

Q&A WITH ARTIST JOE IURATO

Joe Iurato's new exhibition **CABIN FEVER** will open at Tagliatella Galleries New York on Thursday June 17.

Multidisciplinary artist Joe Iurato sat down with Tagliatella Galleries to talk about his creative process. Mr. Iurato discussed two major projects from 2020, Franklin Alley in Troy, NY, and Beyond the Walls in Deep Ellum, Texas. He also spoke about how the coronavirus lockdowns impacted his creativity and what he is looking forward to in the future.

Mr. Iurato's new exhibition **CABIN FEVER** will open at Tagliatella Galleries New York on Thursday June 17, 2021, with an opening reception to be held on that day at 6:30 pm. To RSVP to the reception, please email info@djtf.com.

Q: One of your largest projects of 2020 was the design and decoration of Franklin Alley in Troy, NY. Where did you obtain the inspiration for the murals and sculptures you did in Franklin Alley, and how did you approach that subject matter?

A: Franklin Alley was relatively autobiographical. For about two years, I made multiple visits to Troy. I met a lot of locals. I had Q-and-As. We did some fun talks and panel discussions. I went to the Boys and the Girls Clubs. I just met people. What happened in the end was that

I pretty much fell in love with the town and the community.

I do that a lot with my projects. I like to get to know the community because I always feel like when I paint something, in the street especially, and I leave it there, it really doesn't belong to me anymore. I mean, I created it, but it belongs to somebody else. It's that person who walks to work every day or the kids that spend time out there playing. They have to look at it. They have to have a connection to it.

Some of the kids in the murals are based on the kids I met in the Boys and the Girls Club in Troy, who I took pictures of after we did a little art project together. We were making paper airplanes. At one point we were talking about sports, and one little kid comes up to me and is like, "Do you know how to make a paper airplane?" And I was like, "Yeah," so it turned into a project. We were all making airplanes, throwing them across the room.

There's a part of the Alley where there's this little kid throwing paper airplanes, and they're going across the walls. And nobody would even know that, but that was a special experience for me.



Joe Iurato working in his New Jersey studio, 2021.

Much of your work is ephemeral, such as the miniature wooden cutouts that you photograph and leave around urban areas. But the project in Troy is meant to contribute to a revitalization effort. It's meant to last for a long time. How does time and longevity factor into your practice?

I look at [Troy] as something that will hopefully remain long-term. There are factors that are involved. It's in a public setting — anything can happen. The reality is when you put something out there it's immediately moving towards its end, even if that's a hundred years from now, because of time and weather and circumstance, and eventually things will change.

The pieces themselves are made to live on. I used materials that are usually made by sign makers for

exterior use. I painted the walls the same way I would paint any wall in public. The work will last as long as the elements allow. It's tough up there because of the snow, so we also purposely did pieces that were higher off the ground, giving everything the best possibility to live on.

The wooden cutouts I make for my own work I know are not going to have a longevity. Sometimes I don't even leave the woodcuts outside. But even if I do leave them, especially in a city setting, they don't last more than a couple of days usually.

When I do projects the size of Troy or similarly in Deep Ellum, Texas, where we did kind of the same thing. I create the works. They're made to last like a sculptural piece or anything else that's made to go in public.



Joe Iurato, detail of **Franklin Alley** (2020) in Troy, NY.



Joe Iurato, detail of **Beyond the Walls** (2020) in Deep Ellum, Texas.

How did project in [Deep Ellum, Texas](#), come about, and what did you create for it?

That's another project I did last year in the beginning of the year. It was a project made by Goldman Global Arts, the same organization that runs the Wynwood Walls in Miami. I went to this area of Dallas called Deep Ellum which is known for its rich history in music, especially the blues and jazz dating back to Robert Johnson and these old blues players.

It was a dream come true. If you look at my work, I'm always painting little blues guys on railroad tracks and hobos and wanderers. I had the opportunity to do something similar down there, to tell a story in the community in various locations and create about thirteen pieces where people could go scout the

town and look for them. And we did it again with metal cutouts and murals.

I used some of the community, too. I went there to visit, and I met with the local artists. I met with musicians and photographers. I got licensing rights for photos of local musicians, as well as Leon Bridges and people who were already there who "made it" from Texas. Homages to some of my favorites like Pantera and Stevie Ray Vaughan. There were things that I was doing out there that were very relevant to the city and also to the up-and-coming local musicians.

Deep Ellum and Troy were two projects that were really, really special to me last year.

The vast majority of your work is in black and white and gray, but certain features like the Earth are often depicted in color. How do you think about

color when you're doing projects like that?

When I paint outside, I largely keep everything in black and white. There's a couple of reasons for that. One is that I just love black and gray. I always have. If I look back to pictures when I was in high school and I was developing, just drawing in my bedroom — everything is in black and white. There's something special about having a piece that's black and white in this colorful world.

Occasionally I will add pops of color to my pieces where I think it makes sense, like if a kid is holding the world, and the water is blue. Blue is my favorite color to use, so most of the time it will be black, gray, white, and blue. I'm never using an abundance of color.

The ice cream show [[I'll Stop the World and Melt With You](#) at Tagliatella Galleries in August 2020] was kind of interesting for me, because I tried to break out of black and white and give things some real color and create this happy environment as opposed to thinking so much about my little black-and-white world.

If I'm going to put it on a white wall in a gallery, I usually add some kind of brown reclaimed wood or maybe a little pop of color in the piece, because you need something else aside from that pristine white. It's all very planned in the moment. It all needs to make sense and balance.

You mentioned your collaboration with Logan Hicks, the exhibition [I'll Stop the World and Melt With You](#) at Tagliatella Galleries over the summer. What was that experience like, and has the coronavirus pandemic influenced your work besides specific projects like that one?

I thought through the pandemic that I was going to be at my very best creatively. I really did. Typically for me, when I have a lot on my mind, or I'm depressed, I tend to take that out in painting. And I find that I create works that mean the most to me during those times.

This was really different. I think the weight of the pandemic, the uncertainty of everything, having a family and not understanding what's going to happen next. There was a lot of rage. And I just shut down completely, creatively.

I couldn't create. I wound up finding creativity, believe it or not, in my backyard, gardening. I started to garden and build garden boxes and grow vegetables, and I spent a lot of time outside just trying to forget about art so that hopefully it would come back to me. And it took a really long time for that to happen.

It was during the time of mid-summer when [Logan Hicks](#) and I were talking about these things, saying, "We need, somehow, to get together and start the motors back up, and I need to start creating."



Joe Jurato and Logan Hicks, installation view of "I'll Stop the World and Melt with You" at Tagliatella Galleries, New York, August 2020.

So we had this fun idea for the show, and that is why the work is so different from everything else that I've done, because it was really just fun.

What's one of the funnest things to do in the summer as a kid? You have an ice cream. We ordered ice cream stickers and all these fun things and got really involved in just trying to do something that was fun. And that show is important to me, because it broke my funk. After months and months of me literally struggling to figure out what to do and how to do it and what I wanted to say, or if I wanted to say anything at all.

And then I realized while we were doing it that it's the act of creating and just painting and being in that moment, and just having fun. And being back with Logan, who is my closest friend and collaborator. It really helped me to kickstart my way back into the studio and getting back to a little bit of normalcy.

The stuff that I'm I am doing now is more of an introspective observation of what I was thinking about and feeling going through the pandemic, in a lighthearted way. I started painting little wooden log cabins thinking about going out into the woods — just kind of transporting myself to another place in time or what it would feel like to just be away from it all. It is a little bit different than things I've done in the past.

There's an element of nostalgia in your work, especially since you frequently use childhood figures. Do you approach your work through the lens of nostalgia or escapism at all, or more generally a search for comfort?

I've never really talked to people about this, and I don't necessarily know if this makes any sense here, but I struggle with depression, and I have a lot of anxiety.

I like to look at my kids. And I like to remember what it's like to have that curiosity, that spark of imagination where the whole world is kind of new. And those little mischiefs that you encounter for the first time, and just being sneaky and fun and escaping my own very serious self. And it helps lift me out of a place where it maybe is not so good. It makes me smile. But I also realize that there's lot of other people that it takes to another place. It makes you remember that life should be simpler. And I think that children are the best example of that.

I tend to be all over the place with my work. I don't know why some days I decide to paint what I decide to paint, but I try not to fight it anymore. I feel like every day when you wake up like is a different day. You're a different person than you were before,

and whatever inspiration hits you in those moments, that's what you roll with.

You mentioned the log cabins that you're working on right now. What other kinds of projects or themes are you exploring at the moment?

This summer I'm working on a project in Asbury Park, New Jersey, on the boardwalk. We're still having talks about that. I have a couple of fun commissions I'm working on. I'm going to Denmark in August to be part of a mural program. I may be doing another show in the fall.

This year was really difficult to plan. I did the [Super Bowl last year](#). And then that went into Deep Ellum. And then we had that long pause where everything kind of fell apart. But then I went into the Troy project, because that had been scheduled for the end of the year. So, that was kind of planned out. But what I forgot was, during that whole time, nobody was planning this year, because nobody knew what to expect.

I'm super honored and excited to do the show at Tagliatella Galleries, because it's New York City and I wanted to do a show with Tag for a while. The title of the show is CABIN FEVER [opening on June 17th].

Is there kind of any mural, installation, or other type of you would enjoy doing but haven't had the opportunity to pursue yet?

There's lots of them. To pick one is almost impossible.

We talked about the blues — one thing I've always wanted to do is I want to spend some time on the blues trail down south, and I wanted to photograph some of the old blues men and hit up some of the old clubs and

do a historical take down there. And return with paintings. And put them in certain places as homages along the trail. That's something I've always had in my head, but I don't necessarily know if it's ever going to come to fruition.

Do you listen to the blues while you're painting? Or any other kind of music?

I like all music. I'm a big fan of the emotion of the blues.

I like stories. I love Norman Rockwell. I've always loved Norman Rockwell. I love the storytelling aspect of his work and the whimsical display of his characters, and I like stories. When I think about music, it's such an important part of what I do and who I am, because I'm always listening to these songs that tell stories. When you go back to the blues, and you think about the stories that they're trying to convey through their words, their emotions — to me, it's super impactful.

I love the idea of that wanderer. I take these pieces and I'll wander train tracks, and I'll wander into places where people may never see them. But I go back out in the world and try to retell those stories. It's hard to explain. The blues are a big part of it. I love the blues, I love rock and roll, I love folk music, I love metal. I like it all, as long as it tells me some kind of a story. I'm a lyrics guy. Me and Logan argue about this all the time, because he could care less about lyrics. He wants the music, and I gotta have the lyrics, you know?

You work a lot with salvaged wood and weathered pieces of material that you combine with your cut-outs. How do you consider the contrast



Joe Iurato, **Cabin #4** (2021), spray paint on masonite, reclaimed wood assemblage, 14.5 x14.5 in., Unique. To be featured in the upcoming exhibition **CABIN FEVER** at Tagliatella Galleries New York, opening June 17, 2021.

between these more organic materials and the streamlined aesthetic of the way that you paint?

First and foremost, I think that my work takes shape in the street.

I prefer the clean aesthetics of stencil. I've always been a big fan of [Shepard Fairey](#) — I just love the clean lines. But that being said, when you take them outside and you put it against this busted-up brick wall, or even in the sand against the ocean as a backdrop, there's so much texture.

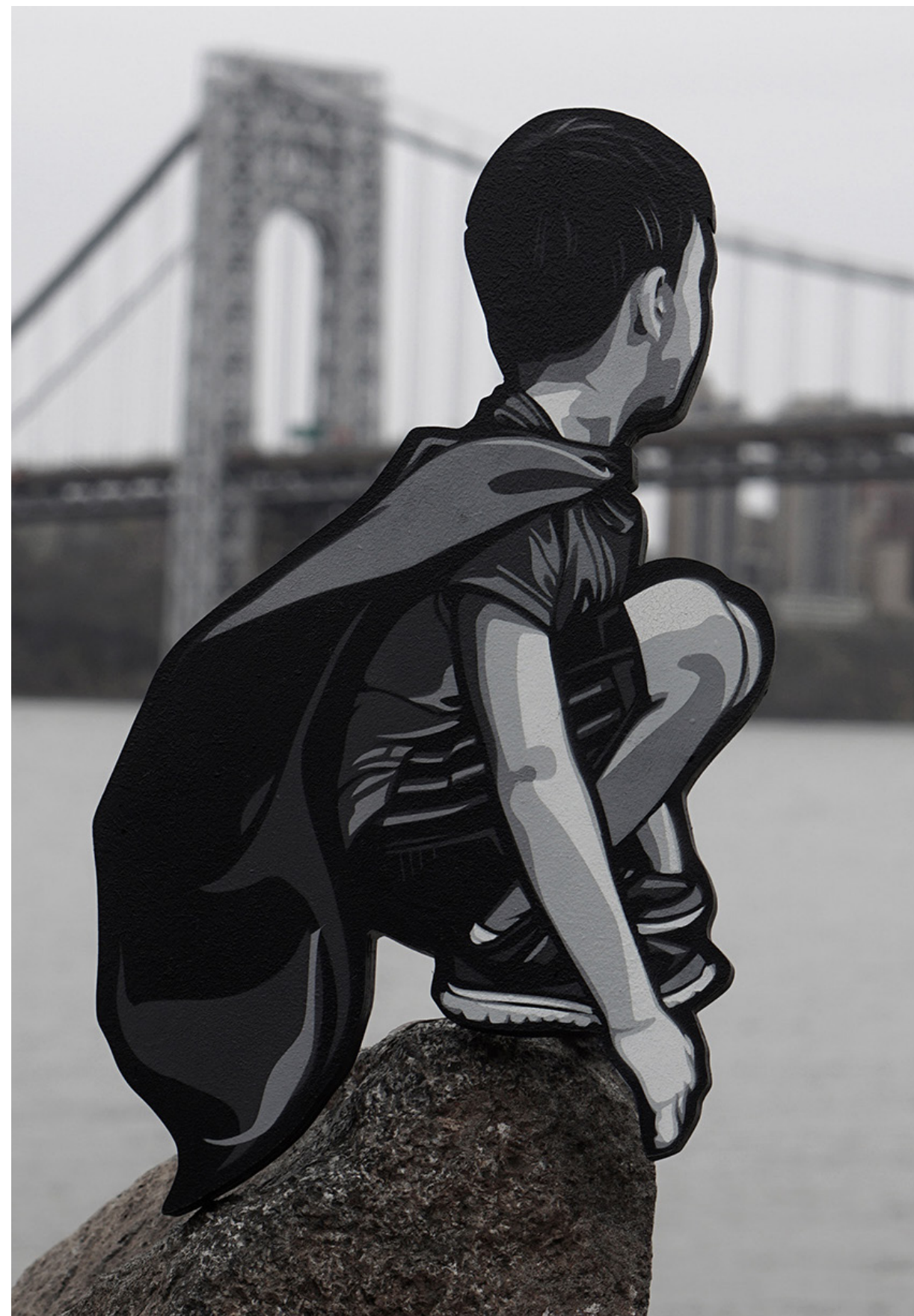
If you take the painting the way I create it and put it in a gallery on its own, it almost feels too pristine. It doesn't feel right to

me. So, years ago I started taking objects like old fence wood, barn wood, all sorts of reclaimed wood, some cabinet doors, and using them with my pieces, because that textural element brings the outside in. It also adds a little bit more of a story. I love the idea of using this reclaimed material that was heading for the trash bin that may have had 100 years of life to it. And now you give it another purpose. I don't want to call it garbage because I think it's treasure. They've had a life, and I've given them a new composition. It's important.

— Interview conducted by Kiki Barnes on April 15, 2021.



Joe Iurato, **Anotherworld (Pink & Yellow)** (2021), spray paint, hand scrolled wooden cutout, reclaimedwood assemblage, 26x14x5 in. each, Unique.



Joe Iurato, detail of **The Guardian** (2021), 12x18 in., photographic print on Fujifilm Crystal Archive Lustre, Open Edition, Signed.