

INTERIORS

THE MAIN ROOM WITH ITS
1950S VELVET-COVERED CHAIR,
1930S MASSAGE TABLE AND
LOUIS XVI-STYLE DINING-CHAIRS
IN FRONT OF THE GOLD AND
GRISAILLE MURAL OF NYMPHS,
FAUNS AND SATYRS

Photographs by Ricardo Labougle



The artist Ricardo Cinalli is no stranger to what might be termed 'extreme decoration'. His house in Spitalfields, featured in many a decorating magazine in recent decades, boasts a dramatic, double-storey basement studio and frescoes of fragmented torsos in the bathroom, while he has covered the interiors of churches from Brixton to Buenos Aires with murals of massive neoclassical figures. Cinalli is a serious artist who exhibits all round the world, and a major retrospective exhibition of his work took place last year in Buenos Aires. When he is in his native Argentina he lives in this extraordinary art deco flat, a beguiling world where the walls are covered either with his murals of fauns, sphinxes and gauzily clad nymphs cavorting in woodland against a gold-leaf ground, or with fragmented mirrors in

Amusement arcadia

This Buenos Aires flat has become, quite literally, the stuff of myth and legend – all thanks to its owner's playful take on neoclassical decoration.
By **Elsbeth Thompson**

which this fairytale landscape is reflected and re-reflected ad infinitum.

In painting the murals, Cinalli was, he says, responding to the particularities of the building. 'It is a beautiful art deco apartment block that won an award for best building in the city in 1926,' he explains. 'There are many original art deco features and light fittings, particularly in the lobby and entrance hall, which have a lightness and elegance I could not ignore. I wanted to create atmosphere, an image if you like, that would provide a perfect undisturbed passage from the moment you enter the building into the apartment itself.'

This frieze of monochrome figures is the intriguing result. Though convincing enough to illustrate some obscure aspect of mythology, they come entirely from Cinalli's imagination. 'I freed myself to paint something that comes naturally to my mind and heart,' he says, in his precise yet poetically accented English. 'And to me they feel natural, almost as if they have always been here.' He is also at pains to point out that such murals would not be out of place in interiors by Jean-Michel Frank, the French decorator of the 1930s whose work still survives in some important homes in Buenos Aires.

The flat is small, comprising a tiny kitchen, bathroom and bedroom that open off a small black-and-white-tiled hall, and a large living-area with tall



CINALLI MADE THE PATCHWORK MIRRORS IN THE BEDROOM (ABOVE) FROM OLD FOXED PIECES AND USED THE OFFCUTS FOR A STARBURST BEHIND ONE IMPALA'S HEAD. RIGHT: CINALLI'S MASSIVE WHITE BED IS AT THE FAR END OF THE MAIN ROOM. BELOW: HIS PICASSO PASTICHES ARE REFLECTED IN THE MIRROR OF A 19TH-CENTURY WARDROBE IN THE HALL.

'Impalas are mythical creatures. When I saw them abandoned in a shop, I knew they must live here'

windows and pale wood floors. It is this main room that is animated by the mural - which does indeed seem perfectly in keeping with the style and scale of the architecture. One long wall is covered with unbroken mirror, making the already dreamy space swim before your eyes, while others have large panels of what Cinalli calls 'Mondrian mirrors' - patchworks of foxed mirrors butted up against one another to add a further layer of otherworldly ambience. Cinalli sleeps on a throne-like double bed that dominates one end of the room. 'It's



a ridiculous, romantic bed, but practical, too,' he says, indicating the ample storage beneath. The bedroom is given over to guests and the television, and is populated, improbably, by a pair of stuffed impalas, one of which has a halo of fragmented mirror-glass. 'Impalas are mythical creatures,' he declares. 'When I saw them abandoned in a dusty old shop I knew they must live here.' He then, he says, felt obliged to paint the 'strange cubist landscapes' for them, while completing the Picasso-esque portraits that hang in the hall next door.

'What is the point of being an artist if you are not able to transform reality into something beautiful?'

When it came to furnishing the flat, Cinalli took care to choose pieces that would not detract from the graceful presence of the murals. A 1930s massage table, a set of spindly-legged gilt chairs and an old glass dentist's cabinet are suitably eccentric yet understated, while the only concession to comfort (apart from the bed) is the pair of old gold velvet armchairs the colour and texture of a well-loved teddy bear. 'On the whole there is little furniture, and this was a conscious sacrifice where aesthetics win out against comfort,' Cinalli says. 'However, I find that the look of the place gives me a sense of peace and psychological security that is every bit as soothing as physical comfort.'

'After all,' he concludes, stretching his arms wide in a comically resigned gesture, 'what is the point of being an artist if you are not able to create a world where reality is transformed into something hopefully more beautiful? Picasso said, "Reality is ugly," and what all of us are doing, whether artists or not, is trying to make beauty in our own homes, where we need it most. Perhaps artists just do it a little differently from other people.' ●

'Living in Argentina' (Taschen, £16.99), by Ricardo Labougle, is available from Telegraph Books (0844 871 1515; books.telegraph.co.uk) at £14.99 plus £1.25 p&p



A GLIMPSE OF THE WORKADAY KITCHEN (ABOVE) FROM THE DREAMY ARCADIA OF THE MAIN ROOM (RIGHT) BELOW A DENTIST'S STORAGE CABINET HOUSES TOWELS, CORALS AND RELIGIOUS STATUARY

