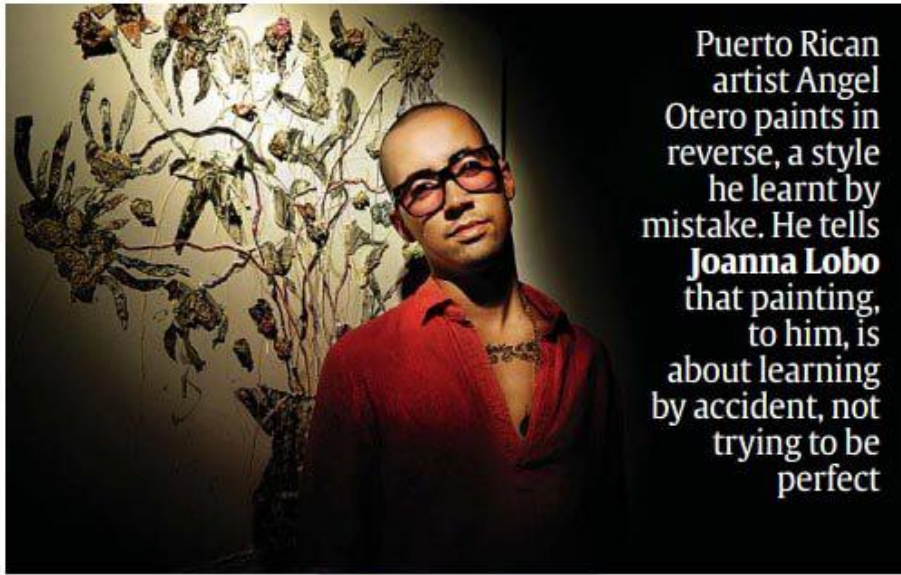


The beauty of his paintings is skin deep



Puerto Rican artist Angel Otero paints in reverse, a style he learnt by mistake. He tells **Joanna Lobo** that painting, to him, is about learning by accident, not trying to be perfect

Angel Otero is an unconventional artist. He uses an abundance of paint but no paintbrush. His 'paintings' are more like collages or sculptures of congealed paint. He likes people to touch his work instead of just standing back and observing it. And he doesn't plan what he is going to paint — he prefers to get "challenged" by the art.

This Puerto Rican artist doesn't like perfection. "If I'm f**king up, it is good because I discover something new, something I don't expect," he says. On his first trip to Mumbai, Otero has come armed with eight of his latest works, his best friends and a ready sense of humour.

Otero is known the world over for his unique painting style, one that's been called everything from 'deformation', 'reconstruction' to 'oil paint scraping'. It's a style that has baffled most people with its ingenuity — he uses dried skins of oil paint to create artwork. Nothing goes to waste in his studio; he has enough recycled 'skins' of dried oil paint to make a wedding dress.

In school, he used to paint the conventional way, using a brush and oil paints on canvas. "I would scrape off the paint from paintings I didn't like so as to reuse the canvas — it was very expensive material," he says. One day, on impulse, he grabbed bunches of the peeled-off paint, applied wet paint, and then spray-painted it. Satisfied with the result, he started making paintings using up all the skins he had. When he ran out of dried paint, and none of his friends had any to loan him, he realised he had

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Shradha Bhargava DNA

to figure out a way to make oil paint dry quickly.

"I decided to paint little pieces of glass. The glass would get stained with the previous colour, so when I painted it with the new colours and scraped it off, the earlier paints would get transferred," he says. And so his personal style of 'oil skin painting' was born.

Given this style, acrylic paints might have been easier to work with, "but it wouldn't be as challenging", he says. "Besides, oil was the best medium to recreate flesh in old Renaissance paintings, so I like the history behind it."

Numerous experiments

over the years have helped him find new ways of using oil skins. At times, he applies layer upon layer of colour on glass and then scrapes it off to get an oil skin that looks and feels like fabric. This is then arranged and stuck using adhesive on canvas, in a way that lets the skin fold and crease. "It's kind of painting in reverse," says Otero. Or when the mood strikes him, he takes dry paint, crumbles it and mixes it with wet paint, spreading it on glass. Once that is dry, he scrapes it off, spray paints it and then cuts it up in different shapes.

His family couldn't understand what he was doing with paints. "I tried to explain it to them but didn't succeed," he says, still amused by the memory. "They don't believe I can make money out of this. They think I do bad things like drugs to make money." But for all their disbelief, Otero loves his family's beautiful ignorance and credits them for making him who he is.

Otero believes in monochrome, not "crazy colours". He likes using black and white. In each one of his paintings, one colour stands out. "I like gold," he confesses, pointing to his gold wallet chain, and the gold chain around his neck.

As you go around the gallery observing his works, feeling the 'fabric' and marvelling at the fabric-like softness, you realise his work is different. "I don't want to paint stories or narratives," he says. "It is up to the viewer to find a connection."

Otero's works will be on display at Gallerie Isa, Fort till June