

ARTS & EVENTS

Creating Frescoes

Venice artist Lawrence Levy combines modern technology with ancient art form



Lawrence Levy is a local artist from Venice who makes frescoes, an old art form that dates back to the Bronze Age.

By Bridgette M. Redman
Lawrence Levy has found a new way to create a very old art form. Frescoes date back to the Bronze Age when the Minoans created frescoes on Crete more than 4,000 years ago. They showed up in many civilizations after that from Egypt and Morocco to the Greek and Roman empires. They also showed up in the religious art of the Byzantine Empire and the Renaissance. Frescoes are a form of art in which color pigments are mixed with water and then applied directly to a freshly laid plaster surface, usually on a wall or a ceiling. They caught Levy's attention during a trip to

Northern Italy. Before the trip, he'd been playing around with processes where he transferred film and photographic images to other surfaces such as wood. But during his trip, Levy became enamored with frescoes and decided that was what he needed to do. He returned to his Venice studio in California and began figuring out a process. "I had worked with photos in some form all of my life, either as a designer or a maker," Levy said. "I came up with the idea of doing frescoes on plaster as they had been done (in ancient times). I developed a process that puts the photograph on the wet plaster. I worked on it for

quite a while until I got it perfected. I'm still working on it and finding new things, having both frustrations and triumphs." Another difference between the traditional frescoes and Levy's work is that he doesn't create his work on walls or ceilings. While he's not opposed to the idea — and would do it if he were ever commissioned to do so, he creates work for a society that no longer puts down deep roots in a single location. "I had determined that the conceit of this idea was that in the much more mobile lives that we live, we can't put our stories on walls anymore and expect to live our whole life in

one unit," Levy said. "If I were to do this — and I loved the texture of the plaster and the image — I would have to find a way to do something you can transport and actually hang on your wall as a piece of art." Levy's photo frescoes tell a story, following the tradition of paintings and frescoes as a way of telling family stories. His stories are sometimes real and sometimes fiction. One of the shows of his work was titled "The Past Is Not Where You Left It," and that is the theme he continues to follow. The title comes from a line of poetry by British poet Ruth Padel. "The solitude of the pandemic and the daily counts of people dying accelerated my art

practice producing my own frescoes, telling the stories of my own past, both real and imagined," Levy said. "It's as though the plaster panels were ripped off the walls of my imaginary past." The images that Levy photographs for the frescoes are made up of actors and models who play the roles of his relatives and people who have passed through his life. He stages images and events that are both real and imaginary. He's even had some self-portraits among his work. Some of Levy's work is taken from pictures of homeless people and used with their permission or from old family photographs. "The idea is that this is all a



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part of me and my past," Levy said. "By combining different images that have interested me along with pictures of people I have known, makes it the narrative of my past, but with the past not being where you left it, it changes both in imagination and memory. Some things are there, others have changed. It's a way to tell a story in the broadest possible terms. A friend of mine said she thought I was cinematic without being stuck in the cliches of cinema." While Levy's paintings create a narrative when seen together, his goal is to make individual works of art that are stand-alone. He's not creating a past that might be found in someone's photo scrapbook, but rather a made up narrative that comes from his imagination and fantasies. Rather than creating the work on a cement or plaster wall, Levy uses a slab of plaster as his canvas. It can be transported and sold individually, and travel with its owner as

opposed to traditional frescoes that always stay wherever they are created. Along the way, Levy has refined his process and figured out what worked and what did not. He starts the work by selecting a photograph or by planning an image and photographing it. It then has to be translated through Photoshop into something that he can print and transfer to the plaster. Early on, he learned that too much color made the transfer process muddled — what looked beautiful on computer and paper did not always transfer to plaster. "The frescoes in olden days were painted and that works very well," Levy said. "It is not like a canvas you paint over. The artist has to get it right the first time. There have been times when I have done it, it hasn't worked and I've basically sanded the whole thing off the plaster and started afresh. It's not something I like to do, but I've had to do it a few times."

When working with the image on the computer, he breaks it up into smaller pieces. In the final creation, it is possible to see a grid of lines dividing the plaster into squares. "They become a part of the aesthetic," Levy said. "Even if I had a way to do it in one solid image, I like the lines." Levy's work has shown up in shows across Los Angeles and he invites people who are interested in his work to visit his website. There are pictures of his work there, but he encourages people to see them in person. "Part of what fascinates me and keeps me working on it is that they are textured," Levy said. "Sometimes they aren't perfect. Sometimes little parts didn't get transferred. Sometimes I'll fill them in, but sometimes they look good the way they are."



Levy makes the frescoes by transferring photographic images to wet plaster, a unique process he developed. One of his frescoes is highlighted in "Art and Hope at the End of the Tunnel" a show curated by Edward Goldman on display at the USC Fisher Museum in Los Angeles.

Lawrence Levy
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