

Mission Local Zio Ziegler Once Painted for Pancakes

By Adrienne Zable, February 21, 2014.



Courtesy of Zio Ziegler

If you've ever come across a slight, dark-haired man with a thin mustache painting a wall on a Tuesday morning near the police station on Valencia, he may have told you he was working for the San Francisco Beautification Committee — and you probably believed him.

Sadly, there is no such committee. But the good news is that local artist Zio Ziegler has taken up the cause anyway.

"If you put on a collared shirt and paint in the streets on a weekday morning — as long as you're painting something that doesn't look like letters — no one will stop you," Ziegler says with a grin. "I'm not talking about destroying property, [painting] on top of wood or boards. [That's] something they would arrest you for at night," he clarifies. "But in broad daylight, painting right there? That's bringing art to the community."

Ziegler, 26, has been bringing his art to the public since 2010, when he graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), and returned to his native Mill Valley. Since then, he's painted dozens of walls around the Bay Area and beyond. His murals and canvases are easily identifiable by his trademark angular figures and animals, and the fusion of intricate, layered patterns with raw, tribal imagery. On 24th and Bartlett, a giant mosaic tiger swipes at a doorway. Ziegler's black and white-patterned figures floated alongside The Sycamore for more than a year, until they were recently painted over. From SOMA to the Facebook corporate headquarters to galleries in San Francisco and the streets of Las Vegas and Puerto Rico, Ziegler's bold lines are quickly spreading to walls and galleries across the world.

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Although he's only recently begun referring to himself as an artist, Ziegler's love for art can be traced to childhood. Some kids download porn, but young Ziegler's computer was filled with images of graffiti — which he credits with teaching him everything he knows about line and color. "What appealed to me the most about graffiti was the gigantism, and the fact that the more you look, the more you see," he says. "I couldn't read a lot of it right away, but then it became this sanctum sanctorum of knowledge where you figure out what's inside — and then you're in the club!"

After that first introduction to the art community, he was addicted. In middle school he moved from tagging stop signs in the neighborhood to painting hats and t-shirts for friends. He found himself at the center of connections and a community that sprang from his work. "My friends would become friends with each other because they were both wearing t-shirts I'd made," he says. "There was this commonality, this excuse for discussion, that would cause people to start connecting."

By the time he moved across the country to study illustration at the RISD, Ziegler's work had evolved from t-shirts to large paintings. Before long, his canvases had officially outgrown his tiny studio and he went in search of a bigger platform. It was during his junior year that he painted his first mural inside a local diner in exchange for free pancakes.

Today, Ziegler spends his days painting in his sunlit Mill Valley studio, which is littered with half-finished canvases, heaps of t-shirts, stray drawings and doodles, markers and paint containers. Books on art and philosophy fill the shelves, and the walls are covered in penciled quotes from Plato and David Foster Wallace, whose books Ziegler listens to while he paints and whose stories and writings on free will and the search for identity inspire his work.

Not that you can expect to look at one of his murals and see a patterned version of Plato's allegory of the cave.

"I used to try to linearize my paintings — to say, 'This is a painting that was inspired by Moby Dick,'" Ziegler says. "I felt like I had to come up with a causality for why I had created the painting. But actually, I don't understand my own paintings for so long after I paint them. And now I'm comfortable just saying that."

He doesn't plan his murals ahead of time; part of his artistic process is approaching a blank wall with an audio book and an open mind. "The only thing that makes painting great for me is its honesty — its sprezzatura," he says. "That's an Italian word that describes the soul of a painting. You can feel it — it moves from the inside. The instinct, the human condition exposed in a painting. Not something planned or premeditated, but raw."

The biggest part of that, he says, is not being afraid to make mistakes, but rather, viewing unintended occurrences as opportunities for growth and creativity. "People say, 'Oh, I'm not an artist; I can't even draw a stick figure.' Well, don't draw a stick figure," Ziegler says. "Draw what you want to draw. Let go of that self-consciousness, that self-awareness. There doesn't have to be an agenda towards what's 'right' — that kind of thinking is poison."

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And as for the controversial tech takeover? Ziegler sees the big tech companies not as public enemy No. 1, but as the new patrons of the arts. “There’s always going to have to be money behind these projects in order to allow artists to do what they envision on a larger scale,” he says. “Like how Diego Rivera did the Ford Motor building. Gallery money is coming from people who have been successful buying your paintings, so what’s the difference in painting a corporate headquarters?”

Thanks in part to those paid projects, Ziegler is no longer trading murals for pancakes, and can continue to spend time on bringing his art into the streets.

“Nothing will ever top that for me — not private companies or individuals, not sterile galleries where you have to pay to see something. It will always be the public sphere that is the most intriguing,” he says. “That’s why I make clothing; that’s why I make murals. I want the two-year-old and the 80-year-old to have an equalizing democratic presence on the streets. Public art changes things around it. So, if you can take the money you [get] from a Facebook mural, buy paint and go paint in the streets, the ends totally justify the means.”

Ziegler recently completed his latest mural, at 1645 Pacific Avenue. This one features gargantuan black and white figures, twisting and bending through a majestic castle like a bloated serpent on a backdrop of bold red and white stripes. He’s also working on paintings for upcoming gallery shows in San Francisco and Milan. When he’s not painting, Ziegler is an avid mountain biker, sometimes spending as many as eight hours at a stretch biking around the Bay Area, taking breaks for burritos from the Little Chihuahua. He also teaches elementary school art classes and works on several other projects, including a screenplay and an app or two.

While he still loves seeing people wearing his t-shirts and is working on a line of Vans (the shoes), Ziegler is wary of his art becoming a product. “I don’t want to produce paintings,” he says. “I want to live in my paintings. I want them to evolve with my character and change. Like Bob Dylan going on stage and playing the electric guitar — I never want to be too scared to do that.”