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Breaking the canvas to invade the space

Argentine artist Guillermo Kuitca talks about his recent work in Somerset, New York

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"At some point you are going to want to break the canvas and invade the space," Guillermo Kuitca told the *Herald* from his Belgrano studio — this is exactly what the Argentine artist did last year as Hauser & Wirth Somerset's first artist-in-residence. Kuitca chose the expanse of England's rolling countryside to initiate a new, capacious style that envelops the viewer, painting a "viral" mural on the dining room walls of the new gallery's 250-year-old Durslade's Farmhouse. Hauser & Wirth already run landmark galleries in Los Angeles, New York, London, and Zurich so the contemporary art giant's foray into the West Country has caused quite a stir — the institution's experimental philosophy befitted Kuitca's desire to breach artistic boundaries, affording him the time and space to explore a new vision.

"Hauser & Wirth are a super established gallery but they also like to take risks," he said. "They are very brave in their exhibitions, so sometimes you feel engaged to try new things under their umbrella, or their patronage, or their protection, or whatever you want to call it."

Kuitca's reputation has soared over the last three decades, with his preference for adopting unusual surfaces to create abstract works inspired by subjects spanning architecture, memory, and maps lauded by critics. His work has been shown extensively around the world, the likes of London's Tate Gallery and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York hosting important exhibitions in his name. The 53-year-old's 1992 installation of painted maps on 54 mattresses, entitled *Le Sacre*, propelled the Argentine into the limelight, showcasing his ability to create iconic artwork. However, July's opening of Hauser & Wirth Somerset was viewed as "the right time and the right space" to roll out a new artistic approach.

Through June and July of 2013 he spent five unexpectedly sun-drenched weeks in the town of Bruton, population 3,000 and listed in the 1082 Domesday Book, working on the mural after first forming the idea on the walls of his Buenos Aires studio — "I was upstairs and in some sort of destructive way I began painting on the wall in the corner, it seemed like a very natural, spontaneous thing to do."

Before long, Kuitca was transferring this free flowing, undetermined mode onto farmhouse walls more than 10,500 km from his homeland. The Grade II listed building was being renovated at the time along with the other outhouses and garden forming Hauser & Wirth Somerset. Both the fine weather and hive of building activity influenced his work.

"There was so much going on around me, with builders walking in and out of the farmhouse, and work on the main gallery itself — but I got to focus even better because you have to pay extra attention," he said. "It was also an incredibly rare sunny English summer. It was amazing. Some of the palate I used on the mural is much brighter than my work usually is, the light was so bright and the days were so long."

The mural's manifestation of bold, angular forms punctuated with bright splashes of colour amid dominant whites and greys is oddly cadenced, the staccato rises and sharp lines of each triangular form merge the abstract shapes seamlessly. Kuitca likened the process of creating the piece to composing music, comparing his palate and



Guillermo Kuitca standing in front of the mural he created for Hauser & Wirth Somerset

tools to the assembly of an orchestra.

"The piece is not predetermined. I do not compare it to poetry or literature, for me it depicts the language of music. I had a certain number of tools and a restricted palate that I compared to musical notes — I was also very conscious about the rhythm of the mural, whether I wanted to slow down or speed up, very much like music."

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References to the surrounding countryside are also evident in the work. One landmark that distinguishes Bruton is a derelict

dovecot standing alone on a hill, which happens to directly overlook Hauser & Wirth Somerset. Kuitca explains that he would occasionally walk to the building for a nap during lunch and that he felt compelled to reflect the roofless structure in his mural, but only very subtly.

He said that the triangles and shapes have "a certain dialogue with the dovecot" with one of many aspects to the painting, stating, "I think influence is too heavy a word."

Following his time in Somerset, the Buenos Aires-born artist has said the experience "opened up a new way to conceive my paintings, which I know I will long continue to explore."

True to his word, Kuitca developed further his three-dimensional, immersive philosophy with *This Way*, an exhibition hosted by the other gallery representing him, New York's Sperone Westwater, from April to June of this year. The exhibition celebrated 20 years of collaboration between the Kuitca and the gallery and marks another significant milestone in the artist's career. Instead of painting on pre-

existing walls, he designed his own space: a room-like structure measuring approximately 2.6 x 3 x 2.2m entitled *Untitled, 2014*. From the outside the structure is redundant, forcing the viewer to enter the space to become fully immersed in Kuitca's design.

'I think the beauty of murals is that you have to go there to see them, the lack of mobility is something I really like.'

"It's a free standing piece so it's like the other side of the coin to Somerset," he said. "The pictorial language still exists, but instead of using existing walls and existing spaces, I was in control of how large the space was. My idea was to create the possibility of inhabiting the painting, to engage the viewer in full immersion. I wanted to enhance the idea I created in the English countryside."

Buenos Aires, Bruton, and New York have no definitive relationship with regard to Kuitca's work, only that he is able to produce and show work in his studio and the two galleries representing him. However, the permanence of his murals, or lack of, is what interests him.

"The thing with the pieces in my Buenos Aires studio and Somerset is that they cannot travel — you have to go there to see them, they are stuck to the walls. The piece in New York was actually made in Argentina before being transported to the US, so it is very different. I think the beauty of murals is that you have to go there to see them, the lack of mobility is something I really like. This is why I decided to try something different with my New York piece, given it is not permanent."

Add Sperone Westwater's retrospective to Kuitca's most recent survey show in Sao Paulo showing his work from the early eighties to present today, and one might be forgiven for thinking the Argentine is becoming a little nostalgic. But he was quick to dispel the idea that he is looking to the past as opposed to forward, saying "I'm not specifically looking back, perhaps I will rediscover pieces, which can be a nice surprise, but I am not treating this period as a definitive moment in my career."

His forthcoming project with renowned US film director David Lynch — associated with the non-profit Fondation Cartier in Paris and involving one of Lynch's former film sets — suggests Kuitca's trajectory is still very much pointed towards the heavens.

However, Kuitca is a remarkably humble character given his international success and obviously has his feet firmly on the ground. His career has taken him around the globe and while Bruton may well be one of the less glamorous locations he has plied his trade, the rural charms of the Somerset town still managed to rub off on the artist.

"The beautiful scenery and weather in England took me by surprise, I did not expect that at all," he said. "In Buenos Aires I only like working for six or so hours a day before my brain is fried, but in Somerset I was able to work for hours on end. Sometimes I wonder about buying somewhere outside the city, in the Argentine countryside. That would be nice."

COURTESY OF ARON SCHUBMAN