



## MONA CARON AND HER GIANT TINY WEEDS

### PAINTING AN URBAN GARDEN

#### IMITATING A LOUPE WITHIN HER INTRICATE SAN

Francisco murals, Mona Caron uses this technique to invert reality and amplify the tenderness in communities. When she needs a break from painting magnified mini-portraits, Caron paints wild plants and weeds on walls, elevator shafts and parapets. Just returned from completing a 30 by 60-foot mural on the main post office of Cochabamba, Bolivia for the Biennial of Urban Art, and before flying off to do a commissioned 4-story Weed painting in Locarno, Switzerland, she talks with us about the power of the process of painting in public, where art and society intersect.

**Lalé Shafaghi: What is the strongest influence from your childhood?**

*Mona Caron:* Nature. And that's the weird thing for somebody whose art pretty exclusively is in urban environments and all about dialoguing with the urban street. I grew up just outside a small village in the hills in southern Switzerland. My house was a short but steep hike away from the road. Another big influence in my life is my mom. She would sit in her garden and she would pick out plants and explain them. Her father was a botanical illustrator. He was an eccentric bohemian, sort of a hippy of the 1930s and he illustrated all of Switzerland's wild herbs.

**Did it inspire you to learn more about your grandfather?**

It explained some things. I've been always drawn to plants in their micro aspects. While I walked to the train I took to school, I would pick some random flower or weed, and



clockwise from top:  
 El Camino  
 120-foot long mural  
 Hillsdale, California  
 Mendrisio, Switzerland  
 San Francisco  
 San Francisco

during my commute I would undo it to understand how the hell it was put together. By the time I'd get to school, it was in shreds. Then during class, while listening to the lectures, I'd draw that plant from memory. Drawing not from direct observation but from understanding.

**Did you always know you wanted to be a muralist?**  
 I wanted to be a writer. I was always writing epic stories as a child.

**Your murals are definitely stories.**  
 Exactly. They're narratives.

**With such an aura of peace in your childhood, that must have given you a lot of mind space.**  
 Having grown up with so much quiet privacy, I thought I needed that for any type of creative process, but I was so wrong. I started out as an illustrator working in the peace of my little home desk. Then it was thanks to the proddings of a friend of mine, to whom I'll forever be grateful, that I actually

dared do something unthinkable: paint a large painting in full view of the public. This meant everybody was going to see all the ways in which I struggle. All of a sudden I was ripped open when I had to do that with the Duboce Bikeway mural, which was my first mural.

**That was your first? Wow! It's a really big mural.**  
 Yeah, I learned everything on that wall. It was traumatizing and wonderful and it totally changed my life.

**I'll never forget seeing you up there while you were painting it. I thought, this is what San Francisco is all about! An amazing woman painting a beautiful mural in a scary alley. Your mural made that alley useful again.**  
 That's so awesome that you were there! That first mural was the most radical shift for me. Before, I thought the process was something you hide, you only show the finished thing and pretend you just laid it like a golden egg. From that I went to the extreme opposite, where my work is actually inspired by the open process. Making murals in public



allows me to engage with people on the street, not just to communicate to them, but to try and become a medium through which their stories get told, from the personal and anecdotal, to our shared history, to visions that aggregate our dreams and hopes for the spaces we share. What is society? Where does it live? It lives in the things we do together.

Painting in the street creates an occasion for us to step out of our individual reality for a moment and shift our attention to the life we create in common. A recurring feature in my murals is the future fantasy vision, where I paint neighborhood makeovers by soliciting suggestions from neighbors. It's been my favorite thing, as an artist, to be able to make the street less of a place of transit and more of a place to inhabit by providing an excuse for strangers to start chatting, using the mural as a sounding board of what could be, accessible to people of any social status. In my cityscapes I paint crowds, but they're never anonymous masses. Each little figure is someone I'd met during the process, their stories enriching the details in the murals.

**There's something so delicious in the contrast that lives in those extremes.**

In my murals, I invert the perspective of our perception. Small things we don't have time to notice, I paint them big. Things that can overwhelm us, like the big city and its crowds, become tiny by creating a bird's eye view. What emerges from viewing the city from above is not the just variety of individuals, but the choreography of our lives.

I do things inversely proportional to their perceived reality. And it's a comment on our current stressed lives. Who's got the time to stop along the way to observe the little weed coming through the crack on the sidewalk? When do we get to express that side of our humanity and cultivate that sensitivity and openness, not just towards the plants—forget the plants—towards each other?

**JUX**

For more information about Mona Coron visit [monacoron.com](http://monacoron.com)

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