

Behind All Beautiful Things Lies Suffering: A Conversation with Oscar Murillo



Oscar Murillo, 2023. Courtesy the artist © Oscar Murillo. Photo: Tim Bowditch

Oscar Murillo: **Collective Osmosis**

March 14, 2026 – August 9, 2026

DAS MINSK + MUSEUM BARBERINI

By **UTE ÄNNE THON**, April 7th, 2026

Oscar Murillo is known in the art world for his comet-like rise and rebellious streak. The Colombian-born, London-based artist and Turner Prize winner first drew attention in the U.S. in 2012, when mega-collectors Don and Mera Rubell presented his work in their private museum during Art Basel Miami Beach. Prices for his paintings soared—everybody, including Leonardo DiCaprio, wanted one of his raw neo-abstract expressionist canvases. David Zwirner took him under his wing.

For his first solo show at Zwirner’s New York gallery, Murillo didn’t present paintings. Instead, he installed a fully functioning candy factory, serving chocolate-covered marshmallows to an irritated crowd. It was a reference to his working-class background and to his parents, who had worked in such a factory in Colombia. A year later, at the Venice Biennale, his intimidating black canvases prominently covered the entrance of the International Pavilion.

For his large-format abstract paintings, Oscar Murillo has developed a unique process of “mark-making.” He does not use brushes, working instead with a trowel and solid oil sticks. A key moment in the production of his paintings is the use of a long metal stylus, which he pushes energetically over a second raw canvas laid on top of the painting on the floor. Working in zigzags and circular motions, and making use of both positive and negative transfer techniques, the stylus imprints dramatic graphic lines onto the surface. Murillo also works with participatory projects, video, sound, and installation to examine ideas of collectivity and shared culture.



Installation view of Oscar Murillo. *Collective Osmosis*, DAS MINSK: Museum Barberini. Photo: Tim Bowditch



Oscar Murillo: *disrupted frequencies*, 2013–2025. Installation view at DAS MINSK. Photo: Tim Bowditch

He has had major museum exhibitions in New York, Stockholm, Tokyo, Hamburg, Munich, London, and São Paulo. Now Murillo is showing his work in Potsdam, a German town close to Berlin with a dense and layered history. The provincial capital was once the center of the Prussian Empire and later a cradle of Germany's film industry. It was heavily bombed during World War II and became a key site of postwar geopolitics, where Churchill, Truman, and Stalin met to negotiate the division of Germany and the onset of the Cold War. Nearby, the Glienicke Bridge became synonymous with Cold War spy exchanges.

After the fall of the Wall, Potsdam—with its crumbling palaces and lakefront villas—attracted investors. Museum Barberini and DAS MINSK, where Murillo's exhibition takes place, are two relatively new institutions. Both are financed by SAP founder and philanthropist Hasso Plattner. For Museum Barberini, which houses his collection of French Impressionist masters and stages blockbuster exhibitions on Munch, Kandinsky, Picasso, and Van Gogh, Plattner reconstructed a historic palace in the city center. DAS MINSK, focused on contemporary art and East German history, is located in a stylishly refurbished former GDR restaurant from the 1970s.

With his exhibition *Collective Osmosis*, Murillo takes a deep dive into the world and vision of Impressionist master Claude Monet. His hypnotic abstract paintings hang side by side with *Water Lilies* and *Haystacks*. Monet's romantic image of the British Parliament is surrounded by *The Institute of Reconciliation*, a maze of Murillo's signature burned black canvases. A surprising artistic dialogue that infuses impressionist modernism with a post-colonial vibe.

The exhibition also offers insights into Murillo's ongoing participatory projects around the world. Visitors can browse through the *Frequencies* archive and study the marks, doodles, and drawings left by schoolchildren from Argentina, China, Germany, India, Palestine, and the United States on canvas-covered desks. The show also invites visitors to get creative themselves: the museum terrace has been turned into an open studio for "Social Mapping" sessions—Murillo's idea of a playful, universal messaging board.

I toured the exhibition with the artist a day before the opening. We then sat down for a conversation.



Installation view of Oscar Murillo. *Collective Osmosis*, outside DAS MINSK. Photo: Tim Bowditch

UTE ÄNNE THON: Can you tell me a little bit about how this exhibition came about? I understand you knew curator Anna Schneider from an earlier collaboration at Kunsthaus München, and that she approached you with the idea for this show. I also know that you have a special interest in the work and vision of Impressionist painter Claude Monet. As it happens, Museum Barberini has key works by Monet in its collection. Did that spark your interest?

OSCAR MURILLO: I must admit, I didn't know much about Potsdam, its museums, or its history before Anna brought me here. She was really the catalyst for this project. I first came to Berlin in 2006, when I was 20 years old. But a deeper understanding of the historical context—the destruction caused by the Second World War and the postwar developments in Europe—came much later, during a cycling trip.

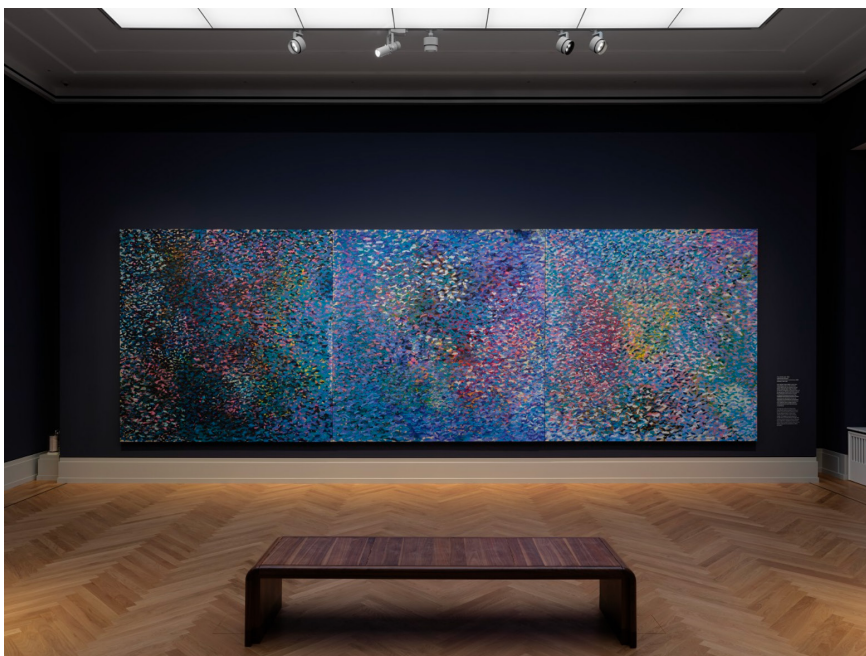
I love riding bicycles, and three years ago I spent a month cycling with a group of friends, starting in Belgium and weaving through France, Germany, Luxembourg, and Switzerland, all the way to Italy. When you travel like that, through the countryside, you start thinking about freedom of movement, about the history of national borders. You also think about agriculture—something I'm very interested in because of my family background. I come from a family of sugarcane plantation workers. I grew up in a rural area in Colombia and experienced the brutality of that system. I'm also familiar with the dynamics between urban and rural life, and how migration to cities can destroy rural communities.

UT: How did you come up with the title *Collective Osmosis*? In science, “osmosis” describes how water particles pass through a semipermeable membrane from a less concentrated solution to a more concentrated one until equilibrium is reached. What does it mean in your artistic context?

OM: For me, *Collective Osmosis* is a metaphor for a certain kind of elasticity. I want to express that the structures shaping our lives—political, economic, geographical—can be dissolved. After all, we are all human; we stand here as one humanity. It's about equality and about the world as a whole.



Installation view of Oscar Murillo. *Collective Osmosis*, DAS MINSK: Museum Barberini. Photo: Tim Bowditch



Oscar Murillo: *Surge (social cataracts)*, 2025. Installation view at Museum Barberini. Photo: Tim Bowditch

It also relates to the opening of the museum—creating permeability between indoor and outdoor spaces, between the museum and the city, between Potsdam and the world. And it touches on the elasticity of history, particularly that of an important artist like Monet—how what he saw and painted more than a hundred years ago can still shape our perception today.

UT: Claude Monet seems to have been on your mind for quite some time. I first saw your paintings referencing his work in 2019, in a gallery show at David Zwirner in London. How did your interest in Monet begin?

OM: I think it started in my youth, when my family emigrated to Great Britain. I already had a love for color and painting, and the museums in London gave me the opportunity to see works by Monet, the Fauves, the Blaue Reiter group—artists with a wild relationship to color. I was fascinated, even though I didn't share much with them biographically.

Much later, Monet returned to my thinking. I became interested in his eye disease—he suffered from cataracts. But that didn't stop him from painting. In fact, during that period he created some of his most beautiful works. I began to see him as an archetype: an artist working through suffering in the twilight of his life, in his garden in Giverny. His impaired vision allowed him to look beyond the surface of things.

So Monet's cataracts became a kind of vessel for thinking about pain and darkness—for finding compassion through suffering. Precisely because of his importance to culture, especially painting, I want to hold him as a bearer. Behind all beautiful things lies suffering. These reflections allowed me to reconnect with virtuosity and beauty in my own work.

UT: Now your Monet-inspired paintings occupy a prime spot at Museum Barberini, a temple of Impressionist painting. The triptych *surge (social cataracts)* hangs in a space usually reserved for Monet's *Water Lilies*. How does that feel?

OM: It's a privilege, of course. But it's also interesting to observe what the paintings do to each other. That large triptych is about the virtuosity of mark-making. It shows how I work intuitively with layers of color and how those colors collide.

The painting is almost like a projection—like looking through a microscope at a fragment of an image. It's unsettling because it flickers; you can't quite focus. There's a sense of movement. Then you turn to Monet's paintings and encounter a different kind of complexity. The scale and texture of my work seem to affect how you perceive his. My marks are so thick—they may unsettle the subtlety of Monet.



Claude Monet: *Nymphéas*, 1914-17



Oscar Murillo, *disrupted frequencies* (United States, Japan, Colombia), 2013–2025. Courtesy of the artist © Oscar Murillo. Photo: Tim Bowditch & Reinis Lismanis

UT: There is another striking intervention. You present three iconic Monet paintings—*Grainstacks*, *Water Lilies*, and *House of Parliament, Sunset*—within an architectural structure made of large black canvases. These works relate to the draped installations you first showed at the Venice Biennale in 2015. What is the intention behind this staging?

OM: It does two things, which I think are important to acknowledge. Monet's *Parliament*, for example, is an incredible work by a revered artist. Normally, you encounter it in a different context—you admire the painterly virtuosity or think about his obsession with that motif. It just happens to be a parliament building, like the grainstacks are just another subject.

But in this new setting, you start asking different questions: Why is this painting here? I'm zooming in on the image itself. After all, it's the British Parliament. For me, that building stands for politics, power, the collapse of political systems, and reflections on democracy. If you consider the colonial history of the UK, the legacy of the Empire, and the decisions made in that building, you realize how much these histories still shape our world today.

UT: Recontextualizing Monet is only one part of the exhibition. There is also a room filled with canvases from your ongoing *Frequencies* project. You invite schoolchildren to draw on canvases covering their desks, which are later collected and archived. What is the idea behind this?

OM: I've been running this mapping project in schools around the world for more than ten years. Over time, the simplicity of canvas and pencil has generated a unique form of poetry—a record of subconscious expression.

For me, it's like downloading data from a collective imagination. By presenting these archives, audiences can observe similarities and differences across cultures and social contexts. Here, you can compare canvases from China, India, Turkey, or Ukraine with those from Potsdam. I'm interested in bringing all these tensions together and allowing people to engage with them at their own pace.



Oscar Murillo: *Frequencies, Germany, 2013-ongoing*. Courtesy of the artist © Oscar Murillo. Photo: Dominique Russell



Oscar Murillo: *Frequencies, Slovenia, 2013-ongoing*. Courtesy of the artist © Oscar Murillo. Photo: Tim Bowditch

UT: You also brought canvases from your *Flooded Garden* project at Tate Modern in 2024, where tens of thousands participated in your “Social Mapping” sessions. Will this continue in Potsdam?

OM: When Anna invited me, there was a desire to create something similar. But the context is very different. Tate is free—it functions almost like a public space. People come in not just for art, but to spend time. That openness is essential; it allows society to take ownership.

That was crucial for *The Flooded Garden*, where we had the capacity to receive 80,000 people. The material you see here carries that energy—a kind of sedimentation of collective participation.

In Potsdam, we want to continue this, but not in a purely performative way. It wouldn't translate directly. Instead, there will be ongoing Social Mapping sessions. We've installed a large canvas outside the museum, from my São Paulo Biennial project. People can approach it at any time, day or night, and leave their marks. **WM**