

Museum shows can be death for street art. Osgemeos look alive and well.

In a Hirshhorn show squirming with energy, the famous Brazilian twins toss out discernment for populist exuberance.

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"1980" (2020). (Filipe Berndt/Osgemeos)

You could write a lengthy history of efforts by artists to bust out of the studios, galleries and wealthy homes that traditionally confine them. A lot of those efforts create friction. From Michelangelo's David and [Rodin's monument to Balzac](#) to [Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc,"](#) Banksy's visual pranks and the [recent poop sculpture on the National Mall](#), they tend to involve hot clashes with the civic sphere.

Graffiti art is part of this story. The identical twins Otavio and Gustavo Pandolfo, known to the world as Osgemeos (Portuguese for "the twins"), have been [the face of Brazilian graffiti art](#) for several decades now. Their gradual crossover into mainstream international art-world acceptance is sealed by a year-long exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum. Organized by Marina Isgro with the support of CJ Greenhill Caldera, "[Osgemeos: Endless Story](#)" is billed as the artists' first U.S. museum survey and the largest U.S. exhibition of their work.

I would not fight to the death with anyone who described Osgemeos's work as twee and repetitive. And yet, honestly, I love it. "Endless Story" is an unusually exuberant museum show. Imaginatively installed across a full floor at the Hirshhorn, it feels joyous, funny and unstuffy.



The Pandolfo twins grew up in São Paulo and became world-famous multimedia artists known as Osgemeos. (Filipe Berndt/Osgemeos)

Born in 1974, the Pandolfo twins grew up in São Paulo. They weren't yet 10 when they first encountered hip-hop culture. Under the influence of their older brother Arnaldo, they took to drawing and their parents soon enrolled them in a free art course. "Wild Style," an influential film about hip-hop, was a big early influence, and by 1986 they had transformed themselves into young B-boys — a local DJ nicknamed them Os Gemeos — hanging out at the São Bento subway station in São Paulo, breakdancing, rapping and making graffiti.

In 1992 they met and befriended Barry McGee, the American graffiti artist known for his witty, socially engaged figurative imagery, who was traveling in Brazil. They began collaborating with him and became lasting friends.

By the 2000s, the Pandolfo twins were making major murals on city walls and subway cars, even as they were showing in commercial galleries. In 2004, in the lead-up to the Summer Olympic Games, they were invited to make two murals in the host city, Athens. The following year they made their first New York mural outside a Coney Island subway station, and they later made a mural in downtown Manhattan, on the same site ([the intersection of Houston Street and the Bowery](#)) as a famous mural by Keith Haring. They were establishing pedigree.



"O dia da festa de break" ("The Breakdancing Party's Day") (2016). (Photo: Max Yawney/Osgemeos/Collection of Polo Molina)

By the 2010s, Osgemeos's works were getting more and more ambitious, both in scale and complexity. They were becoming known for painting figures they referred to as "Giants" — enormous figures with yellow skin; wide, comically expressive faces; skinny legs; and colorful clothing inspired in part by traditional Brazilian dress.

When Boston's Institute of Contemporary Art gave them a solo show in 2012, [the exhibit](#) was complemented by a large-scale mural commission — a boy in patterned pajamas crouching in a space that was perfectly congruent with the building's silhouette. An eruption of color and pattern in gray downtown Boston, it totally transformed the cityscape.

The Hirshhorn presentation includes a montage of blown-up photographs of Osgemeos's best-known murals, which have appeared all over the world.

Of course, institutional acceptance in the form of commissioned murals is one thing. But my sense is that, within the graffiti community, art world success, in the shape of museum surveys and commercial gallery representation, can be fatal to street credibility. So be it. If success is a deathbed, Osgemeos look surprisingly alive and comfortable in it.



"Osgemeos: Endless Story" is the largest U.S. exhibition for Osgemeos. (Rick Coulby/Osgemeos)

Their show squirms with energy. Every gallery is different. Early on, a phalanx of display cabinets teems with sketches, comic strips and graffiti paraphernalia, all of it revealing the twins' working methods and impressive drawing skills. As you go further in, you sense a creative partnership that thrives on expansion — into film, sculpture and installation art, and the creation of futuristic fantasy worlds.



"Tritrez" (2014). (Rick Coulby/Osgemeos)

Much of Osgemeos's imagery is fired, as fantasy worlds usually are, by nostalgia. One gallery is devoted to "Tritrez," a mystical world the twins invented — a place where "there's nothing to worry about" and "everything's in harmony." (I can see this becoming a place to hang out after the election.)

In this shrinelike gallery, which includes geometric designs and totemic sculptures, colorful paintings have been hung against patterned wallpaper in the manner of Andy Warhol's cow wallpaper displays. The installation, according to the wall text, combines "mystical and sacred geometry, references to 1970s and 1980s movies such as 'The Holy Mountain' (1973) and 'Flash Gordon' (1980), and the Afrofuturist style of hip-hop groups such as Afrika Bambaataa's Soulsonic Force, offering a warm and inviting vision of modern spirituality."

Sincere and spellbinding or facetious and gaudy? The question disintegrates as soon as you formulate it: Like Jeff Koons, like Warhol, like McGee and their fellow graffiti artists, Osgemeos render old categories of discernment obsolete through a policy of strategic populist overwhelm. Discernment is not the point: exuberance is.

Osgemeos's paintings could hardly be more vivid. Inspired sometimes by Brazilian landscape and people, other times by aliens and interplanetary travel, their keynote is cuteness (in expressive guises) alloyed to eye-catching design and bold patterning. They combine drawn and painted imagery in acrylic and spray paint with swaths of glistening sequins.



"Untitled (92 Speakers)" (2019), "Gramophone" (2016) and "1983 — The Boombox" (2017). (Rick Coulby/Osgemeos)

The show groans, too, with all kinds of sculptures and installations, including a display of scores of old-fashioned speakers, a zoetrope (the proto-cinematic devices that create an illusion of movement with a rotating cylinder and strobe lighting) and "The Moon Room," a poetic installation of a bedroom bathed in moonlight.



"Untitled (Zoetrope)" 2014. (Rick Coulby/Osgemeos)

Much of the second half of the show is given over to a nostalgia-inspired celebration of 1970s and '80s graffiti culture. A suite of paintings shows characters from that world, often with face coverings wrapped around the heads (to protect against paint fumes and preserve anonymity), tagging New York subway trains at night.

These cleverly composed works celebrate an activity many people abhor. But they are so softened and plumped up with nostalgia (hip-hop and graffiti culture have entered advanced middle age) as to seem wholly innocuous.

So the question could be framed this way: Does the Osgemeos aesthetic have legs? Or will their work's undoubted originality collapse into nostalgia — a nostalgia that may have wide appeal right now but is destined to wither and wane?

Does their achievement amount to more than just a notable instance of graffiti culture finding art-world acceptance? Is their manic, cheerful patterning merely a cover for the cuteness and kitsch of rose-tinted remembrance?

I think the answer to such questions will depend on whether Osgemeos can keep finding ways to speak to the present. To do that, I think they have to keep pushing into public spaces, maybe even creating a little friction as they reflect the world back at us. In the meantime, this major museum show is a great way to get to know them.

[Osgemeos: Endless Story](#) is on view at the Hirshhorn Museum through Aug.3. hirshhorn.si.edu.