk to him about settling into his new hometown of Bologna, creating a pop-up hotel for Hermès and how he 'tunes' the colours of his work to the spirit of a place.





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We know you’ve lived in quite a few places – where are you based at the moment, and what’s it like?

I’ve been living in Berlin for the last six years, but I recently moved to Bologna with my family after spending a few months in New York. Despite being a relatively small city, it has a lot to do. It’s home to the world’s oldest university, and is very well connected – I can be on the coastline of Liguria and Tuscany or in Berlin, Milan, Rome, or Venice in less than two hours. I’m learning about the city and I still feel like a tourist here, but so far I like the young vibe and the way its surroundings span hills and plains. I’m enjoying its scale the most.

It sounds wonderful. Where in the city do you live and work? And when you’re not working, what do you like to do?

I live close to the centre, just outside one of the medieval entrances to the historic city. My studio is located on the outskirts of the town, in Borgo Panigale, in a bright warehouse where I work alone, or with the people I collaborate with on the more ambitious projects. When I’m not at my studio, I go to shows, concerts, movies, and theatres and I love getting lost in the surroundings by bike or motorbike. Food is also a big part of my life, and I like discovering new restaurants.

With so much to explore, do you manage to keep a regular work schedule going?

Since I am constantly travelling from place to place for work, it’s hard for me to have a proper routine – I set it depending on the project I’m working on. I’m a morning person, so I try to get to my studio early and take advantage of the daylight. It’s almost impossible to work at night; I rarely do it and only if strictly necessary, and I always try to keep two free days a week to enjoy some downtime.

Your work spans several disciplines. How do you describe what you do?

I consider myself a painter, even when I make sculptures or installations. My work is often described as stylised, bright, bold, elegant and open.

Is that variety of media important to you?

Indeed, I enjoy working with different media and collaborating with other creatives and professionals. For this reason, I ended up exploring a variety of fields – art, public art, design and theatre, to name a few. Overall my practice, especially in recent years, is solidly inspired by interdisciplinary methods and approaches.

Can you tell us about your creative process and how you approach a new project?

The process behind each project is pretty chaotic. I usually start with some paper sketches while doing basic research, like reading books, articles and catalogues. I use both analogue and digital techniques. Most of the work happens on a very artisanal scale and, depending on the project, I work with various professionals – curators, architects, scientific advisors, artisans, directors and art directors.



Previous page: Agostino outside his studio space, which is located in a bright warehouse on the outskirts of Bologna, Italy; his 2021 mural in Aielli, Italy is called 'Cardi' - meaning thistle in Hungarian, and features a number of the prickly plants which are common to the local area. Left: The artist playfully inspects a series of wooden palm tree sculptures. Above: A selection of current pieces Agostino is working on in his studio - vases, palms and plants are recurring motifs for him.

How do you decide which projects to work on, and the balance between commercial and personal work?

I try to dedicate almost all my time to self-directed work. Sometimes I receive excellent proposals for collaborations with third parties, such as brands or private institutions. I take these opportunities when I see room to explore new paths.

You've collaborated with brands including Apple, adidas, Hermès and Herman Miller. Have any of these had a significant impact on your career?

The most recent one is the Hotel Il Faubourg project with Hermès, at Teatro Parenti in Milan. Hermès invited me to design and decorate a 2000 square metre fully functioning pop-up hotel within the building of an iconic theatre, for a unique, one-off event directed by Laure Flammarion, which saw the hotel filled with performances, dancing acts and concerts. It was a fantastic project and allowed me to work with a vast team of outstanding professionals, pushing the limits of my practice.

And looking back to the start of your career, how did you first get into the creative world?

I was very young with little knowledge of the art world but a huge desire to turn my passion for creating images into a profession. I studied illustration, which at that time seemed to me more like a proper job than being an artist. I liked the visual language of drawing because it was more direct and popular. But I realised I was more interested in painting and creating my own work rather than illustrating someone else's ideas, so I went to study a Visual Arts degree at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. Around 2006 I started creating some large-scale



paintings in the city and, soon after, worldwide. A few years later I felt ready to show some of my works on canvas, and I had my first show in Rome.

Most of your building murals are absolutely huge. What's it like making work on such a monumental scale?

The exciting part is that you can temporarily transform a landscape with just a few buckets of paint in a reasonably short time. You also get in close contact – with no filters – with your audience, the citizens.

On a practical level, how do you go about creating these giant murals?

The process is always different. It's a mix of contexts, casualties, current interests, meetings, luck and weather. The longest part is working on the concept, the sketches and the render. I research, talk to people, and try to get an idea of the context. Then the work on site is pretty quick, usually lasting a few days or weeks. I typically work with one assistant.

In the past you've spoken about the importance of a 'genius loci', or a place's spirit, which originates from classical Roman mythology. Why is this important for you?

Genius loci is the intangible quality of a material place; a distinctive atmosphere – the specific light of the site or the colour of the sky, for example. These elements inform the work as I try to tune my painting's palette according to the environment. Then, there is a second level based on how the image connects to the history of the place and the individual stories of people who come across it. Indeed, I am always surprised by the sheer number of links people can create.



Above: Agostino with some of the strikingly designed fabric elements developed for his site-specific project 'Tracing Vitruvius' with Musei Civici, in Pesaro, Italy Left: With works spanning sculpture, murals, and public art installations, Agostino nonetheless considers himself a painter first and foremost



Above: In 2021 Agostino worked with Hermès to design and decorate 'Hotel il Faubourg', a 2000 square metre fully-functioning pop-up hotel in Milan; it was a fantastic project for the artist, giving him the chance to work with a vast team of outstanding professionals, pushing the limits of his practice



Above: A painting from his 2022 solo show 'Of my abstract gardening', which explored garden painting – a recurring theme in the wall decorations of Roman interiors where paintings of flowers and foliage brought nature closer to home. Next page: Featuring paintings and terracotta sculptures, the show was held at contemporary art gallery Ex Elettronica in Rome





Which of your murals has meant the most to you, or been the most memorable?

It's hard to say. Recently, I painted a large mural on a building in a social housing district in Montreal [left], where someone had died in a fire a few months before. It has been incredibly touching to see the community reunited under the painting, which somehow became a way to commemorate this tragic event.

The mural features some of the recurring motifs – such as vases, palms and plants – that feature in your work. What draws you to these shapes and symbols?

A psychologist would say that it all comes from childhood, and I think this is somewhat true. I believe that the attraction to specific shapes and colours is almost innate. Also, they were part of my landscape as a kid growing up in the countryside in southern Italy. Then, in a more mature phase, I became interested in the meanings of these archetypal images that have been used in a symbolic and ritualistic way since the first manifestations of human culture. The wall was probably one of the first things that humans used as a painting surface. Amphorae and pottery are some of the most resistant traces of different civilisations. The palm is one of the most robust and invasive species that has been able to adapt to the most diverse landscapes and stand the test of time.



Plants also featured heavily in your exhibition 'Of my abstract gardening' in Rome last year. What was the concept behind the show, and are you pleased with how it turned out?

Well, there's always space for improvement, but I am pretty happy with the result. Recently, I became interested in topics specific to the history of wall painting, such as garden painting, which is a recurring theme in Roman interiors. In these painted gardens – featuring fountains, busts and columns, and enclosed by architectural elements – there was harmony between the different components, with plants that bloom in different seasons coexisting. This idealised, and therefore abstract, construction, with different times and natural cycles coexisting, stoked my imagination and somehow, together with some readings about Goethe, ecology and botany, inspired the show.

Can you talk us through your graphic, eye-catching artwork for this edition, and how you explored our paradise theme?

I have explored the subject before. Last year I made a large terracotta fountain, titled 'Hortus' (shown in the Baroque Chapel at the Italian Cultural Institute in Prague, 2022), that recalls the one placed at the centre of the Garden of Eden in several of its representations. My work for *Wrap* was more of a personal interpretation of the theme, using some of the archetypal elements I mentioned earlier to evoke how plants, pottery and architecture can all live on through history.

Finally, your work takes you all over the globe – where's next on your list?

I just returned from an extended tour of Montreal, New York and Madrid, and I plan to spend the next few months in my studio working on upcoming shows in Berlin and Los Angeles.

Left: A special project for Agostino is his mural 'Premise of a Flower' (2022) on a social housing building in Montreal; someone had tragically died there a few months before in a fire and the artwork helped to unite the local community after such a sad event. Above: 'Disegno d'esame' ('Exam Drawing', 2021) for an elementary school in Santarcangelo di Romagna was inspired by drawings of local wild flowers by a student of the school in the '60s, who used them for good luck. Pull-out print: Agostino's paradise-inspired wrapping paper artwork.