



The Many Layers of Esly Escobar



Esly Escobar, a native of Guatemala, has brought original music and art to the South Fork, both individually as a creator and as a member of the LTV Studios crew.

By Christine Sampson

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If you've ever seen a smartly dressed millennial sporting a "New York Artel" hat, then you were viewing the design work of Esly Escobar. If you've ever vibed along with a sweet D.J.'d set at Rosie's in Amagansett on a Saturday night, chances are good you were hearing the vinyl stylings of Esly Escobar.

And if you saw the hard-to-forget, large-scale sculpture made from some 10,000 tennis balls (and other sports equipment) in the Parrish Art Museum's 2018 Road Show, then you were definitely looking at his artwork and social commentary.

The list of creative achievements goes on for Mr. Escobar, a Guatemala-born multimedia artist, D.J. and music producer, fashion designer, and LTV Studios technician who lives in Westhampton Beach.

For him, art is "both a process and a vehicle," he said in an interview. "We all got our troubles — I definitely got some demons I fight with every single day — but the only way to fight them is to work, to do these things."

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To understand Mr. Escobar's aspirations, one can look at the career of Virgil Abloh, the Ghanaian-American fashion designer, artist, architect, and D.J. who was the artistic director for Louis Vuitton's menswear line from 2018 up to his death in 2021. "He was designing stuff that I would wear, and he was also a D.J.," Mr. Escobar said. "I loved that. He'd go from designing — then boom, he'd play at packed places. I think he has inspired me a lot — I followed his career until he passed away."

Mr. Escobar is also an admirer of Jackson Pollock, the artist to whom his large-scale paintings have drawn frequent comparison.

"When I did my first show, all I heard was 'Jackson Pollock.' I didn't know who he was," he said. Having arrived from Guatemala in 1994 not knowing much English, let alone any American art history, Mr. Escobar said, "I went to his studio in Springs in 2017. When I walked into his studio, it was my studio. I didn't even know what to think. If you would have walked into my studio at that moment, you would have seen the same place."

He was angry at himself. Seeing the similarities "made me go crazy. I was going to go home and burn all my paintings because I thought I had come up with a new style, a crazy new thing, and I didn't. He was doing that in the 1950s."

Once he began studying Pollock in depth, Mr. Escobar said, he finally understood there was room for more than one artist in the abstract world. The technique was similar, "however, the work is totally different," he said. "From there I've grown as a painter, and I do things that are my own style." Before there was visual art in his life, there was music — a love since his first-ever job, a shelf-stocking gig at a nursery and flower shop when he was 13, allowed him to buy a pair of turntables and a few records.

"I've been collecting vinyl since," Mr. Escobar said. "After I got the turntables, I would come home from school and be on them playing music. Next thing you know I'm 17, 18, and I'm D.J.ing at Flying Point in Southampton. . . . Then I started getting bored of playing somebody else's music, so I wanted to learn how to make my own."

That led him first to Suffolk Community College and later to the Institute of Audio Research in New York City, from which he graduated in 2005. It was a meaningful experience that put him on his current trajectory.

"I met a few people there who later on in life brought me to places and projects," he said.



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One of those people was Dame Dash, who in 1994 was a co-founder, with Jay-Z and Kareem Burke, of the Roc-A-Fella record label and later on the Rocawear fashion brand.

“Dame is an incredible person and I appreciate him to the fullest,” Mr. Escobar said. “He opened up the door of his building to me and my brother to work out of for a year, kind of like an incubator. There was so much stuff going on there — a lot of what’s happening now came from there.”

Asked about his other musical influences, Mr. Escobar pulled out his iPhone and scrolled through his playlist: Rufus Du Sol, an Australian group known for its electronic dance music; the Smashing Pumpkins’ 1996 hit titled “1979”; Selena, of course, because you can’t be a Latino of a certain age without adoring the Queen of Tejano Music, and Outkast.

He is now writing hip-hop with lyrics in Spanish, his first language. “My music comes to me in Spanish. I try to make it in English, but I can’t,” he said. “It just doesn’t happen.”

With his brother Alexander, Mr. Escobar produced a series of 80 original videos under their “Control Creativo” initiative. The working title of his latest music project is “Special and Spatial,” a nod to his 2001 graduation from the special education program at Hampton Bays High School, mixed with the “head in the clouds” mentality he sometimes has going on.

He is planning another one of his educational trips back to Guatemala in February, when he will visit elementary schools to deliver donations of art supplies and give lessons to the students. He also has helped OLA’s Youth Connect.

“It all comes down to the kids because they are the future,” he said. “Whatever little spark that I’m throwing in there, hopefully it works. Maybe they’ll say we can do it here at home, build and do these things, and look out for each other and the community.”

While his first love was music, it’s art that has sustained Mr. Escobar, an up-and-comer in the South Fork arts community.

“Something I disliked about music is it has to go through different hands to get it done. You need a recording engineer, a mixing engineer, a mastering engineer. It’s too much,” he said. “When I found painting, the beautiful thing is that I have control of it. I start when I want to, and I finish when I want to. And it is like music — throw down red, that’s a drum kick. Yellow is a little bass. Green is like a saxophone. They’re all instruments, really.”