**Making Public Art: Add Fuel - ECHOES**

We worked with some wonderful artists throughout 2023 to bring large-scale mural pieces to various locations across Leeds, as part of LEEDS 2023. We’ve been catching up with the artists, in a new series that looks at working with communities, sustainability, and their working process in creating public art.

In the third instalment, Add Fuel talks about his practice as an international artist, working at large scale and the development of ECHOES. Taking inspiration from the renowned Burmantofts pottery and celebrating the area's important ceramics heritage, ECHOES includes redesigned patterns from tiles that can be seen at some of Leeds’ most esteemed institutions – including Leeds Central Library, Leeds Town Hall, University of Leeds, and Leeds Grand Theatre. By combining traditional decorative elements with contemporary designs, Add Fuel, on closer inspection, reveals a detailed world of unique images and characters – brimming with unequivocally original motifs and characters with deep emotions.

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Helen

First of all Diogo, can you just tell us a little bit about you and your practice?

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Diogo

Well, my name is Diogo Machado, and my artist name is Add Fuel, and I am from Portugal. My work revolves around reinterpreting the visual aesthetic of tiles, mainly Portuguese tin glazed tiles called azulejo. But not only Portuguese. You know, I have a large interest in reinterpreting and redesigning and rethinking different cultures from around the world, wherever. Whenever it makes sense for me to work and rework with different aesthetics, different traditions, different inspirations, mainly based always in patterns.

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Diogo

If it's a tile pattern, it's better, of course, but if it's not a tile pattern, then I'll adopt the aesthetic of, let's say, that specific pattern from that culture, which might be, let's say, a fabric pattern, and then I'll adapt it into my own aesthetic and make it more like a tile because I might work the results largely around tiles.

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Diogo

So as I mentioned, I am an artist and I say artist in general. I do work a lot, quite a lot with street art and with public interventions and public installations, with murals, painted murals. I use stencil as one of my main techniques just because it's so much easier to repeat the patterns with the stencil. It just makes it,

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Diogo

everything very, very, you know, exactly the same in terms of repetition. But I do also apply freehand techniques with spray and one of the, you know, one of the, let's say, techniques I also enjoy quite a lot and aim to do more and more. It's properly tile installation as a tile mural, which has been happening quite a lot more in recent years.

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Diogo

And the clients have finally been able to have a good amount of budget to create tile installations which are more expensive, obviously, than a painted mural. And so, me personally, and we as a studio and the people that I work with in my studio, we are aiming towards having more and more tile installations as one of our focuses.

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Helen

And have you done quite a few of those recently?

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Diogo

Yeah. It's been at least one or two per year, which is good. Like one or two per year. In the past two years, we've been doing more and more of these tile installations, and we have been trying to create these tile installations because, in a way, it just makes them more permanent, less ephemeral, you know? Interesting enough, a mural, a painted mural, is interesting enough.

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Diogo

It's amazing. It's a beautiful art piece which can be created with some sort of ease. It's easily created within a city in terms of technique and logistics. Tile installation is more complicated to achieve, but it's also more permanent. It's something that, it just stays, it lasts years, even decades, centuries. So even if it's painted over, it can also always be cleaned.

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Diogo

And it's different with tile, than a painted mural, which once it's painted over it needs to be repaired, and it's not possible. Then needs to be buffed. You know, so it's about trying to, in a way, be more faithful to what I have been working on. So if I have been working on the tile aesthetics, I'm just trying to be more faithful in that sense and trying to create tile installations and just being more faithful to what I initially worked on, that I've been working on, you know?

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Helen

Yeah, Yeah, that's great. I can imagine they look really striking as well in the ceramic. Yeah.

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Diogo

Yeah.

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Helen

So can I ask you next, how did you get into working on public art and mural work and what do you feel sort of helped you on this journey?

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Diogo

Well, I started to work on public art and in this kind of public installations or interventions, I've started to work in a very intuitive way. I want to say, because first of all, my first contact with public art and with, let's say, facing a wall was when I was as a teenager, I was doing some graffiti and I love it and I still love it to this day, and I have done it for a few years.

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Diogo

So, you know, I've always had this and, this little, there's always something inside me that I've always felt was something that was interested in being outside and just creating something, you know, in the exterior, in the street setting and, like, living a city through the experience that one has while doing an intervention on it.

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Diogo

So when I started to work with the tile aesthetic and just reinterpreting the tile patterns, curiously enough, I was not initially, what I did was not immediately go into creating stencil murals or painting them. I started to work. I tried to actually achieve the visual aesthetic of the tile in the studio. So once I actually created tiles in the studio, then that was a turning point for me to go back into the street and put the tiles back on the street.

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Diogo

And so because in Portugal we do have so many tile facades and, for me, the tile is not only a construction element to be used inside the home, let's say, you know, in the bathroom or in the kitchen, we use tiles as building facades, it's something that, for me, it's outside. So when, as I mentioned, I’m in the studio and I created my own tiles and then I felt like I should return them and put them back on the street again.

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Diogo

And that was the approach point for me into a more street art kind of interaction, pretty much similar to the style of Invader from France. You know, I had little tile pieces that I was placing in the streets of the city that I visited. But then this was Portugal, so no one really cares.

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Diogo

It was just like a little bit of another tile there. That was funny enough. And then some other projects, bigger projects that are like bigger murals started to appear. And, as I just mentioned, the clients right now, luckily, I've been, you know, reaching a point where the clients have the budget. But now, you know, this was like 15, 16 years ago.

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Diogo

And, you know, the clients just wanted someone and were approaching me and wanted to do a mural and they didn't have much budget. So I had to find a way to create this pattern repetition. So that's when the spray paint came in again to my life. And I was like looking at a mural again, this time with a stencil and a spray can.

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Diogo

Like, ok, I can do this, you know. Yeah. So, the process was inverted. I started with the tiles, then I switched to stencil. Now going back to tiles again.

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Helen

So, that's interesting, how it's kind of come full circle like that.

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Diogo

Yeah. Yeah exactly. Yeah.

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Helen

And interesting about the tiles in Portugal. I’ve been to Portugal a few times and obviously there is a lot of the exterior buildings are tiled, but we don't have that in England at all really.

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Diogo

Yeah.

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Helen

It's definitely an internal thing.

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Diogo

It’s a very Portuguese thing also. Not only Portuguese, but it's very Mediterranean I would say. Yeah. It's Iberian, I want to say Iberian, or from Portugal and Spain. From the, from Iberia.

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Helen

Sort of the Moorish influence in the architecture.

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Diogo

Exactly. Yes. Yes, exactly.

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Helen

Great. And so next I'm going to ask you, what was your involvement in East Street Arts’ public art programme last year?

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Diogo

Okay. So that was that was, my involvement with East Street Arts and that intervention I created was a very long project and process, let's say. You know, it started almost like a few years before it was actually accomplished and painted due to some pandemic that happened.

Helen

Some small pandemic that happened.

Diogo

Exactly. Like, the restrictions that people had to travel and all this.

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Diogo

Anyway so it was curious enough. I was contacted by East Street to create a public intervention. And I immediately felt a connection there with Burmantofts, with the pottery, Burmantofts pottery. It was like such an amazing catalogue that they have. And, you know, as I mentioned, it's always interesting to me to not interpret the tile aesthetic of the azulejo from Portugal all the time.

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Diogo

And I enjoy quite a lot switching colours, moving into a different colour palette moving to different tile aesthetics and drawing something different. And this was exactly what Burmantofts’ catalogue allowed me to do, you know, as an inspiration. From the pottery, the vases, and also the tiles, obviously. So, yeah, it was very interesting to create this installation, this mural called ECHOES. It delved into the fact that, you know, echoes is something that, kind of it comes from one place to the other: an echo.

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Diogo

So it was something that comes from the past into the present. And, you know, what I have done is an echo of the actual Burmantoft catalogue. So, as an echo, this is what I created. This was like my idea for the mural itself. And then it has a chromatic and patterns and elements inspired obviously by, as I mentioned, from the Burmantoft catalogue, and I think it's just overall a very, very beautiful and amazing add on to the city.

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Diogo

So, I mean, I'm just trying to be modest here, but I'm very excited and happy with it.

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Helen

It’s really changed the area for us. I think it really stands out and the positioning of it because it's on a slope.

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Diogo

Exactly. And it was quite a challenge, quite a challenge to paint on that slope. t was also quite a challenge because of the weather as well. It was, you know, my Mediterranean blood does not allow me to be cold for long. And I was freezing most of the time. I was putting layers and layers of clothing.

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Diogo

Yeah. So that was fun.

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Helen

Well, it looks stunning and I would say it's really changed the area. It has added so much colour and, yeah, I think there's been a lot of really positive feedback on it.

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Diogo

I'm happy to hear that, it’s amazing. I mean, while we were painting, this was painted by me and my assistant, there were two of us. While we were painting, we had great feedback from the people in the area walking by, passing by, and just saying, this is beautiful. So I'm glad to know it maintains the colour.

Helen

Yeah, it definitely does.

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Helen

And actually, building on that, I know originally way back before the pandemic when we first started talking about this project and we were, I think, we were originally going to involve some school groups and various participants in the project, which I appreciate due to the nature of things being so delayed, we didn't have time for the end, but I just wanted to ask in terms of working with and in communities with your work, how do you think artists and communities can successfully work together?

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Helen

Is that something you've done in your practice before and how do you think that works best?

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Diogo

Well, you know, artists and communities working together, it's always something that has to be, I want to say, I'm kind of missing the word here, it has to be, it has to come from the community. Half of it has to come from the community. Half of it has to come from the artist so that it can meet in the middle and actually work together.

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Diogo

You know, this specific project that we were going to include participation of the schools as well. We were going to do a workshop and this would have created a whole lot more meaning into the actual intervention itself. As you just mentioned, we were not able to do this because of the schedule and the timing was just so delayed that we were not able to include other

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Diogo

these other elements that we wanted to include. These other, you know, the participation of the community, more of, specifically, the participation of the school. We wanted to include workshops. We wanted to have a little talk about Burmantofts pottery, to have the kids, kind of, get to know what was done in the area before, as Burmantofts factory and all this.

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Diogo

So the fact that I was willing, and I was willing to be proactive in that sense, and I believe that the kids would have loved it, too. And I just, and as I just mentioned, we would have met in the middle, obviously. So this is the way that I feel that artists and communities need to work together.

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Diogo

It needs to have, the artist needs to have a story to tell. It needs to have something to say about the community, needs to have, like this, the artists needs to have this, as I just said, a story to tell, but it needs to kind of be willing to show something to the community that they kind of were missing or they didn't pay much attention.

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Diogo

This is the role of art, is to pay attention to something, is to create awareness. Right. Just for me, this is what I always explore, creating awareness towards something. And the community needs to be open to have this, needs to be open to this, to receive this information and to be open to explore it.

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Diogo

So I would have loved for this to happen. Who knows if we can do it in the future.

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Helen

Is it something you've done before in any of your other work, working with schools or different groups?

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Diogo

Yeah, we've done some community works. When I say we, it's like me and the people that work with me, obviously. We've done a beautiful workshop in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. Yeah. So for this we did a beautiful stencil workshop, you know, again, with the tile and with the tiles stencil. Portugal and Brazil, they do have quite a lot of connections, you know, we have this in common.

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Diogo

So I'm maybe I'm forgetting some more, but anyway, this was just an example and it's always interesting. People just, it's very much face-to-face feedback when people say, I love this, this means something to me. And it's like, okay, as an artist, I think, well, my job here is done. I've opened the eyes of someone and I'm, you know, I’m ok with that and I'm good, you know?

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Diogo

Yeah, yeah.

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Helen

And I know, because in public art generally, I think there's a lot of debate about how much a neighbourhood has ownership over a piece of art.

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Diogo

Oh, for me it's quite simple, the answer: the neighbourhood owns the piece. Once the piece is finished by the artist, it's owned by the neighbourhood. That for me, it's as simple as that. And when I finish one of my pieces, one of my paintings, one of my tile installs, whatever, it's not owned by me anymore.

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Diogo

Yes, it's signed or whatever, but from that moment on, it's part of the neighbourhood. It's part of the people that pass by that street everyday to go to work. It's part of the people that live in the building across the street or whatever. It's not owned by me anymore. And I love the fact that, this is something that I love that it happens.

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Diogo

It's out there. It belongs to the world, it belongs especially to the neighbourhood, and to the community.

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Helen

And I guess ideally, we had been able to do the school workshops and things with this project that the local community might have felt they’d been part of the process, as well, which is always a nice thing to do to get them involved at the start as well. Great, well we'll move on to talking about the international side of things.

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Helen

So, I guess really for us it's just about asking how do international artists and arts organisations develop partnerships? I know, obviously, when we were looking for a mural for this area and looking at the pottery side of things, we came across you and it was just a natural synergy between you and what we were aiming for. In terms of your other commissions and the international work that you do,

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Helen

how does that, sort of, happen?

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Diogo

Yeah, I mean, in terms of working internationally, for me, it's interesting that, as I mentioned, you know, it's for me it's all about the tiles and mainly about the Portuguese tiles, azulejo. But the fact that I have the chance to explore other cultures, other traditions, other aesthetics, it's just like the cherry on top, you know what I mean?

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Diogo

So it's just amazing. And what happened with East Street and what happens with some other organisations and clients and projects that I do, I believe the thought process is the same. And there's some sort of tradition, pattern tradition or tile tradition from that city or from that country. And people see my work and see, okay, this artist is able to focus on what was done, think about what can be done and rework that and create something new, even if it's Portuguese.

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Diogo

Let's bring him over and, you know, bring them into our country and allow him to rework our traditions and our culture. And, you know, and for me, it's very rewarding, obviously, it's something just it makes me really happy and grateful that people allow me to rework their tradition and their history, you know, and make it somehow my own, obviously.

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Diogo

But then give it back to the community, give it back to the street and put it back on the street on a large-scale mural that everyone can see. And there is a story behind it, obviously. The story is that this was previously done by this pottery house or it was done by our grandmother, etc., etc..

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Diogo

She used to do this and now it's kind of lost. And then this artist comes over, rethinks that to create something different, puts it on the wall, obviously, does, I do my own style. Always, it has rips and the cuts and the layering and I create the layers of history, which is the layering effect and all this. So obviously it's very rewarding for me.

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Diogo

And I think that the thought process is quite similar. You know, I've done, I want to say, I've done recently, well not recently, but a few years, a couple of years ago in the U.S., in Cincinnati, they had Rookwood pottery, very interesting, same thought process, logically, in terms of idea and reworking Rookwood pottery.

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Diogo

But Rookwood is actually something that is still very active to this day. I went into the factory, I met everyone there. They were super happy that I was reworking their catalogue into something, you know.

And, you know, when I was in Scotland, I found these little tile panels that were on the floor on the entrance of the old houses.

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Diogo

So then I took these little tile panels from the floor and put them into this big mural. You know, these are some of the stories that can be told, can be told, you know. And so some stories that can be rewritten and I'm very happy to do this.

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Helen

Yeah, I guess ceramics and and tiles are quite a universal thing as well. There is in a lot of different countries, and all used differently but there is that kind of universal connection.

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Diogo

Exactly.

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Helen

To show that through your work is really nice.

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Diogo

I’ve done a very rewarding project as well in Tunisia. In Tunisia, there are these beautiful, beautiful ceramics and beautiful aqua tone and blue tone ceramics, very similar to the Portuguese actually and I've done almost like an entire, right now, it's almost looking like an entire street covered in tiles.

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Diogo

And it's actually a tile project. And we want to do more in the future in the same street. So I mean there's always a history, a story, to be told.

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Diogo

So just as a curiosity, one of the first questions that we were just talking about working internationally, one of the first travels that I did out of Portugal to paint somewhere else was in France, in Mulhouse. In Mulhouse, they don't have a tile condition, but they do have the Mulhousien, which is a textile pattern.

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Diogo

And they have different Mulhousien textile patterns. And that was something that I just, I retold that story. I took the Mulhousien, I reworked them into a pattern and I put them on the wall. And so that was interesting as well.

Painting for Norway, in Norway they have rosemaling. Rosemaling is something that's embroidered, in fact, in textile as well. A very old tradition to have.

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Diogo

And then I took these rosemaling patterns and created tile patterns with them. So, there's always something that can be told as a story. The fact that people allow me to do this is just amazing.

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Helen

Yeah, that's great. And we feel it's really important, obviously, to not only nurture the talent we have in Leeds and in England, but also to bring international talent so that we can, you know, show something else and bring a new perspective. So, yeah, I feel that that is something that's important within, well, across all art forms but particularly with public art.

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Diogo

In the same way that English artists come to Portugal to do creative projects and to paint, you know, it's an interchange, a change of culture, the change of people that, that just move.

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Helen

Yeah, I mean, just before we finish on the international side, is there any, do you have any sort of ideas of how and in terms of sharing good practice, how we might better engage internationally with other people doing public art? I mean, do you have any, sort of, experiences or some really good examples of commissions you've worked on internationally but that you feel others could learn from? I just wondered about your perspective on that?

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Diogo

Well, yeah, okay. I think in terms of how engagement with international artists can be done more efficiently, right? That's what you're asking? So, my comment here would be, going back to what I just mentioned and what I try to do all the time: there's got to be a story to be told all the time.

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Diogo

If there's an interesting story to be told, then the fact that you hire an international artist from the US or Italy or Africa or I don't know, or if you are a local artist or not someone from the UK, it doesn't really matter as long as the story is told, the way that people will perceive it correctly, and in a good way. What I mean is as long as the community accepts it as something that they embrace, you know, it doesn't matter who does it.

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Diogo

But, if you feel like that specific international artist is the right person to do this project, then its all a matter of just explaining, you know, contacting this person or his manager or his, whatever, studio and just, you know, put on a good show, like, okay, we have this for you. We want to tell this story. I feel you’re the right person.

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Diogo

This is what we can do, you know?

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Helen

Definitely. Okay. So the last, sort of, theme we were going to talk about was a bit more challenging probably, but to do with climate change. And climate action, we're trying to be, well I guess the whole world is. But I know that especially in the UK, we're trying to be much more conscious of our, sort of, ethics around what materials we use and how we're kind of contributing to, sort of, global issues.

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Helen

And obviously public art is something that can be quite difficult in terms of being climate friendly, as well, with materials.

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Diogo

Yeah.

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Helen

We're just interested if that's something that you consider in your studio and with your team, and how you think that might look going forward? How do we try and reduce the, sort of, carbon footprint of public art?

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Diogo

And this is yeah, I mean reducing the carbon footprint anywhere, anywhere in the world with any practice. it's difficult, right? This requires a lot of change. It requires a lot of thought and it requires a lot of attention. And it's, you know, personally to what I do in the studio, what we do, it's what we can do. What we do is start with the small things.

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Diogo

You know, changing the Scotch tape from the plastic one to the paper one. We do the small things. You know, the small things can be done. The big things are difficult. The big things, the main things I want to say. So unless someone manufactures a CO2 free spray can. Yeah, we cannot go around. We cannot move around not using spray cans.

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Diogo

So you know what I mean. So the big things, the main things are difficult. I say this for me as an artist. Other artists will have other opinions. They, if they use, if there's a specific artist that uses the specific kind of paint with a brush, that paint can be changed into something more sustainable.

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Diogo

A spray can, spray cans are spray cans. I'm dependent on a manufacturer.

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Diogo

You know, it's difficult. And, you know, with the tiles themselves, tiles are clay. They're fired. They're glazed. There's a process with inks, with paint, also with high-temperature paint and all this in the studio, you know, there's not much we can do. It's like it's achieving a specific result. And with a technique that's been going on for years, there is no way to change this process or else the end result will be different.

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Diogo

And so it becomes quite difficult for me to have this conscience. Again, we can do the small things. We can use paper bags instead of plastic bags. You know, you can do these different things and then recycle everything. And then you have different recycle bins for different materials. But again, the big things are very, very difficult.

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Helen

So the final bits really are because we're hoping to do some work going forward around working with artists that maybe haven't worked in the public realm before and helping them to develop their practice so that they can do in the future.

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Helen

So, I wanted to ask from your experience, do you think there is many opportunities out there for sort of new an d aspiring public artists and what would you think would help them achieve being able to work on scale and outdoors? What are the things that helped you to do that, I guess?

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Diogo

Yeah, no, to be honest, I don't think there are enough opportunities for artists, for new and upcoming artists, these days. And, I feel that if East Street wants to create these opportunities I am 100% in agreement with that. You know, I feel that there's got to be more opportunities, more events, more, I want to say… again, I'm missing the words here… because there's less, and it's not a contest, but you know, something that like an event that brings in people and brings them in a way that creates a mockup, create a project for something that you can turn into a reality in a mural or in a sculpture, you know?

00:32:49:17 - 00:33:10:22

Diogo

So I feel that these kind of initiatives. Okay, initiative, that's the word I was looking for. So initiatives may be I feel that there are not enough. So if East Street is willing to create that, truly, truly amazing.

00:33:10:24 - 00:33:16:06

Helen

Do you think that it’s to do with confidence? I can imagine it takes quite a lot of confidence to do something of scale outdoors?

00:33:16:06 - 00:33:44:04

Diogo

Of course, you know, someone that doesn't know how and where to start. If this artist is starting and they want, even if it's not starting the artistic practice, but starting the public art practice, I mean, there are examples of artists that have been working as an artist for five, ten years and have never done anything in the public art realm.

00:33:44:04 - 00:34:10:01

Diogo

And then they've done this one project. Then all of a sudden it's amazing and they start to do more. Even if it's the starting point for an artist that is actually starting a career or just starting in the public art realm and, you know, circles, why not? Why not create the opportunity? There's another side to it.

00:34:10:02 - 00:34:46:14

Diogo

And what I mean is creating public art, creating street art, it's just as easy as going outside and doing it, obviously, you know, it can be a paste up, it can be a stencil, it can be, whatever. You know, it can be a spray can creating something, brushes, anything is possible, anything is valid. But to have the opportunity to create something in the large scale, something that's thought, something that has a line of thought, something that has a story to tell, something that has a beginning, a middle and an end.

00:34:46:16 - 00:35:15:02

Diogo

Something that is done thinking about the community, something that is done, you know, with a specific goal. That's something always that has to be the impulse of an association or someone behind all of this. And if East Street is willing to do this and create these opportunities. I feel like that, that's amazing.

00:35:15:04 - 00:35:38:21

Helen

Thank you. I think because we're hoping to use these interviews that we're doing as well to help sort of inspire sort of newer artists as well. So that's really valuable. Thank you. My final question just before we finish would be where would you like to go next with your practice? Do you have a sort of ultimate ambition or place you want to work or thing you want to do?

00:35:38:23 - 00:35:41:21

Helen

Dream project?

00:35:41:21 - 00:36:13:00

Diogo

Well, yeah, to be honest, yes. So I want to go back inside again. So, yes. So what I mean is one of my goals that I'm aiming towards right now. So I've done studio and then I moved out of the city into the streets and I keep on doing and I still obviously want to do more and more public art and street art projects, but I want to go back inside into the museum.

00:36:13:00 - 00:36:37:18

Diogo

So my goal is to go into some sort of museum. And, you know, it's been happening slowly. There's some connections being made. So I want to go back in and I want to go into a museum. I feel like that's that's the goal for now. So but always keeping obviously, always keeping. And I want to make this very clear, always keeping street art, always doing murals, always doing the exterior work, always doing the public art.

00:36:37:20 - 00:36:55:19

Diogo

But I feel like museum is the next step. Having a good museum. It would be, yeah, I think my work in a good museum would be the next step. So, you know, it's always baby steps as an artist and as a career. It’s always baby steps.

00:36:55:22 - 00:37:03:10

Helen

I can see that happening. Definitely. And you've got some great museums, well, in Portugal, Spain, everywhere.

00:37:03:10 - 00:37:07:13

Diogo

So, who knows? I'm not picky about the country, you know.

00:37:07:15 - 00:37:09:23

Helen

I’ll let you know if I hear of anything here!

00:37:09:24 - 00:37:11:04

Diogo

Okay. Okay, good,

00:37:11:08 - 00:37:16:23

Helen

But no, thank you so much. That's been really, really useful and really great conversation and interesting.

00:37:17:01 - 00:37:18:24

Diogo

Thank you, Helen. Thank you, thank you.