

London Design Festival 2021: Meet Damien Poulain

Article by The Conran Shop

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The London Design Festival is back and, dare we say it, better than ever. To mark its return after a global COVID-19 pandemic, French artist Damien Poulain transforms our Chelsea windows with his mesmerising ‘Magical Value of Shapes’ display: a colourific backdrop to our latest global exclusives. Read on to see what drives and inspires Poulain, and what his future holds.

Damien, can you please tell us a little about the inspiration behind your ‘Magical Value of Shapes’ display at The Conran Shop?

‘Magical Value of Shapes’ refers to the path of inspiration I follow when creating a painting. As a process, I mentally gather shapes and colours that accumulate in my mind and take note of how they meet to create new shapes, colourful objects and spaces. Everything we do inside our minds is a construction, but art is about how we give that form in the world.

It is a gift to have the chance to see the world not as it is, but as we want it to be. I would like my viewers to have that chance.

‘Magical Value of Shapes’ is also a response to the grid system of the new shelves in place in the Conran shop window and it functions like an open invitation to the viewer – an encouragement to step inside of the painting I’ve created, and experience it from within.

My intention was to allow the viewers to project themselves inside of the artwork, to allow their imaginations to wander, and to summon their own rainbow-hued visions. By rethinking the value of the flat surface and giving an architectural aspect to painting, my hope was to conjure an extra-sensory experience.

The Conran Shop has partnered with you for multiple projects over the last few years, including a mural in our London office. What about the Conran Shop aesthetic appeals to your style?

The Conran Shop offers me the chance to work on the inside of beautiful architecture, in a world of inspiring design. I am mainly invited to produce monumental murals and

installation works, but my work is also linked to the architecture itself, and to the humans living in or with it. That's what makes The Conran Shops such dream spaces to work with, because they allow me to be part of the Conran universe, and it's like a holistic circle, where the furniture lives with and alongside the wall paintings.

I have always tried to express myself freely through shape, colour and form, and to not let myself be labelled or boxed into any type. I have also always allowed myself to adapt to the different environments I've been in because that's the way my creativity flourishes. My work is inspired by everything that surrounds me, and a lot by architectural details, so it makes total sense to be collaborating with Conran as a place that champions the crossover of disciplines. I move between design and painting, colour and architecture, from the streets to indoors, and any medium could be the one I use to express myself. The team at Conran are one of those rare clients who can commission artists and then, in full faith, let them manifest their own creativity within a space within any constraints.

The current London installation, 'Magical Value of Shapes', is very different from the one created for Paris – they always are, for the simple reason that each new project is a fresh relationship to a space. My installations, paintings or constructions are created to inhabit a specific space, and so that means also working around the constraints and limitations of it too. In Paris, I created a 16 metre long painting based on my small, nomadic painting series 'Painting The Territory (Paris)', because I wanted to translate this series, inspired by the city, to the Conran Shop walls – bringing outside in. The monumentality of the wall painting compared to the originally small painting created a sense of excess and almost a new architecture, with colourful doors like portals to another space.



The new display creates the perfect backdrop to our new season offering; which is your favourite piece?

My favourite piece for this season is the Rocking Chair by Hans J. Wegner. There's just something so inviting about its curves and lines. I can picture myself sitting in it, reflecting and reading a book by a window in my living room.

Back to your beginnings, why were you first inspired to enter the world of art?

My practice is predominantly shaped by personal influences, and everything I do is in some way traceable to my youth and my upbringing. I grew up in a relatively artless environment at home, my parents weren't in the art world and I had no access to artistic education, so most of my earliest encounters with art were out on the street, or in the things I got myself. For instance, my eyes were often drawn towards street advertising, billboards and comic

books – elements of graphic and visual language I came into contact with day-to-day. I always had a creative spirit and I was looking to hone my artistic sensibilities for as far back as I can remember. My desire to express my ideas through all sorts of crafts was insatiable, and books were my whole world and a true escape for me – I'd look through them again and again and then attempt to draw my own versions of their characters. It's like I felt a strong desire to connect all of my senses through making things, right from the beginning, before I really had an idea what artmaking, or being an artist, meant. Back then, it was an intuitive, impulsive thing to draw or paint or make something, and that pure spontaneity is something I've tried to keep with me into adulthood. That's why my art now selects from a constellation of different mediums and techniques, including architecture and design, murals and spray painting – I like to do what feels right, let my intuition lead, and explore the possibilities of each new project without boundaries.



You seek inspiration from Shintoist, primitive, and heraldic symbology, amongst others; how did you stumble upon these?

My childhood was spent living in a tower block in the suburbs of a mid-size town in France. It was a relatively unremarkable place, and there weren't a lot of activities to do in the area, so I spent a lot of time at home, alone inside my room. My world then was populated only by a small amount of books and comics so certain ones became formative. Looking back, it's like each of them was a tiny starting point for the creation of my universe, like coordinates on a map, a series of interconnected dots.

I think that as a child you don't quite understand how things are processed, or why some things speak to you more than others, you just live and connections reveal themselves. This is exactly what happened to me. Some of the influences you've picked up on in your question are things that impressed themselves upon my consciousness from a young age, and it's only in later life I've realised the true extent of that. I used to read and copy from the illustrated dictionary I received for one of my birthdays, for instance, and spent endless time poring over world maps and drawing each flag in coloured pencil and paint. This no doubt contributed to my love of finding out about other cultures, but that's also where the heraldic influences you mention first emerged. I drew and I dreamed of escaping a lot during those years, and as I grew that wistfulness turned into action. It pushed me to become a graphic designer first, and an artist later.

The Shintoist and primitive influences – by which I mean the essence of our cultures, the birth of our civilisations and where we're from – came much later on, some time in my thirties, when I was finally able to travel and I discovered Japan and the African continent.

As someone with a Catholic upbringing who was taught to be god-fearing, discovering Shinto in particular was a complete revelation to me. It opened up my worldview. The symbols of Catholicism had never really spoken to me, not like this did. Shintoism is a religion that places nature at the heart of it, de-centring the human, which was a radical new way of thinking and seeing.

Attempting to locate a formula for what I do now, I would say that the ways humans move through and interact with the world, and the myriad relationships between space, colour, people and movement are all elements that tie together what I do. And when I say movement, I mean that in every sense – physical movement, across continents and cultures; metaphysical movements across times and planes of existence and understanding; and emotional movement, and what it means to truly touch someone, or evolve their way of thinking, by making something. That's why I continually find myself returning to geometry, because it's a universal language.



You have exhibited your work at some incredible institutions; which one was most memorable, and what is most important to you when you're collaborating?

I find it hard to pick favourites, mostly because each experience brings with it something completely different to the last, but if I had to choose, then the exhibition I had at the Issey Miyake 21_21 Design Museum in Tokyo left a real impression on me. I was invited there not only to exhibit my works, but I also had the chance to create a painting on site, and the energy of that was really incredible. I painted a tennis table so that the public could play and be tactile within the show. It was interactive in every sense of the word. That's the sort of interaction I am looking for with the public – either by immersing the viewer within my paintings, or by creating an installation that generates an exchange.

I always appreciate it when curators give me the green light to really activate a space, because engaging people in physical, creative ways is the very essence of what I love to do, and that sort of trust is a huge honour.

You live in Paris but work around the world; where do you like to work best?

Paris is a recent base, but I lived in London for 14 years before this, and I still consider myself as based between those two places, because I cannot forget my heritage. These bases are important to me because they shaped me, and they have each given me roots I've grown from. In terms of where I like to work, that's a more intuitive thing, to do with the feeling of a space and what inspiration it ignites within me – I think I work best on site and

when confronted with a completely new environment, for instance.

In the past few years, I've done residencies in Iran, Japan, France and Senegal and each of those experiences made me reflect on the world I live in, and the way I would like things to be seen, in different ways. I've come to understand that nature is important to my process, as well as the ways community and architecture are built and maintained in relationship to the natural world.

How do you feel that the pandemic has affected your craft, if at all?

Mostly, it has made me rethink my priorities and what it means to travel and create art. I used to travel to entirely new cultures to create a lot of my projects, but once the pandemic hit that was no longer an option, and our worlds got smaller, almost overnight. It's amazing how that expands your mind in different directions though, and the new sparks it can ignite. I found myself looking closer to home, around my apartment, and in my local area, and it actually opened up a direct relationship with my neighbourhood I hadn't had before. I live in a predominantly African neighbourhood, and the more time I spent within it, the more I realised how much was on my doorstep. That's the beauty of big cities, isn't it? The world comes to you, people converge from all different places and build new communities, and you can happen upon different pockets of life all the time. As a result, I started to create new projects, in my own city, with what I had at hand. I also discovered new regions in France, far from everything and perfect for an artist needing clarity and new scenes.



What advice might you offer to those wishing to explore a similar path to which you have taken?

Always be curious, and question everything, because curiosity is the most powerful state of being for any creative mind.

You can also travel, and sometimes it doesn't have to be too far away. It could be round the corner, or up the street. It's how you look at things that inspire, not where you go. Most of the time, we're not tourists in our own cities, so start by being a tourist in your town, visit local places, look up, look down, and things that were once invisible will start to appear. Keeping open eyes is the start to having an open mind.

What do you hope the future might hold for you? What are your next projects?

I am eager to add a new dimension to my work in the coming years, and to switch to more volume-based pieces through the production of three-dimensional projects, monumental sculptures, and the painting of entire buildings. I would love to plan some architectural spaces to paint too, or even to be able to work on the materials themselves to produce an idea from scratch – one that makes sense to people and communities. I believe in art, and in the power of art within the public space, whether that's out on the streets, deep within nature, or on the walls of an enclosed space, and I want to make work that encapsulates that passion.

When the time is right, I would like to travel again too, to paint monumental murals from my series 'Love Has No Size' – a series I initiated in Tehran, Iran and then pursued in Tunisia and Senegal. Pre-pandemic, my next destinations should have been Algeria and South Africa, and I had planned huge mural paintings where the word 'Love' dominates the streets and buildings of cities often marked by difficult pasts. In the end, I am an eternal optimism, and a romantic at heart who thinks poetically, and in a humanistic way, so these big gestures and proclamations of love just come naturally to me. If my art inspires someone to reflect on the way we live, then it's done its job and more.

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