

Interview

Oscar Murillo: 'I work on canvases for years. It's like making really good wines'

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Tim Lewis



📍 Oscar Murillo in his studio in north London. Photograph: Antonio Olmos/The Observer

The artist on lockdown back in Colombia, sharing the Turner prize, and his new political hero

Oscar Murillo, 37, exploded on to the global art scene a decade ago, becoming known as “the 21st-century Basquiat”. Born in Colombia, he moved with his family to London when he was 10. He graduated from the Royal College of Art, and worked as a cleaner and a teacher until 2013 when one of his paintings, with an estimated value of \$30,000, sold for \$401,000 at auction in New York. In 2019, Murillo – whose work includes paintings, videos and room-sized installations – was one of four artists to be jointly awarded the Turner prize. He has new work showing as part of *To Bend the Ear of the Outer World*, a show examining contemporary abstract painting at Gagosian, London.

Where are you living and working these days?

Well, I don't really have a home. The work began, many years ago, to take me everywhere. And the pandemic really accelerated that, even though things collapsed in terms of movement. But I moved to my village [La Paila] where I grew up in Colombia and I lived there during the entire lockdown. And it was a beautiful experience to live in such a context as an adult for the first time – as opposed to being a tourist. You understand better the social complexities of Colombia and the politics. The crisis that the country has been living for decades.

Did your feelings towards the country change?

Prior to this trip, I've always idealised Colombia, and I still do. It's a pretty magical place where I'm from, but it's magical precisely because it has its own complexities. It's not a dormant place: it's complex and dark. But then nature injects a tremendous amount of beauty in parallel, too. Unmatched by any other place that I know. Also I had time to think about the decade that had just gone: 2020 really marked a decade of non-stop experimentation and travelling.

Also of great personal success. What impact did winning the Turner prize have?

I don't think about it. It's funny, because I obviously grew up watching the Turner prize. Like, I remember Martin Creed winning [in 2001]: the lights going on and off. And Jeremy Deller winning [in 2004]. It was just something that felt... so unreachable. But I'm really very grateful to the courage of my fellow nominees – Tai Shani, Helen Cammock and Lawrence [Abu Hamdan] – that we collectivised. Because the Turner prize didn't want us to collectivise.

You wrote to the judges and asked to share the prize...

Yes, ironically it was the marketing agency that works with the Tate that said: “This will actually continue the legacy of the shock tactic.” Because, of course, it is something that had not been done before, and then everybody will write about it, and so on.

Did that feel empowering: an artist having power over this huge institution?

Of course. And it was a win-win for everybody at the end, because the Tate [which organises the prize] was seen as progressive, but I think they are not progressive at all! And we were able to intervene in the way we did and it was a good thing.



Manifestation, 2020-22, by Oscar Murillo, on show for To Bend the Ear of the Outer World at Gagosian, London. Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/Shutterstock

How did you find moving to London when you were 10?

It was a trauma. If you imagine a mango tree getting uprooted from the most beautiful tropical place, and this soil where anything grows... You spit a seed of mango or papaya - I'm serious - and it grows into a tree three weeks later. If you remove that tree and you bring it here to London, and you try and replant that tree - even though you have the most beautiful parks - it's just not going to grow.

Were there positives?

In the 1990s, the floodgates opened and this country really opened itself up to the world in a way that I am tremendously grateful for. If I had travelled to the US, for example, I don't think that I would even be an artist. The migrant experience in the US is brutal, it's dehumanising. It removes the sense of self and worth and dignity from the individual, and everything becomes about money.

You have a new work, *Manifestations 2020-2022*, in the new exhibition at Gagosian, alongside work from Gerhard Richter and Frank Bowling. How would you describe it?

Well, when I was in Colombia, I wasn't thinking about art. I wasn't thinking: "Oh, shit I have to be in the studio." I was really living. But I had canvas, I had paint, and then very slowly, I got into it. I work on canvases over years. It's like making really good wine, it takes years.

And the painting gets better over time?

Exactly. Like a very good stew or ramen broth: the richer it is, the better the ramen will be. So I had some material, but in truth, I only had myself: I didn't have all the baggage or structure that I usually rely on to produce. And I just dived in, in this way that was very unfiltered and this was really the birth of this work, *Manifestations*.

Outside the world of art, who inspires you?

The Colombian vice-president, Francia Márquez, I think she's really a hero. She's of Afro-Colombian descent and she's not really a politician, she's an activist. It's not whether I agree or not with her politics - I mean, I do, because she's someone who wants to protect nature - but it's that kids can look at this black woman, who has a similar background to them, effectively running the country. And Colombia being this not just very racist, but also violent country, that takes a lot of bravery.

Does that give you hope for the country?

It gives you hope for humanity.