

A studio like no other

Artist Camille Walala collaborates with Our Department on new, one-of-a-kind creative space



Studio shots by Taran Wilkhu.

Pairing creative flair with technical complexity, Camille Walala's newly transformed studio is an artistic statement in its own right.

The space at Regent Studios is the result of a collaboration between two creative duos. Camille Walala and Julia Jomaa have collaborated for years on their artistic projects, whereas Our Department (aka Simon Sawyer and Gustave Andre) is experienced with helping artists turn their abstract ideas into functional reality.

Together, they've created a bold, beautiful and imaginative space featuring impressively intricate relief panels that take inspiration from Camille's public artwork. The result is an unmistakably 'Walala' studio.

Collaboration

Big ambitions for a new stage of their career

Having moved to London over 25 years ago, Camille has spent time in many different kinds of studios. Her first was a table in a basement with no windows, and when she first met Julia, they were sharing a desk in Dalston along with 10 other creatives. Now, on the seventh floor of Regent Studios, it's a proud moment for the whole studio team.



Early questions tested their ambitions. Would they need a builder? How could they manifest Camille's aesthetic vision in material terms, yet also have a functional workspace? Rather than simply leave Simon and Gustave with a design to deliver, Camille and Julia were involved every step of the way. Every nook and cranny, every material choice and hidden detail bears the traces of their work together.

Initially, Camille was nervous about adding extensive colour and pattern. Would this clash with work that would be ongoing? Taking the risk was worth it to create an inspiring space. "I enjoy the ambiance of the studio when I'm working. I want to inhabit the aesthetic fully, and push it in a new direction," she said. "But I don't want any Walala style at home, Julia and I just have artworks by other people we like."

A joyful workplace

The studio is divided between two rooms, one for 'clean' work on the computer, and the other for 'messy' activities such as painting and model making. The two different approaches reflect the scope and scale of the studio's output: both large-scale public realm projects, often in collaboration with architects, and artworks, such as paintings, sculptures and ceramic pieces, created by Camille herself. Yet a lot of crossover work takes place between each space. Every project, regardless of its scale, begins in a sketchbook and through drawing. And renders produced digitally might later inspire other physical artworks.



There was a need to have continuity between the two rooms. Although different in function, yet have a shared feeling, aesthetic and texture. Camille and Julia developed a SketchUp model of their broad plans for the space. They were conscious of how certain visual lines should coordinate, and how material choices would pair well through the space.

To ensure the workspace was functional as well as beautiful, materials were chosen that would stand the test of time while preserving the striking aesthetic choices. The internal cabinetry is made from high-quality melamine-faced MDF with robust

edging. Doors and panels required high-density MDF for stability, with polyurethane paint chosen for its resistance to humidity and light. Other bespoke elements, such as the door handles and desk legs, used tulipwood.



Technical wizardry

Everything in the space is bespoke and precisely designed – yet lots of how pieces work is carefully hidden. To ensure there were no bits of colour that peeked out from the cabinets, the edges of the doors were made from their own piece of wood; a simple but solid solution. Using a CNC machine, Our Department developed each unit to be built from many smaller components that could be assembled on site. Underpinning this is Gustave’s experience making furniture and research into modular design. One of the best examples of precision engineering behind the design might be the sliding door, which required the unit to slide within a tight 10 mm space.

As with previous public-realm artworks, the process involved combining many pieces to create the whole, with each piece cut and spray-painted separately. Reflecting Camille’s distinctive use of black lines in her artwork, colourful components sit in relief to a black background, creating a striking three-dimensionality to the cabinetry. Extensive research into materials, and even particular types of glue, was needed to realise the entire project. It was essential

that the space was beautiful but functional – eye-catching, but hard-wearing and easy to clean.

To optimise the budget, everything was designed precisely; for example, a larger cabinet was designed from standard sheet sizes. This created additional interest while simplifying the manufacturing process.



Challenges

Retrofit always poses a challenge – but repurposing a characterful space can be hugely rewarding. The studio space had a lot of particularities they had to work around, and they went to a huge level of detail from finishing thresholds, hiding an existing gas metre, navigating around pipes, and fitting everything in seamlessly. They kept within precise gaps, often just 30 or 50mm.

Like other residents of Regent Studios, when they leave, Camille and Julia are contractually obliged to return the space as they found it. Simon and Gustave have ensured that all the furniture and structures can be dismantled (even the middle wall in the space is freestanding), while still having the sturdiness of a permanent fixture.



How they met

Camille first met Simon when she needed a desk for her studio. Pleased with the results, Camille would turn to him again as her career took off and projects required more extensive technical assistance.

Alongside fellow technician Gustave, Simon founded Our Department to work behind-the-scenes with artists, helping them to transform creative ideas into a physical reality – in their fullest technical complexity. Both Simon and Gustave come from a shared creative background – the former studying sculpture in art school, the latter music at the Guildhall – and both built practical experience developing public-realm projects, collaborating with engineers, planners and others involved in a broad scope of fabrication.



Portrait of Simon Sawyer and Gustave Andre, founders of Our Department.

Of their collaborative approach, Simon and Gustave explain they have distinct styles. Simon is much more of a dreamer, whereas Gustave keeps them more grounded in practicalities. Both are excited by the prospect of transforming a drawing into a reality, with overcoming the challenge of practical unknowns. Together they reach a good balance.

“The trajectory of Camille’s career has been kind of amazing,” Simon reflects. Having worked together over projects of varying scales, Camille and Simon watched each other’s careers develop while also fostering a deep sense of creative trust together. Their working relationship really took off with her exhibition PLAY at NOW Gallery in 2017, and more recent large-scale projects such as ‘Putting Things In Perspective’ at the Box gallery in Plymouth really tested the scale and scope of what they could pull off together.



Notes to editors

For more information about the project, Camille Walala or Our Department, please contact walala@zetteler.co.uk.

Camille Walala

Known for her ambitious, large-scale and explosively colourful interventions in public spaces, Camille Walala uses the man-made landscape as a platform for disseminating positivity. Her work encompasses full-facade murals, immersive 3D installations, street art, interiors and set design – characterised by a fusion of bold colours and playful geometric patterns.

Since her 'Dream Come True Building' burst onto the Shoreditch streetscape in 2015 and thrust her into the spotlight, Camille and her creative producer, Julia Jomaa, have been engaged in an increasingly bold roster of international projects. These have included collaborations with leading global brands – such as LEGO, for which she created the HOUSE OF DOTS; the creative direction of the ground-breaking Mauritian hotel SALT of Palmar; and a slew of major installations for events such as NYC's WantedDesign and London Design Festival – including Walala Lounge, as complete suite of semi-permanent street furniture that transformed South Molton Street, Mayfair, into a corridor of colour. Camille finds inspiration in community and collaboration, and the power of colour and pattern to transform atmospheres, elevate moods and spark positivity.

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Our Department

Both Simon and Gustave come from creative backgrounds, and since meeting in 2018, have built careers collaborating with artists to realise ambitious projects and with commercial clients to deliver technically complex fit-outs. Their impressive roster of accomplishments to date includes the production of a Celia Hempton sculpture for Art Night and a retrofit of Camille Walala's studio. Their obsessive commitment to detail is matched by a broad understanding of the fabrication process – whether that's collaborating with engineers, planners and contractors, figuring out material details or finding precisely the right tool for the job.

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