



Text and translation by Caleb Neelon
Photos courtesy of Blu

Two buckets of house paint, and Blu is ready to go. Working with the barest of materials, the Bologna, Italy-based street painter is busy bringing the quick beauty of a line drawing up to mural size. From his beginnings in the Italian explosion of graffiti in the mid 1990s, Blu has done an admirable job of removing everything about traditional graffiti painting that didn't suit him—the name, spray paint and colors—while retaining everything that did, like its speed, scale and economy of materials. He added in a love of simple line drawings, and got to work, often working with his friend Ericailcane. Blu taught himself how to paint large-scale without scaffolding, by dangling out of windows and taping his brushes to long poles. From his early wall murals on the sides of anarchist-occupied disused factories and warehouses on the outskirts of every Italian city, he's taken his work throughout Europe. Recently, Blu worked with film director Lorenzo Fonda on the documentary *Megunica*—which sought to capture Blu's creative process as he was inspired by traveling through Central and Latin America.

BUCKET OF BLU



What is Bologna, Italy, like as a city?

Bologna is a small city within a larger city. The small city is the ancient historical center, in part still encircled by the large one's protective walls. Outside of these walls begins the big city, the periphery—and that's where you go to paint. You can find a lot of spots there: old walls, abandoned factories, occupied buildings. The heart of Bologna is the university. A lot of people come to study here but few people remain after they finish school. So it is a fantastic place to meet interesting people from every part of Italy, and sometimes these people successfully create cultural happenings. But on the other hand, it is a small city where the rents are high, the job opportunities are not many, so therefore nearly everyone makes an escape after a few years, and the city at times is emptied and becomes less interesting.

What kind of street and train painting was happening in Bologna when you started?

When I began to paint in the middle of the 1990s, I was 15 years old, and there was a great boom of the graffiti here. People fed off of the graffiti magazines produced in Italy or that came from abroad, but there wasn't yet much on the Internet, and this lack of information stimulated creativity and forced people to invent their own graffiti shapes and styles. At that time, the difference was obvious from city to city—Milan, Bologna, Rimini, Pesaro, Ancona—every city had its crew and its styles. Italy seemed like the paradise of graffiti writing, and nearly all the trains that I saw passing by were painted.

Was there a moment when you made a switch from more traditional graffiti to the work you do now?

For sure a lot of things have changed about the way in which I painted seven or 10 years ago, but my work hasn't made unexpected changes from one day to the next. If I put in a row the stuff that I have made in succession, I can see in every one of them an embryo of the next group.

Once in a while I look at the drawings that I made as a child and I notice that I still often draw the same subjects. With graffiti writing, what interests me more is the free and unconditioned creative action, the idea that someone left their house in order to create something in a public space, without asking anything from anyone. That's something very special—half gift and half theft!

What did not appeal to me about graffiti writing were the unwritten rules and the imitation of these rules: the absolute importance of just the name, only using spray paint, the necessity of the tag, the gravity of the color, the background and this idea of originality of style being the only scope of a writer's creative action. Therefore taking what I had learned from graffiti writing, I have tried to move backwards, removing all the parts that I did not need. Working with rollers and paintbrushes was more complicated, but other possibilities opened because of that. Changing the tools always creates a lot of ideas. I like to work with few tools and improvise different solutions every time. The best ideas are always born of necessity.

Do you work with permission usually or on abandoned buildings?

Until recently I worked almost exclusively without permission, painting in the streets at night or in abandoned or anarchist-occupied [buildings] but still very visible places. Then through the "magical mechanisms of the art" permission and planning began to arrive in order to paint lots of buildings. Usually I prefer to work on places that are abandoned or decaying, especially the places that tell a story to me: old houses, old factories—all these inspire me a lot.

Have you seen your walls age? Do you think they look good as they get old, crack and fade? Do you care about your work lasting a long time?

Most of the paintings that I have made thus far don't exist anymore. Many were illegal and therefore have been destroyed—the old factories have been pulled down or renovated, the occupied places have been

lasts a day or a year. Once I stop painting, the work belongs to the city and the people that inhabit it, and the painting's fate is their decision. It doesn't matter if someone paints over me, I do not want to lay claim to the wall. I trust in the good sense of other painters and I hope that they can judge when a piece is old enough to be covered with something better.

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What artists do you like working with? Who are some of the artists you admire?

I work a lot with Ericailcane; we have made a ton of pieces together, and we've known each other and drawn with each other for years now. Two crazy ones that I love are Os Gemeos. Beyond being the best at drawing, they're also complete serial bombers, kings of Sao Paulo. I work often with JR—he's unstoppable. I can't understand how he glues his giant photos everywhere. The last time I checked, he had attacked the center of Venice with a series. I know many good artists but above all I prefer those that continue to work in the street.

Tell us about *Megunica*, the film project that took you to Latin America.

One day Lorenzo Fonda said that he wanted to make a documentary on me and on my work, and I thought that it was a great excuse to fund a vacation in South America, and so we began to travel. We had a rough draft of an itinerary but no precise plan, leaving us the freedom to improvise several solutions, and in the end we succeeded at many more things than what we had been expecting. During the trip I painted a lot, but this is a totally secondary fact next to the people and the story that we encountered.

The idea was to explore some countries of Central and South America, and to speak with the people living there, and to investigate the possibilities of urban art in these countries. Therefore we tried to contact various people [writers, muralists, advertising painters, artists] in order for them to tell us their stories. Naturally, when speaking about urban art or public art, unavoidably one ends up speaking about the city, the society, the history of that country, and this was fundamentally what interested us.

Many of the countries in which we have been have had a tragic recent history whose effects are clearly visible—the daily poverty; the exploitation on the part of fruit multinationals like Dole, Chiquita and Del Monte, and the spreading violence they generate; the dictators supported by the United States; the soldiers trained in the U.S. to seize and to torture; the drug lords who dominate these countries; the people who desperately try to cross the border hoping for a better life. To hear these stories from the mouth of the people is not like reading it in books.





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How did the public perceive what you did there? How did their opinions compare to other countries?

The thing that interested me mainly is the great amount of painted walls. In these countries, painting walls is still used as a form of mass media (advertising, as an example), and there isn't the anti-graffiti propaganda that we have in Europe or the USA. Therefore, there isn't a prejudice against those who paint walls, since it could be a job like any other. From what I have seen, painting in South America is generally very easy. Normally it's enough to ask the permission of the owner for the building, promising a beautiful decoration, and he probably will offer you a drink, too.

The situation, however, varies a lot from country to country. As an example, in some countries like Guatemala, where there is an enormous problem of juvenile crime, people painting with spray paints often are seen as a *pandillero* (gang member) because they use spray paint to mark their territory. In this moment in Guatemala there is a very violent political campaign against the *pandillas*. The policemen are practically licensed to shoot any *pandillero*, therefore to go run around at night to make tags isn't a very intelligent thing to do.

Then there's painting in Buenos Aires—it's absurd. The roles are reversed: the city is full everywhere with enormous, badly painted block letters in two or three colors. Naturally, these are illegal, but no graffiti writer made them, they are the illegal electoral advertisements for political candidates. Every political party pays some painters for going out at night with trucks loaded with paint and tools. They fill in the big letters with aerosol guns and paint the black outline, then they paint the rest with red or blue (depends on the political party) and they jump on the truck ready for another piece. They can paint an entire neighborhood in a single night. It seems that in Buenos Aires the worst vandal is the government itself. When I was there, I always painted over these electoral ads, and the public was very happy to see me paint over their politicians.

Italy also has a lot of "electoral vandalism," every political party posts illegal posters. But the difference between Buenos Aires and Italy is if you paint over these ads in Italy, you're arrested.

Recently you did a show with Ericailcane at Lazarides Gallery in London—how are gallery shows different from your projects outside?

When working with galleries or museums I always try to paint public pieces on the outside of the galleries. For me, this is the main task, and the exhibition is only an excuse in order to show and eventually to sell some drawings, which are not much other than sketches of what I make on the walls. My exhibitions are very simple and quite ugly in comparison with the work I do in the street.

