

Q&A With French Artist Rero On Perfecting The Art Of Contradiction

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Rio de Janeiro-based French artist Alexis Devevey, also known as Rero, talks about inventing an instantly recognizable graphic signature using the universal Verdana typeface in capitals and a bold black line striking through the letters.



Sans Titre (SERENITY), 2014. color photography on plywood, Plexiglas (diasec), edition of 5, 60 x 90 ... [+]PHOTO COURTESY OF RERO STUDIO

Where does your artist name “Rero” come from?

I used to do graffiti and I wrote “Aurer”. It was just a choice for calligraphy and typography, but it has no special meaning. Over time, I decided to reverse the letters and to write “Rero”, but it’s one of the things in my work where there is no meaning. I try to find meaning in everything, but there is none in my name.

Tell me about your background.

I was born in Beaune in 1983, where we stayed two years. Then I spent time with my dad in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso in Africa. Afterwards, we came back to Villeneuve-sur-Lot in the south of France. After Saintes, Charente-Maritime, we arrived in Paris. I was 12 years old, and at this moment, I discovered graffiti. I knew I wanted to express myself with art, but I always say with classic art, you need a lot of culture and a lot of information to understand it. Contemporary art is really elitist. It’s not something very easy to access, so I found something more attractive and more spontaneous in graffiti and street art, and I decided to follow this path. I started to paint graffiti at 14 years old, copying what they used to do in New York in the ’80s. At 16, I painted one truck and my mom said I could continue to do graffiti in the street because it’s not a crime. In France, and this is very important, we don’t think badly of material destruction. We also like strikes. It’s one way to speak and to show your frustrations. It doesn’t exist in every country in the world, but in France, if we don’t kill people, if we don’t create victims, if we just destroy material things, we let people express themselves. It’s totally French. I don’t know if it exists in many countries. During the French Revolution, we used to cut off heads, but after, we let people talk and disagree about things. If we don’t kill people, if we just destroy things, it’s part of French liberation. My work is also about this.



Sans Titre (NOTHING REALLY MATTERS...), 2019, digital print on golden aluminum, edition of 50 + 6 ... [+]PHOTO COURTESY OF RERO STUDIO

You write one thing and it's opposite in the same phrase...

I say something, then I cross it out. I put one way of thinking and the opposite way of thinking, and I try to make a composition with a synthesis, with an open conclusion because I always write three dots to open the conversation. So when you read it, sometimes you can read it in a negative way, sometimes you can read it in a positive way. People read it differently and it's very interesting. At the beginning, I was writing my name, and with time, I started to cross out some words to create context. The context is primordial, and to subvert the situation. Normally I try to always interact with objects and contexts that are not supposed to be artworks, like a bicycle or a flag. For example, when Macron, the French President, said that art was not essential, I said that I would use the same weapon as him. I would create this flag in the same manufacture as the French

flag, and instead of the flag flying in the sky, the sky is in the flag. It was the view from my house during lockdown. I decided to put the image I could see from my house, and I wrote “Pas Essentiel” (Not Essential). This question of what is essential for us is a huge question for me.

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Does the fact that you choose to work with letters and words stem from graffiti?

I guess yes because when I used to do graffiti, the only thing I could do was to put letters on the walls. I couldn't express myself in another way. With time, I started to do a small line. I wanted to keep the energy from graffiti, of interacting on the street, so I started to do it in a very simple way because I couldn't do it in another way. I did it after in abandoned places, in nature. I think words also are simple. You don't need to know a lot to impact the world. Normally words are for propaganda for something, but they are not used to ask questions. I think words are a simple way to talk with someone.

Why did you decide to use the Verdana font?

Verdana is really interesting. It's the most common typography in the world. It's not Helvetica or Comic Sans MS. I did the opposite of graffiti artists who try to find their own style, their own identity, and in the end, it became my identity. Using words is also one way to be French. During one residency in Morocco, a collector said that it's a very typical French way of seeing because in the same artwork, you put one idea and the opposite idea, and you try to make a conclusion about what you show. In the United States, it's difficult to accept contradiction. Contradiction is something very attached to the French spirit, and I really have this feeling, the more I work, the more I can centralize and

condense in one spirit. With time, I try to understand why I chose this way and not this one. I think people are touched by my work because it's always something very simple, but to take off all the unnecessary things and to go to the essential is very difficult. It took me 12 years to really concentrate my proposal.



DO NOT CROSS THE LINE at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, 2013

PHOTO COURTESY OF RERO STUDIO

Do you consider yourself to be a political artist?

For me, to be an artist is already like being an activist. It's already political because, for example, if you decide to paint flowers, just the fact of painting flowers is to say no, too much bullshit in the world, too much information. I don't want to be part of it, so I decide my resistance is to do flowers or to work around beauty. For me, I connect with politics and the news because it's the way I live, the way I express myself, so it's very important for me. I say we are like a

stone in a shoe or itching powder. You don't kill people, but you make them uncomfortable. I'm just trying with my work and with this line to talk with people who don't totally agree with me, and art is the only thing I think able to do it because there couldn't be exchange or talk about many subjects, if we don't take the opportunity to use art. But I don't like to say I'm totally political. I don't have one very strong point of view about politics. I just try to find questions, angles to question, but after, I think every piece of art is political, not necessarily mine.