

Vox

Two Drinks With Artist Zio Ziegler on the Tech-Titan Medicis

By Nellie Bowles, August 1, 2014.



Courtesy of Vox

I sat down for two drinks with the painter Zio Ziegler, as the first part of a new Re/code interview series called “Two Drinks With” (you can order kombucha, but I will judge you). Ziegler talked about his contemporary Medicis — San Francisco’s wealthy tech-titan art patrons.

Subject: Zio Ziegler

Drink: Warm Pacifico Claras, followed by a craft beer

Location: Ziegler’s studio, and then Beerworks in downtown Mill Valley, Calif.

“The beer might be warm,” the artist Zio Ziegler warned me. He opened the Pacifico Clara bottles by whacking them on a folding metal stepladder, and we sat in his office, the only room of his house with electricity. He had Van Morrison playing from his computer. I apologized for not having brought candles, which he had told me I should bring, given that it was nearing 8 pm.

Ziegler, a 26-year-old Mill Valley native who paints enormous graffiti-style allegorical murals across city walls, canvases and sports cars, is becoming one of the tech world’s favorite new artists. He sold his first piece to Napster founder Sean Parker. He painted a Porsche, and venture capitalist Shervin Pishevar’s McLaren (now being loaned to a museum). He has painted for Medium, Digital Garage, Sherpa Foundry, Facebook, and both Uber and Lyft. His murals are all across the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco. And his audience is growing beyond Silicon Valley: He has partnered with Vans and, this summer, with Pottery Barn Teen to make backpacks and bedding.

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He met Pischevar at a Christmas party last year, and said he got the keys to Pischevar's McLaren the next day.

"I love nice cars. It's kind of alpha, but I love them. That car perfectly symbolizes the paradigm shift in the mentality of how they're reintegrating art," Ziegler said, referring broadly to influential tech figures. "It's an expensive vehicle. Most people would leave it pristine in their garage. But here's this guy who's disrupting transportation, and he wants his own car to be disrupted, too."

What's on the car?

"It's a dragon."

"People say, 'Oh, but these are the gentrifiers pushing artists out of the city,'" Ziegler said, talking about the moguls who sponsor his work. "Maybe, but I think about the Medicis, and that's how I justify the tech thing. If you seed a culture with art, it seeds it with something unquantifiable, it seeds it with thoughts. If you look at what's passed on, it's not Ubers and iPhones, it's art. The life cycles of disruption for technology is short. Ideological disruption lasts. I work with sprezzatura."

Wait, what? How do you spell that?

"I'm really dyslexic, but it's on the wall somewhere," he said, and pointed to a phrase scrawled on the white-washed wall.

Ziegler, whose parents Mel and Patricia Ziegler founded Banana Republic, went to Rhode Island School of Design and Brown University, where he said he was often thrown out of art class. In his application to Yale's art school, he said he told them they could "go screw themselves if they didn't endorse my freedom." He didn't get in. Apparently, curators still bring that essay up with him.

Why did he write that?

"I meant it," he said.

There was only one beer left, so we headed down the impossibly steep hill from his house to his favorite local brewery, Mill Valley's Beerworks, for the second. He ordered both of us something called a Moonlight Just Enough Rope — bright, acidic, brewed in Fulton, California — and told a dirty joke about limp rope. He wanted to know why it mattered to me that his parents started Banana Republic. He asked if it was too "alpha" that he ordered my drink for me. He just got an apartment in Brooklyn, but said he prefers the San Francisco art world.

"The art world in New York is based on a very small world, and artists have agents and they have a gallery," he said. "In San Francisco, it's actually a really different art buyer. The people I sell to buy directly from me. They don't use consultants. They don't want them. They want to go straight to the artist. I don't have an agent or a gallery, because I don't need one here."

And you get to know the companies?

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"My downside protection is I want to see how these companies work," he said. "I've started thinking about building a platform where artists can use the money out there to live their lives."

Everyone has an app.

"But I don't really have a mind for businesses," he said. "I'm more of a Sherlock Holmes."

When he wants to paint a mural illegally, he said he just puts on a collared shirt and tells passersby that he's on the City Beautification Commission: "Broad daylight defiance."

"The simulacra of prestige in order to mask an activity considered illegal, and isn't that disruption?" Ziegler said draining the last of his beer. "Isn't that exactly what these companies are doing? That's why they like me. We're doing the same thing. When I hit a window, I pivot my painting."