

Ignite your inner activist - representation through illustration

 By [Leigh Andrews](#)

27 Feb 2020

The second day of #DI2020 kicked off with a powerful presentation by Italian illustrator Olimpia Zagnoli on the politics of taking up space and the personal nature of colour in creative work.



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Happy to be one of the 40 artists Barcelona-based wallpaper company @coordonne has chosen to celebrate its 40th anniversary. "Repetita luvant", Latin for "Repeating helps", is a series of stylised human profiles inspired by teenagers rooms from the 1970's. A moment in time where rooms were temples adorned with Lava lamps, Glam Rock posters and empty Coca-Cola bottles. In these suspended places, the memories of the first love come back as a psychedelic dream and turn the present world upside-down. #coordonne40

A post shared by Olimpia Zagnoli (@olimpiazagnoli) on Jan 20, 2019 at 12:56pm PST

"Good morning creatives and media in the nosebleed seats in the back, thank you for covering us", said Design Indaba MCs Lebo Mashile and Lucas De Man, as we watched a video recap of the previous day's highlights.

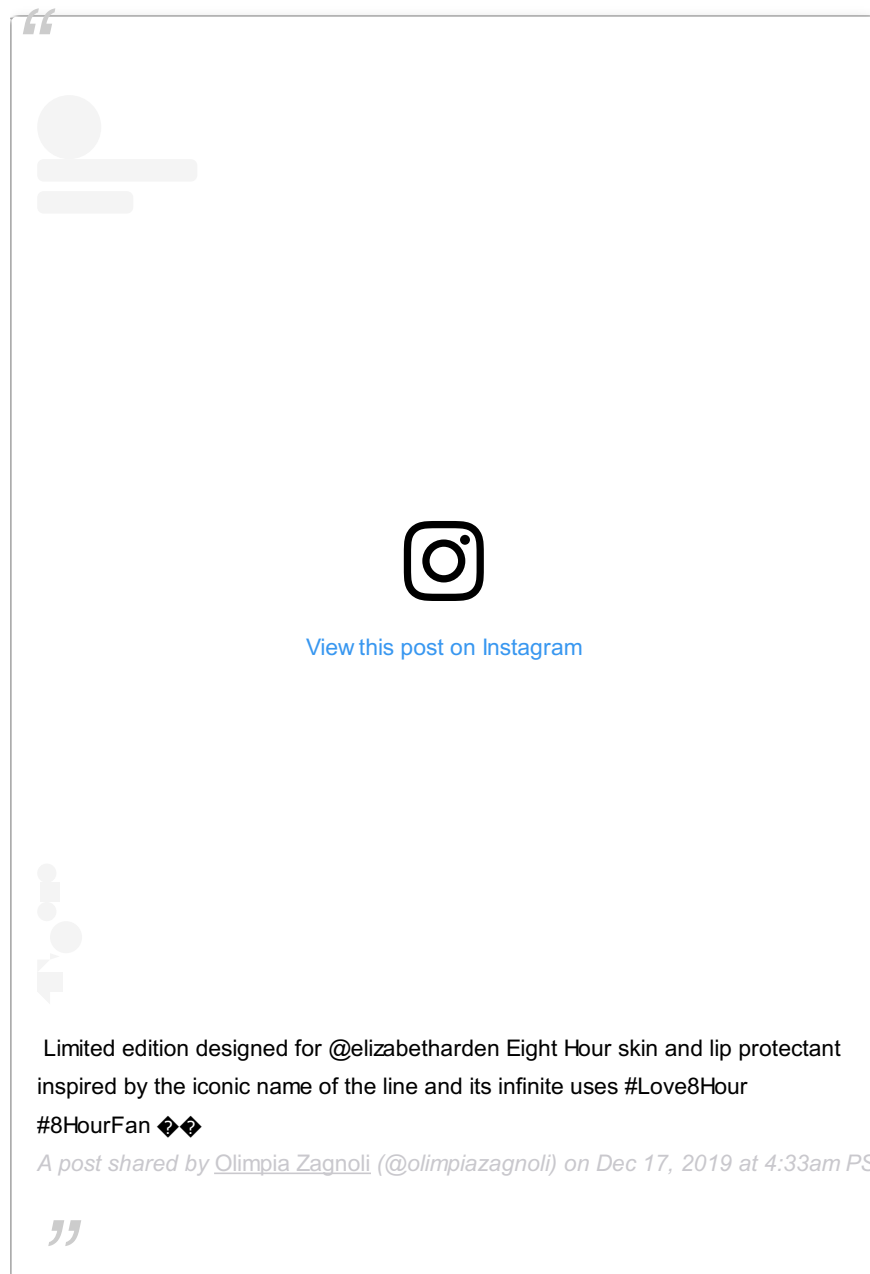
We also did an 'African wave' to get the creative juices flowing: A Mexican wave that started at the left-front of the theatre and flowed to the balcony and back again to the right-front.

Again commended for being one of the most "kind, generous, awake and alive" audiences some of these global greats have ever presented to, we felt pride in the humanity of South African creatives.

Learning about representation through an illustration presentation

But the industry also has a lot to learn from the first speaker of the day, an illustrator described by Mashile as "one of the most important artists of her generation" - Olympia Zagnoli.

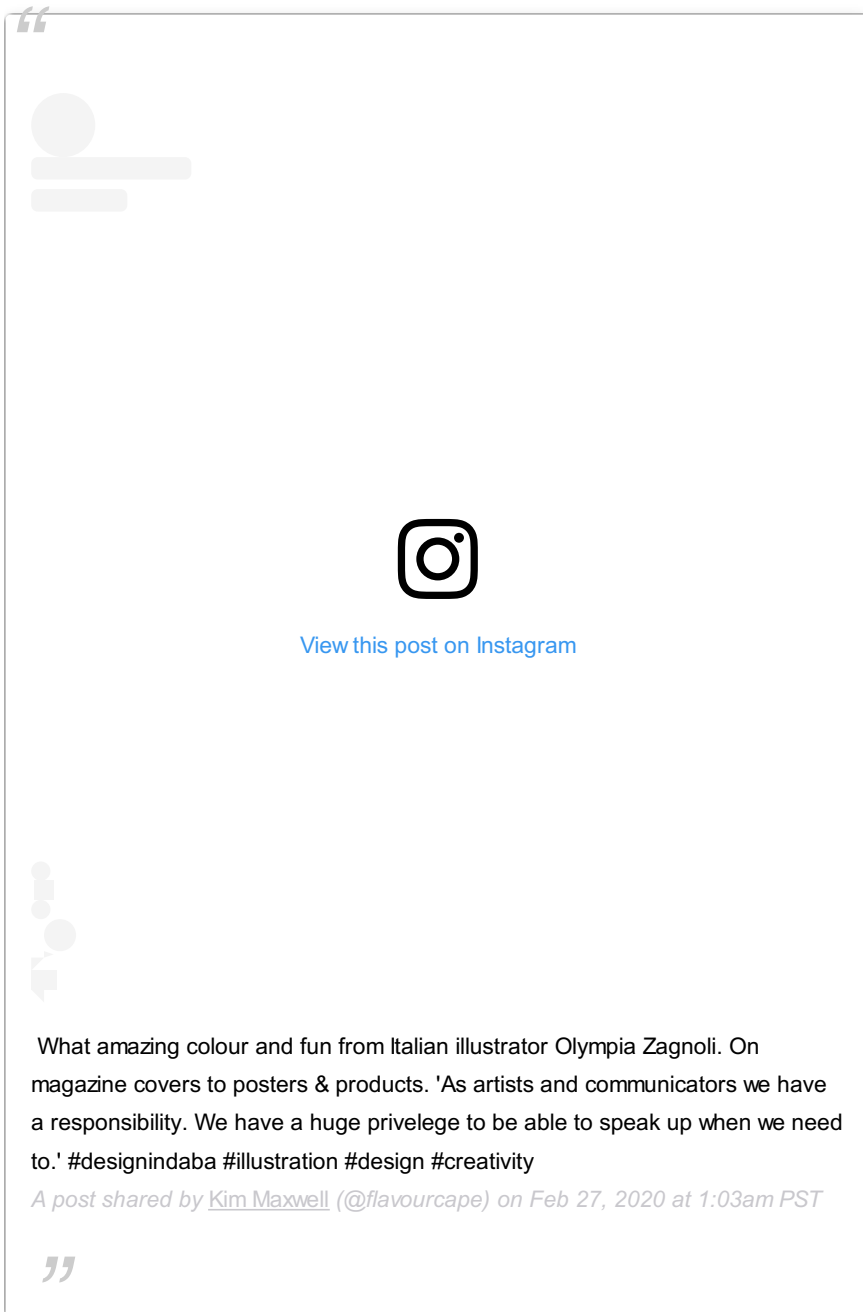
Her career, a dream for many, has seen her work grace the cover of the *New Yorker* and *New York Times* alike, having also collaborated with brands like Prada and Fendi.



It's not often that an artist's work literally walks onto stage, but that's exactly the charming beginning to Zagnoli's presentation.

"She began with a splash of history to bring her field of work alive. In the 18th century, artist sketches were known as 'first thoughts'."

This way of scribbling and jotting down impressions of the world around her became the best way for Zagnoli to get in touch with own intuition from an early age.



She acknowledges that this is also the product of many individual factors - mostly how we are raised, the light we see every day and our social context.

For Zagnoli, this meant being born in what she saw as an endlessly flat, green and plain part of Italy before her family moved to Milan.

“ Milan looked grey to me, with the only splashes of colour coming from neon signs. ”

This was a household where creativity flourished, as Zagnoli's mom would sit and draw at the kitchen table, while her dad took photographs of the world around them.



#DesignIndaba2017: Students' social activism FTW!

Leigh Andrews 2 Mar 2017



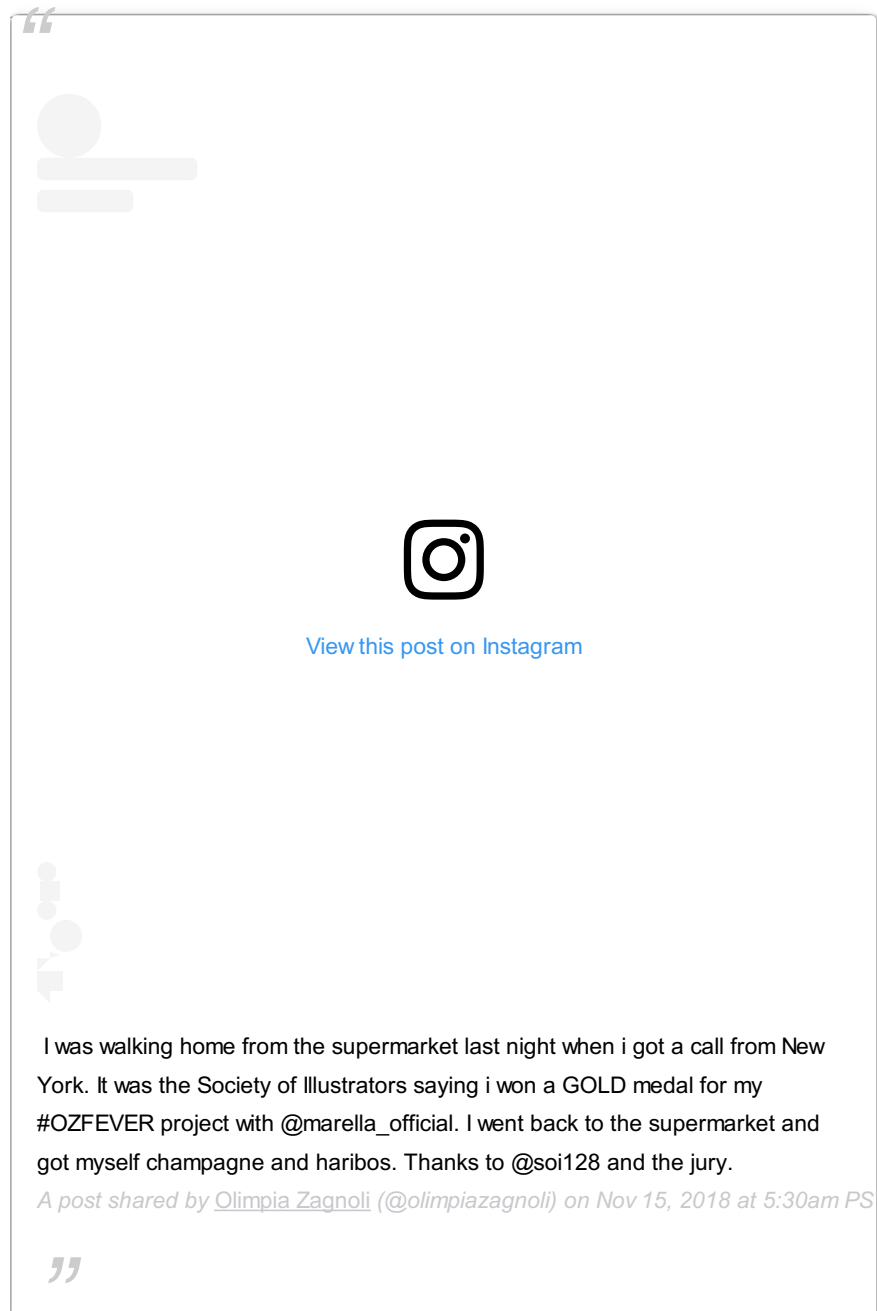
There were always magazines and books to pore through, and a box of pastels to create art of her own. Zagnoli says that the fragments of these early experiences are clear in her work today.

Zagnoli describes illustration as the sum of hundreds of lines that are drawn and redrawn for their synthesis of reality, to be interpreted in a certain way.

All is revealed in imperfections; cracks between colour blocks

As an illustrator, her intention is to present her interpretation of reality, which is not necessarily a balanced or even accurate worldview. But Zagnoli hopes that amid the "imperfections and cracks between colour blocks", you can see her real self.

The main quest for any artist is to find a way that reflects yourself. It's an endless job as each day, we are a little different. To illustrate this, Zagnoli demonstrated her 2007 *New York Times* illustration compared to the 2017 version, which showed the vast difference in direction.



But that's a good thing, as Zagnoli reflects that the more she changes direction, whether that's in designing book covers, t-shirts or even neon lights, the more she learns about the process, the world around us, and herself.

When an artist sits in front of a blank page, there's something all artists recognise - the moment in which you begin facing the limits the page or canvas implies but doesn't necessarily place on the end-result.

“ Zagnoli finds the moment of friction of the brush or pencil against the page or canvas the most fascinating. It's about understanding the concept of 'being free' as an abstract one - the answer to 'free from what' will differ from artist to artist, from situation to situation. ”

The blank sheet of paper gives all the freedom Zagnoli needs.

On making use of and taking up space

Zagnoli finds the issue of space an interesting one, which has changed since she was younger. There's a difference in creating a piece to print on a stamp, to one that will be painted on a huge wall.

That's why Zagnoli believes space doesn't just live in the physical plain, but also in the mental one.

Zagnoli admits she was very aware of taking up space when she was younger and felt the need to expand and stretch her insecurities, which were largely imposed by others.



The importance of showing up

Aileen Sauerman 30 Aug 2019



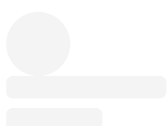
Her work in oil painting, ceramics, sculpture and even music videos is a result of that impulse to be more and try more.

Colour is another important aspect in Zagnoli's practice.

“ I would get very frustrated as a young girl in the 1980s, as it seemed that all you could aspire to was to wear pink clothes and drive a pink car and live in a pink house. ”

Zagnoli clarifies that she doesn't hate the colour pink - far from it - but this treatment simply didn't seem fair to the other colours.

“





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George Lois was called a male chauvinist pig by the National Organization for Women in 1972 when this ad was produced. In 2019 i hope we can all understand why but it's certainly hard to be a good feminist when ads look this good.

A post shared by [Olimpia Zagnoli](#) (@olimpiazagnoli) on Oct 28, 2019 at 8:17am PDT

”

Beyond the glaring point of what this said of women's place in the world, Zagnoli says this 'colour unfairness' is still evident today, when you open a design magazine and find the latest creations all follow a similar wash of colour and style trends.



#FairnessFirst: Seeing red over the 'pink tax' problem

Leigh Andrews 9 Jul 2018



But when she first started illustrating, Zagnoli felt colour was hard to tame. So she went for the 'safe choice' primary colours, toned with greys and pastels. It took years before she included courageous, vivid colours in her work.

But for Zagnoli, colour is not just a decorative element but also an expressive method. So together with the sense of sight, she also wants to evoke other senses so that you can effectively also 'swallow' the colours and 'hear' what they say.

Evoking intuition in art: When the seaside isn't necessarily blue

For this reason, colour is a key area where Zagnoli exercises her intuition.

This means that the seaside to her is not necessarily a blue surface. It involves feeling the breeze on her face and sensing how the light reflects on the water, which may well be a pink or yellow impression overall.

“





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Sister on a solitary beach

A post shared by [Olimpia Zagnoli \(@olimpiazagnoli\)](#) on Jul 31, 2018 at 4:29am PDT

”

Zagnoli says that colour also introduces the idea of representation.

In 2012, Zagnoli was contacted by the New York City subway system to create a city-inspired artwork.

“ Ah, New York City. I love the vibrancy of the colours living together and the character of the neighbourhood. I wanted to get that across. ”

And so she illustrated a day in the life of a young woman travelling through the city.

Most heartening to Zagnoli was that subway commuters would send in pictures of the poster, with messages from young black women who recognised themselves and identified with the character.

“





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"A wall was recently removed at the Hoyt-Schermerhorn station and this 2014 time capsule was revealed" thanks @amybwh for sharing!

A post shared by [Olimpia Zagnoli](#) (@olimpiazagnoli) on Nov 1, 2018 at 6:05am PDT

”

Zagnoli loves that something like this - a choice she made while sitting at her studio in Milan - can take just a few seconds to decide on, but the impact is far deeper than that and lives on.

Wielding a paintbrush and pencil against societal ills

To illustrate this, Zagnoli also spoke of how she came to work for the Barilla pasta brand. Barilla wanted an illustration inspired by a plate of traditional 'spaghetti pomodoro'.

Interestingly, Zagnoli had boycotted the brand until then, as a statement against their earlier view that gay couples are not representative of the typical Italian family.

“



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Olimpia Zagnoli @olimpiazagnoli #olimpiazagnoli #barilla
#pastaworldchampionship #pastapics #pastacollage #fotografia #photography
#photo #design #art #contemporaryart #artsy #artdaily #artlovers #artaddicted
#instaart #instadaily #instagood #bestoftheday #picoftheday #piclove #igersart
A post shared by Memecult (@_memecult_) on Apr 22, 2019 at 4:26am PDT

”

So when the opportunity to work with the brand arose, Zagnoli initially thought of declining.

Then she considered taking a more productive approach, in illustrating a female couple sharing a plate of spaghetti.



Curating 'creativism' and wearing it forward with the Mal Foundation

Leigh Andrews 20 Nov 2017



To Zagnoli's surprise, not only did the brand accept the illustration, but when she chatted to the team and addressed her initial concerns, they told her of the progress the brand had made in updating their code of ethics and standing for LGBTQI+ communities.

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Milano. 2019 ••• #loveislove #laprimavoltafurivolta #thenewyorker #lgbtq
#lgbtpride #gender #toptags #homo #lgbtcommunity #lesbian #bisexual #bi
#poly #polysexual #loveislove #trans #lgbtsupport #lgbtteens #transgender
#milanopride2019 #genderfluid #gaypride #agender #pansexual #ftm #mtf
#lgbtyouth #lgbtqa #transsexual #demisexual

A post shared by [DDR89 \(@dorindr\)](#) on Jun 30, 2019 at 1:17am PDT

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Zagnoli's work served as the first visual sign to society of the brand heading in a more inclusive direction.

Zagnoli concluded that she's by no means so arrogant as to expect that her work will change anyone's life, but she feels that creatives definitely share an original point of view on the world, and have the right to educate themselves on societal issues, as well as a responsibility to speak up when needed.

“ Every day, at our desks, we have a responsibility to act – for our work to be more than just creativity, but an act of resistance. ”

With that call to action, Zagnoli's bright designs walked off the stage. Let's heed her call and follow in her footsteps, becoming an army of creative activists.



#DI2020: Silver jubilee shines with Department of Audacious Projects launch

Leigh Andrews 26 Feb 2020



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ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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