

Art

Writing on the Wall. Graffiti artists Os Gemeos reimagine urban space

By Christopher Schmidt

WITH GRAFFITI ART, LOCATION IS HALF the story. The Brazilian street artists Gustavo and Otávio Pandolfo, known as Os Gemeos, or, in Portuguese, the Twins, began their careers tagging buildings in their native São Paulo during the late 1980s. Since then, their instantly recognizable images—colorful dreamscapes that draw on Brazilian folklore and Western hip-hop culture and star a cast of wistful yellow characters—have transformed public spaces from Coney Island, N.Y., to Miami Beach to the 2004 Athens Olympics and from a city train in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to a multistory building in Lisbon and even a 13th century castle in Scotland.

Their latest commission takes Os Gemeos to Boston, where the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) is presenting their first U.S. solo exhibition through Nov. 25. The brothers are creating a mural along the city's Rose F. Kennedy Greenway, turning the domed roof of an air-intake station into the hooded head of a vigilante graffiti writer and painting a red-and-blue-checked pattern over the wall's original grid. A flat surface thus shape-shifts into a three-dimensional giant who seems about to peel off the wall and stroll carefully into the streets.

The twins' ability to straddle the worlds of street art and fine art, not to mention their knack for big statements, is part of what makes them "two of the most influential artists working today," says Jeffrey Deitch, their former dealer and currently the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

"In our art, we strive to capture the play of childhood," says Otávio. Take, for example, one of the ICA show's highlights, *Upside Down Sunrise*, in which a man hangs happily from the ceiling of his topsy-turvy house while his double-bodied guitar shrieks in surprise. Outrageously patterned fish float freely across Os Gemeos' canvases, murky messengers of the surreal. In one canvas, a pair with Op-art-style scales sweetly kiss while just nearby, an upended catch

serves as a sinister, openmouthed palanquin for a blue-skinned bandit-princess.

Amid the high-volume color and cartoon whimsy of their paintings and sculptures, melancholy is an undertow. The yellow figures of Os Gemeos' universe often have wary eyes and hunched shoulders; they seem on the defensive against the chaos of urban life and filled with *saudade*, or longing, for Brazil's rustic northeast, whose folklore traditions inform many of the paintings in the ICA show.

Os Gemeos' iconic, inimitable creations are the product of "one sensibility intensified by a factor of two," as Deitch puts it, the outgrowth of a lifetime of shared art-making. In the office above their São Paulo studio, which is crammed with sketches, photographs and dolls, the twins speak as if from the same mind. When the more talkative Gustavo pauses to find a picture of himself and his brother at Burning Man, Otávio stops doodling to pick up the conversational thread. How do they negotiate the division of labor for their compositions? "We don't," Gustavo says with a laugh.

Their connection is an inclusive one, attracting collaborators like Pink Floyd's Roger Waters, for whom they painted a giant pig balloon for a recent concert. ("That was amazing, because we grew up watching *The Wall*," says Gustavo.) Lance Armstrong owns some of their work, as does Johnny Depp, who commissioned them to paint his Los Angeles home.

But hobnobbing with celebrities doesn't mean the Pandolfo brothers ever stray from home for too long. They recently began a project to paint entire trains in the poorer areas of the Brazilian northeast, recruiting other renowned graffiti writers to participate. The project reveals an impulse central to Os Gemeos' art: to acknowledge social realities while providing a dreamlike escape from them. "Life is better here," says Gustavo, pointing to one of the twins' paintings, "than here," he says, touching the scarred surface of his desk. ■



1. *Dentro do Arco-Iris, É Assim* (Within the Rainbow, 2010) uses a patchwork of old doors and found materials

2. For the painting *Untitled* (2012), the twins collaborated with their older brother Arnaldo



3. Os Gemeos' new mural in progress on Boston's Rose F. Kennedy Greenway

4. The organ keys of *Os Músicos* (The Musicians, 2008) activate a grid of humanoid speakers

