



UP THE WALL

mural painter polina soloveichik
makes art on a massive scale.

WORDS JENNIFER PERKIN PHOTOGRAPH JULIA SCHAUENBURG

Berlin is a city of walls. Besides that famous (fallen) one, it seems practically every vertical space in the German capital is daubed with some kind of artwork. Apartments, shop fronts, offices and alleyways: the city is a canvas, and the scale of its creativity can be mammoth.

One lady helping to beautify these once-blank spaces is Polina Soloveichik, originally of Chernogolovka, Russia. Her work has been commissioned for Berlin walls both inside and out, public and private. But she almost never did it. After finishing art school in New York and deciding she was "no good at painting", Polina got roped into decorating a huge wall for some friends organising a film festival. A couple of days and a few buckets of paint later, a mural artist was born.

"I loved how simple it was to wholly transform a space and to make it embody even the silliest of ideas – which was the case then – on such a grand scale," Polina says. "And I loved that to get this done required lots of physical activity: running up and down scaffolding, carrying buckets, painting strokes that involved my whole body."

One of her most striking pieces spans an entire apartment block; the figure of a woman taking up a huge, towering wall. For a project of such stupendous scale, Polina "sketched like a madwoman" and also used models. A few mates to guide her way didn't hurt, either: "I used the windows as my markers when I was actually painting, and friends on the ground to tell me when my curves were off. The entire thing was hand-painted, a quality I hold very dear to my work."

Polina's Russian heritage is clear in her work, a fact she was oblivious to until it was pointed out to her. "The first time it

happened, I was caught off guard because for that particular mural I thought I was referencing Japanese patterns! I kind of enjoy not being fully accountable for my influences. You choose some things, and some things choose you."

You could say Polina's adopted home of Berlin – or as she dubs it, "the capital of black walls" – chose her. While visiting the city as part of an art project (still in her 'reluctant mural stage'), she was swept off her feet, and decided to make the move. "It is a place in constant flux, very much re-inventing itself, and that openness is priceless," she says.

Berlin is also a place of notoriously harsh winters; presumably the arch enemy of the outdoor artist. "Most paint should not be applied below five degrees Celsius, so that lets me off the hook in winter," she explains. "Rain is almost always an issue, but you learn to take breaks when you must and work when you can. Once, I've had rain actually wash away part of a mural. That happens very rarely since exterior paint dries quickly, but both me and the rain were particularly stubborn that day!"

Exposure to the elements is an occupational hazard for the paintings as well as the painter. Murals are essentially public works; the antithesis of an art piece that lives behind glass in a gallery. Does it fill Polina with dread to imagine someone spray-painting a giant penis on one of her works one day?

"My first paintings on the street were illegal. I learned how to make work that belongs to its place and to everyone and no one at the same time," she says. "Relinquishing control of a delicate thing out in the open adds what I think is a second, non-aesthetic beauty to the piece. This beauty already includes the nostalgia for the piece in the face of potential destruction." ❄️