



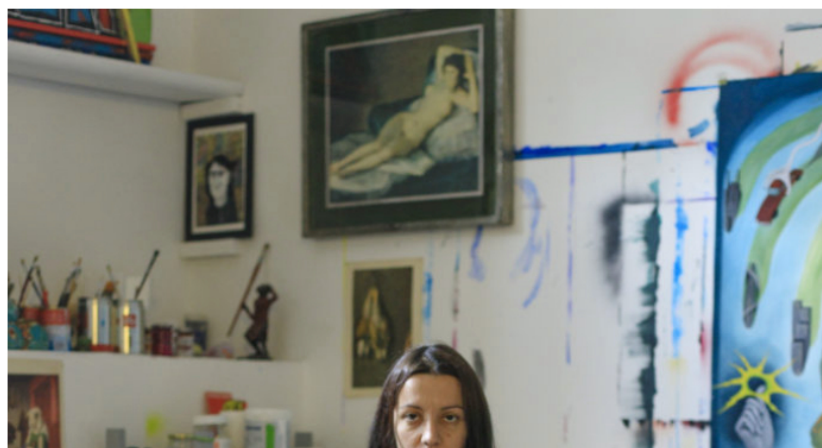
A WAY OF BEING IN THE WORLD: AGNESE GUIDO

BY CHARLIE ASHWORTH × 12 MARCH 2021

The whimsical and weird world conjured up in Italian artist Agnese Guido is both an escape from and product of the real world around us. It is populated by a cast of anthropomorphic characters who animate pop culture icons, old technology hardware and everyday objects. These characters embody anxiety, media fatigue, loneliness, hallucinations and other projections of contemporary life. But they're also just inanimate objects with complex, often comedic, and involved lives. In trying to piece together the cryptic narrative scenes in Agnese's paintings, we leave our world behind and become lost in another where cars wear lipstick and coffee pots sing, where buildings have eyes and leaves smoke cigarettes. In this world time has its own fluid logic and the past and future coexist. Like a dream, Agnese's art takes us on a journey that is at once confusing, exhilarating, nostalgic and often just plain weird.

Storytelling is important to Agnese. Each artwork conjures up a dense and darkly humorous but often illusive narrative. Using featureless brushstrokes and flat gradient backgrounds, Agnese's compositions are deceptively naive. She draws reference from a mix of high and low brow sources—the surrealist and symbolist art movements and cartoons. "In cartoons especially the characters have a strong expressiveness that is very essential and straightforward, and so empathetic", she says. Agnese's visual language is highly stylised and symbolic, using the hybrid characters as poetic symbols with which to tell perplexing and irreverent tales. But while communicating the story is important, Agnese leaves interpretation open and up to us to decide for ourselves.

Agnese studied at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, and lives and works in Milan. She has taken part in several group exhibitions and is currently working with Federico Luger Gallery in Milan.





portrait by Nicola Serra

AMM: Hi Agnese! To start us off, can you share an early memory related to making art or creativity and tell us a little about how you decided to be an artist?

AG: I remember that as a child I drew a lot and it was a means of communication and a refuge for my excessive shyness, I preferred drawing to doing any other social or sporting activity.

I loved to immerse myself in any painting found in someone's home to enter another world by observing its brush strokes and shades. Then with my family I visited the Uffizi Gallery in Florence and there I think I decided to become a painter. Obviously growing up I had many different influences: Japanese cartoons, comics, art studied at school... over time I absorbed a lot but certainly the initial approach was and is the need to create a world, to communicate with my own language, a way of being in the world.

AMM: How has your approach to your work and career developed and changed over the years? What have been some of the things that have influenced you?

AG: To attend the Academy of Fine Arts I moved to Milan from southern Italy, where I had the opportunity to see many exhibitions and compare myself with other artists, and I also started exhibiting and working. I learned how others see what you do, how your work is received and I also understood what I didn't want to do; even not wanting these things affect you but they are part of the creative process itself and it's good. You understand that things are working when even painting for yourself you welcome the outside world into your work in a natural and spontaneous way and it also becomes a necessity to do so. I experimented a lot as an artist, but only when I stopped going too far and started joking about it did it become much more interesting.

AMM: In your work the divide between objects and humans is blurred and malleable. Can you tell us more about this and what interests you about this in-between anthropomorphic space?

AG: Animated objects are very poetic to me, they stand between the dramatic and the comic, they make me think of stories of Japanese spirits and old haunted objects. I have a strange pleasure in painting them, it is like a kind of hypersensitivity because, in reality I am talking about human feelings, and the objects give me that detachment and at the same time the possibility of adding other meanings that derive from the bond we have with those certain objects or to the function they have. I can create further meanings in the image because a humanised object belongs to two worlds; painting a yawning coffee pot is not like painting a yawning man making coffee, it's more poetic, more fun; it says exactly what I mean.





'Shakespearean experience', gouache on cotton paper, 24 x 31 cm

AMM: How would you describe the world that is depicted in your art?

AG: Paradoxically realistic. But also tender.

AMM: Who are the characters that populate your work?

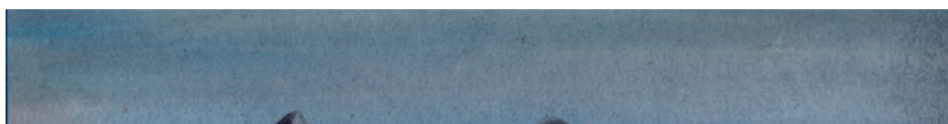
AG: In a way they are anyone, and by anyone I also mean anything, like an employee, a leaf, aliens, body parts, microbes, ghosts, thoughts, words, leftovers, vices, good or bad intentions, feelings. Everything can tell about itself.

AMM: Your work mashes together iconography from popular culture and mythology, dreams, feminism and technological nostalgia. What do these recurring motifs represent?

AG: It's like a mille-feuille cake, like society. I couldn't help but talk about it, what I see enters my work, I'm not interested in pursuing abstract ideas. I like to observe, a bit like in William Hogarth's art, or Goya's Los caprichos series.

AMM: You've recently introduced ceramics into your practice—adapting some of your recurring characters in three-dimensional form or as a surface on which to paint. Where did the initial impulse to work in this medium come from, what has it brought to your work as a whole?

AG: In the past I was not interested in sculpture at all perhaps because I was still looking for my "pictorial" identity. Recently, perhaps because I am in a very creative period, I felt the need to expand into the third dimension. In fact, the beauty of making ceramics is that I get a three-dimensional shape to paint on and I can go into it to give it depth by adding a story within the story. I usually decide first which shape to model, and I don't know immediately what will happen next, that shape can be transformed by painting on it. I also like the fact that, not being an expert sculptor, the shapes I create have a naïve and childlike quality, and I don't try to change it. And it's even more fun to get your hands dirty!





'It's hard to put on makeup in the car', gouache on cotton paper, 23 x 31 cm

AMM: What other mediums do you work in and why?

AG: Working with tempera and gouache, the canvas does not seem to me a suitable support, it does not render as the cotton paper does, which enhances its depth and velvety qualities. I used wood instead, I prepare the board with chalk and it works very well especially with egg tempera, I work on it in layers meticulously and it is very satisfying. I recently tried coloured pencils as well, and I think I will again, but still I always prefer gouache on paper.

AMM: You use the hashtag #storytellingpottery on your Instagram account, and narrative is evidently an important part of your work. Please tell us more about this.

AG: It's true, but then in life I'm not a big talker and I don't tell many stories, but I believe in the importance of doing it and knowing how to do it, without the stories it seems to me that nothing remains. Then perhaps in my work there is not only that, I mean, I tell of the small situations of ordinary life that no one would notice or to which we are all so accustomed, but above all I want to reveal what is underneath, what the character lives, what he feels, the subterranean mood. And I think I can because I have often had people say to me "this is how it feels" or "that's me", and it's very nice to me. I like to tell what we are or what we could be.

AMM: There is a sinister undercurrent in your work that is off-set by a playfulness and dark humour. Please tell us more about this duality and finding the right note with dark humour?

AG: It's great when art or mythology has a sense of humour, you can feel immediate involvement that transcends time. I think life itself is tragicomic, and I love that it is. I believe that the sinister aspect in my work is not deliberately researched or measured, it is more a natural way of seeing things, like a lens through which I see the world.



'Johnny Cash', gouache on cotton paper, 102 x 142 cm

AMM: Let's chat about your visual language, which seems to borrow from the world of cartoons and illustration. How did you find or develop this style of working? What is your intention behind your stripped back, deliberately naive and low-fi aesthetic?

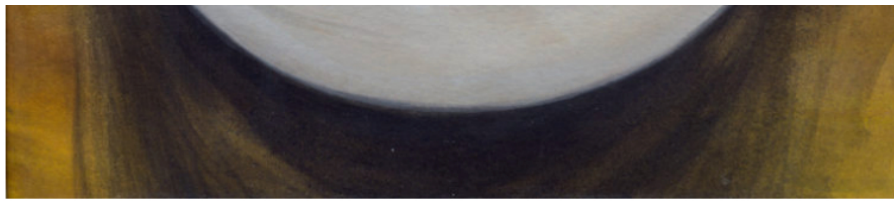
AG: I think it is related to the fact that as a child I copied my favourite cartoons and comics and I still love this language because it is direct and raw. They were mostly Japanese manga or anime or Disney comics. In cartoons especially the characters have a strong expressiveness that is very essential and straightforward, so necessary and so empathetic and that's what interests me. I work very spontaneously and I am not so interested in aesthetics or style, if I need to draw a shoe in the painting, then I draw a shoe. I am interested in telling stories, revealing mechanisms and feelings, drawing or painting are a means to do it, and I do it the way I am able to.

AMM: Your painting Ruines exquises with a figure standing atop a pile of bones with hands on hips mirroring the scroll of the Ionic column set against a sombre gradient background is like a homage to de Chirico's The Disquieting Muses. Do you draw reference from any specific art movements? How do you orientate your work?

AG: That painting of mine is particularly mysterious and evocative. I wanted to represent something that evokes the past and ancient culture in contrast to the modern design of the rainbow on the shirt, or it's probably just a boy studying, merging and growing in the ruins.

Surely De Chirico is one of my favourite artists, together with Magritte and much of Surrealism, I am interested in their connection with the psyche, the unconscious and the game, irreverence and mystery. I also love artists like Alfred Kubin, Louis Wain and Boris Artzybasheff who are considered more illustrators than painters, but have created an amazing and unique world in a personal and intimate way. I really like the pictorial style, detailed and meticulous, of medieval painting, even the crudest one in which the figuration is more stereotyped and static. Painters such as Giotto, Cimabue, Paolo Uccello or the Flemish, especially Bruegel, for his direct way of representing abstract ideas. In his painting Flemish Proverbs he literally represents hundreds of sayings and idioms in a figurative sense, a grotesque scene in which everyone seems crazy, but in reality it seems much more realistic than others. A little as if thoughts and instincts materialize. It is a great inspiration to me. I really like the German Neue Sachlichkeit too, it's so starkly realistic.





'The disaster ashtray', gouache on cotton paper, 31 x 24 cm

AMM: Outdated technology often features in your work. Is this a form of nostalgia? In a recent interview you gave, I read that you are trying "to recreate a personal and generational archaeological site." Can you tell us more about what you mean?

AG: It is something personal, but not only. All those of my generation almost fondly recognize an old Sony Walkman or a VHS, they are objects related to childhood and adolescence and necessarily have something emotional, connected to memories. It is nice to resurrect the ancestors of technology, they create a map of emotional memories in your head, because there is a connection between us and our objects and that bond is the subject I am talking about.

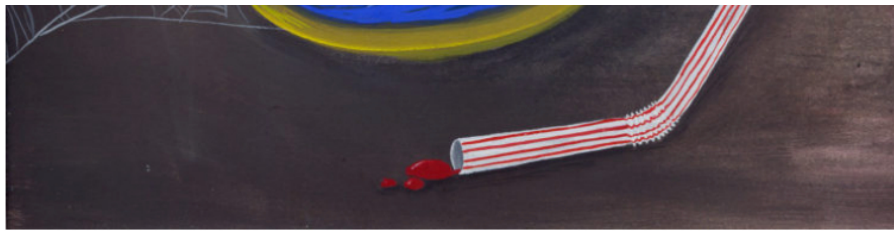
AMM: What is your process of researching and working? Do you work from references and make sketches before starting a painting or just dive right in?

AG: Internet is often a great starting point for finding inspiration and images, or sometimes ideas come from chatting with friends or just looking at objects on the table or around my studio, or something that happens to me during the day or that I read. Sometimes I start several drawings together starting from a background, like a sky, a flat field, or some hills or a room, a city, and I wait for the right idea, for something to happen; other times I immediately decide what to represent and prepare a pencil sketch. In short, it is often an unknown, but that is the most fun aspect: I proceed a bit like an investigator in search of clues, and when I solve the case it has something revealing and satisfying.

AMM: What ideas or themes are you currently exploring in your work?

AG: In this period I am working on a large drawing on paper depicting a map, a large geographical and emotional map of late capitalism. Who knows how it will turn out. At the same time I continue to make ceramics, some related to the map, others not, and I continue to work on other smaller paintings.





'Summer is gone, spider prevail', gouache on cotton paper, 31 x 24 cm

AMM: Have you been working during the pandemic? What effects do you think this radical time has had on you creatively?

AG: Yes, I worked a lot during the pandemic, isolation and tranquillity were favourable to me but obviously the events influence the issues of work. This is not necessarily bad or good. Creativity is always there! Fortunately my loved ones and I have been healthy and this is important.

AMM: Do you anticipate any lasting changes to the art world or broader society as a result of the pandemic?

AG: In Italy following and during this pandemic it was used to say "everything will be fine" but most likely "everything will be the same". I don't know what will happen. Surely there are missing contact, the sharing and the tranquillity in human relations. Everything now seems to be pervaded by anxiety and this is very sad, the world before covid-19 and sanitizing gels seems something so exotic.

AMM: Do you have any daily rituals or routines that feed you creatively?

AG: I don't think I have any rituals, but I'm a person of habit. I like to wake up early in the morning, have breakfast at the bar and listen to music or podcasts in the studio. Every Sunday I take a tour of the flea market, by now I have filled my studio with strange old objects and funny figurines!

AMM: When you're not making art what are some of the things you enjoy doing?

AG: Some days of the week I teach art to children, it is very interesting and stimulating to understand how you can teach art and creativity to others, because it is something that has to do with freedom and rules at the same time. In my free time I like going out with friends, watching movies, visiting exhibitions, playing with my cat or taking care of my plants.

AMM: Do you have any projects or exhibitions coming up? What's next for you?

AG: In October I had an exhibition in a gallery in Venice along with three other Italian artists, and there are other things planned but we will see how it goes with this health emergency. It's a complicated time to make plans, so I'll keep focusing on my work.

Find out more about the artist: www.agneseguido.com

Interview by Layla Leiman for ArtMaze Magazine.



'Painting, progress and tea time', ceramic, 20.5 x 26 x 0.5 cm



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