



FINE ART

'We are like one artist': These identical twins are in sync from graffiti to gallery

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Elizabeth Blair



The Hirshhorn Museum will soon host an exhibit named OSGEMEOS: Endless Story, by twin brothers Gustavo and Otavio Pandolfo and curated by Marina Isgro. Shown here is "Retratos (Portraits)," 2023-2024.
Maansi Srivastava for NPR

They finish each other's sentences. They say they don't need words to communicate. Their creativity is in sync. "We are like one artist," says Gustavo Pandolfo. His identical twin brother Otavio nods in agreement, adding, "There is a conversation in the air flying there, but only we can listen [to] each other."

The Pandolfo brothers are best known as the artist duo Osgemeos. *Os gemeos* means twins in Portuguese. Their fantastical, playful artworks have graced murals, parks, trains, bridges, an airplane and countless other outdoor spaces around the world. Major museums, galleries and private collectors have acquired their works. For the 2004 Olympics in Athens, they painted a ginormous, 82-foot-high giant in his underwear.



Portrait of OSGEMEOS.

Filipe Berndt

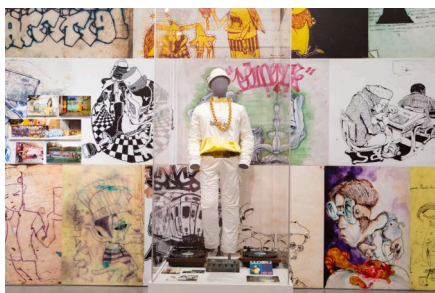
OSGEMEOS: Endless Story at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden will be the largest U.S. retrospective of their work when it opens Sept. 29 in Washington, D.C.

“These guys have a way of just using their imagination to create all kinds of magical and unexpected renditions of things,” says Dr. Nancy Segal, a psychology professor at California State University Fullerton, who first encountered a mural by Osgemeos in São Paulo’s Ibirapuera Park.

As someone who studies twins, she is not surprised that the connection between Gustavo and Otavio Pandolfo is so strong.

‘Twin culture’ with roots in hip hop and graffiti

“Many twins have what I call a special twin culture with their habits and rituals and ways of doing things and understanding things,” she says, “and that's understandable, because they are genetically alike. They respond to the world the same way. They process information the same way.”



The exhibition will include art from across their careers, including their early days as street artists.

Maansi Srivastava for NPR

The Pandolfo brothers were born in 1974 into a family of artists and art lovers in São Paulo, Brazil’s most populous city. As kids, they spent their free time breakdancing, DJing and listening to rappers. They also wanted to dress like them. They once showed their grandmother a photograph of LL Cool J and asked if she could sew them a similar outfit.

“And she did in two days. Like crazy,” remembers Gustavo.

But it was the Pandolfos' distinctive graffiti style that gained them art world recognition in Brazil and beyond. Eventually, their graffiti evolved into full-scale, eye-popping illustrations of human characters and mystical landscapes.

The mystical world of *Tritrez*

When they were kids, Gustavo and Otavio invented a fantastical universe they call *Tritrez*, a kind of colorful, trippy wonderland that Lewis Carroll might appreciate.



OSGEMEOS, *Untitled (Zoetrope)*, 2014, installed at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Mixed media. Courtesy of the artists.

Rick Coulby/Smithsonian Institution/Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden

For the Pandolfo brothers, *Tritrez* is a “magical, beautiful place full of love... We feel very comfortable inside and we like to share [it] with the people.”

Anything is possible in *Tritrez*. Animals, humans, boom boxes, UFOs, break dancers, railroad tracks and all kinds of other creatures co-exist.

The Hirshhorn retrospective features more than 1,000 artworks including large-scale installations, paintings and sculptures including a huge, mechanical zoetrope decorated with tulips, mushrooms, little rowboats, human hands and bodies.

Decades of ‘can control’ practice

Mastering the art of graffiti requires a deft touch with a spray can, also known as ‘can control.’ When I visited the Hirshhorn as *Endless Story* was being mounted, I watched as one of the brothers steadily spray painted a thin black outline of one of their trademark human figures.



Curator Marina Isgro poses for a portrait in front of a finished portion of the exhibition, with “Gramophone, 2016” and “Untitled (92 Speakers), 2019.”

Maansi Srivastava for NPR

Marina Isgro, associate curator of media and performance art at the Hirshhorn, says the brothers have honed their "can control" over decades of practice.

They create “these extremely thin lines, these very subtle shadows,” says Isgro. “You think of spray paint as being sort of big and bold, but they get this incredible amount of detail and they just have this amazing technique.”

While Gustavo and Otavio Pandolfo began their artistic lives in the underground world of graffiti and hip hop, they say they're happy to see so much interest in their work from institutions like the Smithsonian. They can reach a wider audience and, hopefully, says Gustavo, help people "see more and more what they have inside of themselves, to see these imagination worlds that sometimes you forget... that everybody have. This magical thing is inside."



Shown is "1980" made in 2020.
Mixed media with sequins on MDF.
Maansi Srivastava for NPR

As for their deep, almost spiritual, connection, the Pandolfo brothers are just as curious about it as anyone else.

"We have these questions very early in our life," says Gustavo. "What [is] the reason to be here, born together, two guys, twin brothers...We are here for what? To do what?"

For Osgemeos, "artwork is a portal and a mirror," they explain, "You have to open yourself up in order to feel it."