

“One afternoon with Andy Dixon, the artist behind the huge mega-shirts”
by Fabrizio Meris / April 26, 2018



Andy Dixon is a Canadian artist known to anyone interested in contemporary art. His paintings are a sensorial bombardment, but at the same time they also perform the essential function of criticism and reflection on today's society.

We met him during Milan Design Week, when we were invited to take a look at the installation created by Versace Home for the occasion. Inside the historic Palazzo Versace, Dixon has exhibited his "Versace Shirt", a shirt with enormous proportions (about 2 meters x 3) that tells a lot about the art market, but also of mechanisms intrinsic to the fashion industry. We talked to him about how he made it, but also why it is better for a Los Angeles artist than New York. Ah, and that time he saw Tupac in a Versace silk shirt, and he never forgot it.

When did you first feel the urge to express yourself artistically?

It may seem like a cliché, but always. I remember that as a child I used to draw comics to make my family smile. Also, I have always been a music fan and started playing guitar at ten.

But when did the love for painting break out?

That happened only later, about ten years ago, when I was on the threshold of 30. At the time, I still saw myself as a multitasking talent: I was involved in graphics, I was producing music and I was painting, of course, but with much less emphasis. I considered it a pleasant pastime. When I looked back, I realized that painting was the field where I had the most success, I think I went through a sort of existential crisis.

You have a real talent for palette and brush: did you learn it by studying?

No, I never went to art school. Many friends who attended academies have lost interest in creating real art. I thought there were other ways to achieve my artistic ambitions and so it was.

You were born in Vancouver, on the Pacific coast of Canada, and for a long time you lived in New York. What is the place you call home today?

Los Angeles, California. It is a city with huge, boundless spaces. My studio is flooded with beautiful golden light, which I have never seen anywhere else. Everything seems to have a rosy aura and people are genuinely welcoming. Many young artists are moving here from New York, because today there is an energetic and exciting art scene. You feel it in the air that something interesting is happening.

First you spoke of the magical light of California. Light and color are very important aspects for a painter: are there artists of the past that inspired you?

To the French Fauve painters and the great Matisse, but also to artists much closer to us like the Englishman David Hockney. The pool paintings of Los Angeles for which he has rightly become famous certainly have a very strong connection with my most recent work. And then I think of the art of the 80s, Basquiat and the portraits that Warhol made to Marilyn Monroe and Gianni Versace then incorporated into his early 90s collections.

In your paintings, cultural references to past eras of art history seem to resonate. What is your goal?

I hope that my references will lead the observer to moments of extravagance in history and objects intended as fetishes of desire. I try to establish a comparison between the extravagance of the subject of a painting and the whimsy of the painting itself.

Another intriguing aspect of your practice is the reference to luxurious lifestyles, as can be seen in the work “Christie’s (Lord Berners Faringdon House)” 2019. Yet the source of this inspiration is only the two-dimensional image of a catalog of an auction house.

If we want to be precise, I took the images directly from Instagram [laughs, NdA]. My work is also a research on cultural tropes: I try to use images and concepts in a new and unexpected way, but without completely denying their common meaning. The idea from which I started to develop the *Christie’s* series was to arrive at a final image that resembled an interior scene of an old painting by Matisse.

Where is the irony in these works?

In the fact that these images taken from the internet are only fake interior reconstructions, sets in which every single object is actually for sale. After all, it’s just a catalog of objects, even if it looks like a work of art. Exactly the kind of work that is sold at auction for millions and millions.

One of the most iconic pieces of your production is “Versace Shirt”, 2019, which together with four new versions is now on display here in Milan. How was it conceived?

Previously I had already created a painting depicting a Versace shirt. While I was painting it, I thought to myself that in the end the canvas on which I paint is a material very similar to fabric, so why not try to make a real shirt made of canvas?

And then what happened?

First of all, I did some research on how I could do this huge job. I bought an original Versace silk shirt with a print that I think is called “Roma”, I disassembled it, seam by seam, and divided into pieces: the sleeves, the neck, the cuffs etc etc. With the help of a model maker I enlarged every single component of the original on a 1: 3.5 scale and cut it onto a rough canvas. Huge pieces came out, and on each one I reproduced the same motif that was present on the original. Finally, I reassembled them, finding in my hands a shirt identical to the one at the start, but three and a half times as big.

It was a brilliant idea, certainly.

If I had only painted on a giant shirt, there would have been smudges and too much painting would have gone into the seams. Instead, I wanted it to look as realistic as possible, so finding the right process to work on this work was fundamental.

Why really a Versace shirt?

There are many similarities between what I am trying to do on a cultural level and what Versace does. We both work on irony, humor and creative flair. There is a quote by Donatella Versace in which I totally reflect, that is that there is no room for balance at Versace. I totally agree with her, because I too look for a maximalist approach to my work.

Have you ever imagined being able to show “Versace Shirt” here in the Palace of Via Gesù, a place that represents the past, present and future of the fashion house?

Absolutely not! From the beginning I thought it wasn't a project with half measures, precisely: it would have been an absolute success or a complete disaster. Versace would have approached me for a collaboration or [laughs, NdA] would have sued me. But I didn't expect to get this far, let alone so quickly!

Is this your first time in Milan?

No, I've been there before while working on the tours of some bands. In fact I have been there several times, but in the end I never really managed to visit it. This is the first time I will spend an entire week. It is a beautiful city and I hope to experience it more deeply in the next few days.

And when did they contact you from Versace, instead, how did you react?

Absurd as it may seem, they called me just as I was in the midst of making “Versace Shirt”, but they didn't know it. It seemed like it was almost destiny. As I told you, I had already made a smaller version of a canvas depicting a Versace shirt, but the fact that the company looked for me when the stuff became serious was serendipic.

What is your first memory of the brand?

I am a boy from the 90s, I think I saw a Versace garment worn by Tupac for the first time. I have this memory of him with this beautiful Versace shirt in blue, gold and orange silk.

So for you it was music that conveyed the brand?

Yes, definitely yes. I met Versace through the rap music of those years.

Do you like fashion as such or for you it is more a source of reflection from which to start developing useful ideas for your work?

I'm not a fashionista, if that's what you mean, but I'm interested in fashion. I love aesthetics, I do a lot of research on this plan. That's what I do every day, it's my job. I'm always a little surprised when my artist friends are more than happy to leave their studio wearing something they haven't really thought about.

So your style is the result of a rigorous aesthetic reflection?

I like playing with tropes, rather than with brands. I love suits, even double-breasted ones, and I take pleasure in dressing well. I enjoy the silhouette of a classic male dress and try to subvert it, which is a bit what I do in my work as a painter. So I wonder: why not wear a tailored suit, but with a Tupac shirt underneath? For me it's a sort of modern eccentricity.

We are surrounded by Versace Home design pieces here in the Palace. What is the one you would absolutely like at home?

Thanks for asking! I really like the lacquered Pop-Medusa Chair. It is a work of art, a fantastic piece. I love that it is also designed for the outside. Actually I'd like it if I were given one [laughs, NdA] ...

Tell me about your future projects. What will you do after you get home?

The next step will be towards the East, actually: only one show at the Over the Influence gallery in Hong Kong which will open at the end of August. The exhibition will be a continuation of what you already see between (and on) these walls, with the addition of new works that will talk about the commercialization of my own works: paintings of my paintings hanging in the homes of my collectors.