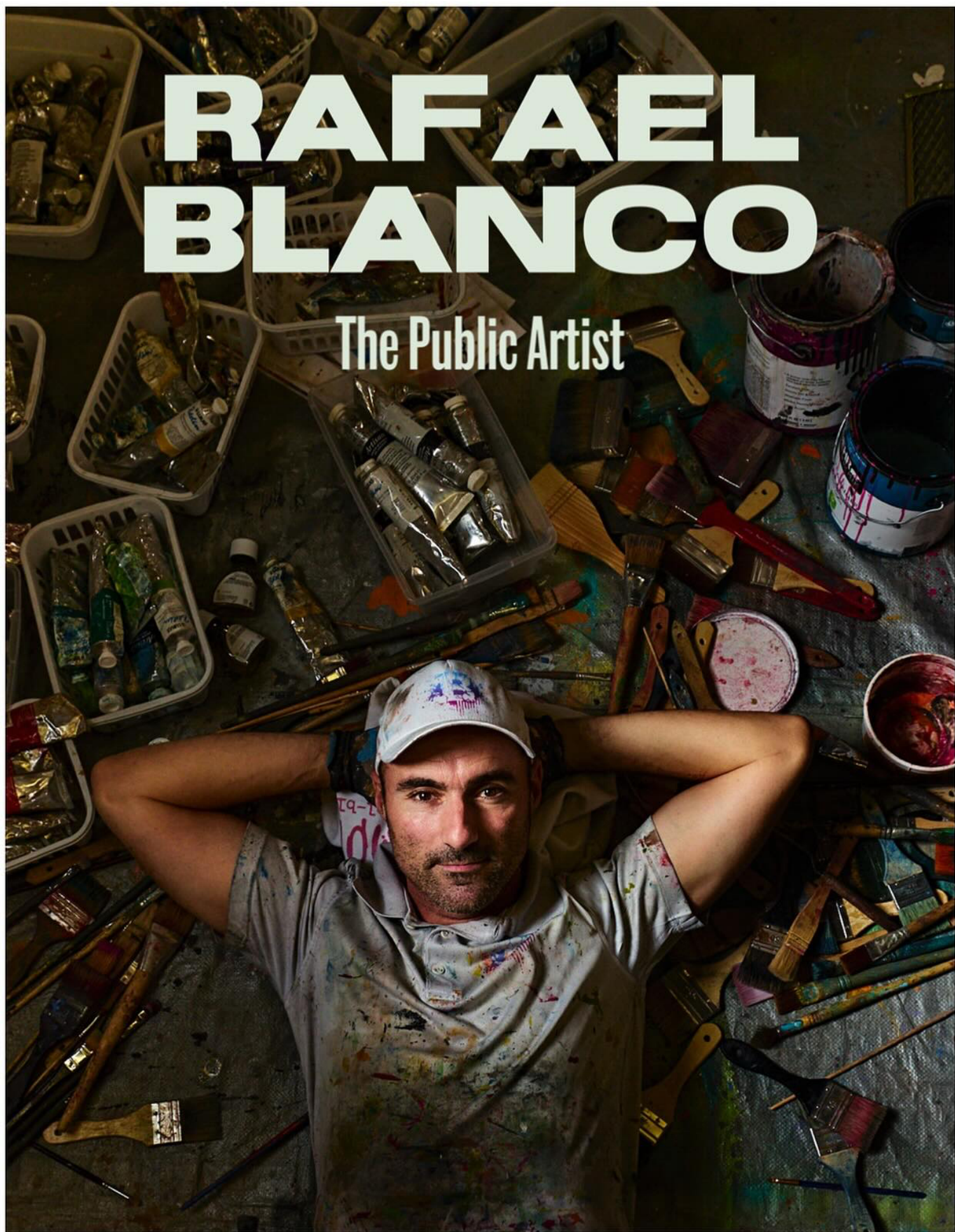


RAFAEL BLANCO

The Public Artist





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Muralist Rafael Blanco embraces his studio roots for an Elmhurst exhibition.

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Contemporary art can occasionally be off-putting, a matrix of inscrutable isms and impenetrable jargon. But if there's one genre that's not for members only, it's the public mural. And for Rafael Blanco, taking it to the streets has been a career-changing experience. It began a decade ago when, as a student at the University of Nevada, he was invited to participate in a 24-hour mural-painting marathon. "I felt terrified," he recalls. "Hundreds of people were passing by, watching every brushstroke, every mistake." But little by little, Blanco got more comfortable painting while on view. "Since then, I've become fascinated with the possibilities of public art."

The Aurora-based Blanco, who was raised in Madrid, has executed murals across the country, from California to Colorado, Texas to downstate Illinois, where he worked on two towering walls of an Urbana apartment complex near the University of Illinois. After he finished that project, he received an email from a woman who said her 96-year-old grandmother had made her drive around the block four times to see the mural again and again. "Something that was created to impact students ended up impacting the whole community."

The artist's past practice as a studio painter and his current focus as a muralist converge in *Rafael Blanco: Reflecting on a Decade of Public Art* at the Elmhurst Art Museum. You'll see him blending street art with classical studio techniques. "My purpose is to visually impact, confront, and surprise the museum visitors," he says. Style, theme, and composition vary dramatically in his body of work. "It may be difficult to perceive that it was made by the same artist," he says. So what's the common thread? "Humanity."

Rafael Blanco: Reflecting on a Decade of Public Art is at the Elmhurst Art Museum through January 5.

