A RINGSIDE SEAT AT THE CIRCUS

# MARIO AYALA

When I finally meet Mario Ayala in his studio, after rescheduling three times due to his insanely busy studio schedule, he is in the final stretch of making works for Hammer's *Made in LA* biennial. The biennial, which typically opens in June and runs through the summer, is one of many major exhibitions to be thwarted by the unforeseen circumstances of COVID19. Now due to open in the fall of 2020, the prestigious biennial offers a glimpse into the myriad emerging practices of Los Angeles-based artists. Being selected out of only thirty artists to showcase, it is a huge honor. "I almost forgot I was in the show since the conversation began so long ago." On the delay: "It typically takes me a long time to make something so I wasn't bothered that COVID added to the situation—I always like the extra time to work." Ayala will exhibit five paintings in this year's edition, organized by independent curators Myriam Ben-Salah and Lauren Mackler, with Hammer's Ikechukwu Onyewuenyi as assistant curator of performance.

Ayala (b.1991) is a well-regarded member of LA's ever-evolving arts community. After memorable solo and two-person exhibitions at iconic downtown galleries SADE and Club Pro, in addition to a smattering of group exhibitions, Ayala's inclusion in the biennial will be a departure from exhibiting in younger emerging spaces and his first in a museum. "The show that Alberto Cuadros gave me at SADE was definitely a turning point. I'd never had a solo show until then. He was like, 'Dude, you want a show?' It was that simple, but he changed a lot for me." Unlike the quiet asylum of a museum, the show was a tribute to the freedom that independent galleries can offer to young artists. The paintings were exhibited past a wire fence installation with frayed edges that needed to be walked through to enter the room, where airbrushed barbecue sculptures sat atop backyard sod. The space was entirely transformed to appear as the worlds alluded to in Ayala's paintings, a meta-environment in which artworks are not typically shown. When I asked how he came to make the BBQ sculptures, Ayala tells me, "I don't think I'd ever seen a low-rider BBQ, so I made one."

Ayala's work is heavily imbued with Latinx iconography—imagery that is often omitted from the art historical narrative. The references, which range from Catholic iconography, tattoo graphics, *Teen Angel* magazine, and images found to inspire haircuts at the local barbershop, function as entry points to his viewers. The notion of access is vital to Ayala, who shirks the gate-keeping 'blue chip' gallery system and has preferred to focus on studio time and his community. Using familiar references, his paintings, which are composed through labored Photoshop sketches, are initially familiar, then utterly surreal; recognizable yet illusory. The works function as

TEXT BY KATE ERINGER
PORTRAIT BY ROMAN KOVAL

an assemblage of the visual flotsam and jetsam of the cityscape, where one is at once welcomed into the frame and pushed out by impossible, fourth-wall-shattering inclusions: a set of gloved hands emerging from the corner, distorted perspectives, and even watermarks typical of photo licensing agencies. Even the characters in his paintings are a surrealist remix of contemporary culture: half human, half Rottweilers with hoop earrings, a disembodied, tattooed foot paying for a parking meter, or a crash test dummy with biohazard warnings.

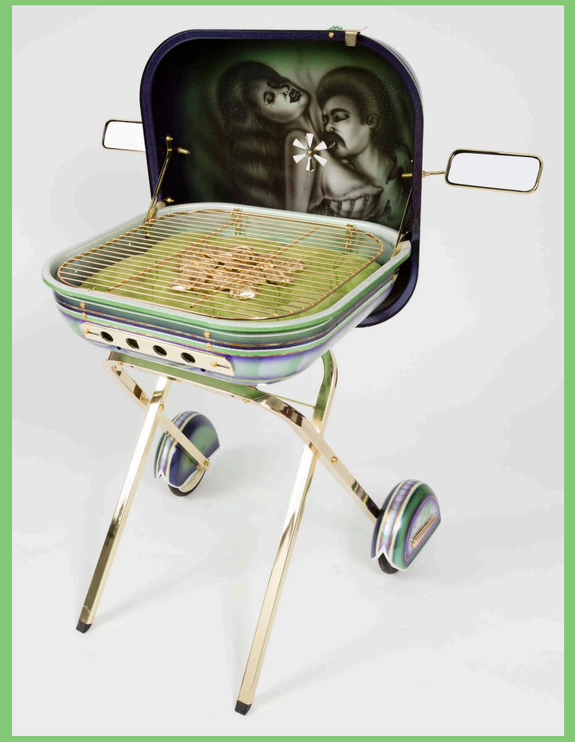
The artist's hometown of Los Angeles and its immediate environs is an integral character in Ayala's work. He grew up mostly in Fontana, a San Bernardino suburb in the Inland Empire, which urban theorist Mike Davis has called the "junkyard of dreams" with its inundation of invasive advertising plastered across billboards and buildings. After attending San Francisco Art Institute, he returned to Los Angeles and began working with airbrushing as a medium, engaging in the Latinx vernacular, and entered into a dialogue with car culture, something he had been exposed to and interested in since childhood via his dad (the only source of inspiration he cites in our interview), a truck driver, who passed down his appreciation for cars.

The transition from graffiti to painting is a natural one, although the modes and mediums may seem at odds with one another. But for Ayala, it works. "I always had friends that wanted to write on things," he says of the prevalence of graffiti culture in his community. "I think being young and interested in skateboarding and painting—the two sort of went hand in hand."

Ayala's participation in Los Angeles's vibrant artist community, as well as his keen awareness and respect for his peers, is one of the things that sets him apart. Last year, he organized a group exhibition at In Lieu, which included Alfonso Gonzalez, Adam Alessi, Jan Gatewood, Alake Shilling, Henry Fey, Nathan Harris and Dee Alvarado. Each of these up-and-comers are early on in their careers, but in the year since participating in Mario's exhibition, they have made huge strides. For example, Adam Alessi's recent solo exhibition at Echo Park gallery Smart Objects, Jan Gatewood's participation in a group exhibition at Real Pain Fine Arts, Dee Alvarado in exhibitions at The Pit, and Alake Shilling who has since shown with The Gallery @, Jeffrey Deitch's booth at Frieze Los Angeles, and has recently collaborated on a campaign with Marc Jacobs.

Ayala has also dabbled in the fashion world, joining forces with the quintessential drop-culture streetwear brand, Supreme. The union was unsurprising in its synchronicity, especially when considering the relationship of advertising to the artist's work. Perhaps unintentionally, his attention to street signs and imagery found in the capitalist empire of the city, have undeniable affiliation with the machine of consumerism. It almost feels like a conceptual extension of the artwork. "My homie Leo Fitzpatrick who works with Supreme hit me up and asked me one day if I'd be into making some parts of my painting into a graphic and I said sure." Leo Fitzpatrick, actor and co-director of Marlborough Gallery, was recommended to visit Ayala's studio by a friend several years ago. "We just really hit it off," Fitzpatrick tells me. "We've talked about doing an art show for probably two years and still will one day!"

When they [Supreme] asked for Fitzpatrick's suggestion he could only think of Ayala, "I'll sing Mario's praises to anyone who will listen." With skateboarding ties going back to his *Kids* days—when he played the virgin deflowering misfit, Telly, in Larry Clark's iconic 1995 film—his friends at Supreme immediately wanted to see more. "Everybody knows [Ayala's] Instagram, but that doesn't give you the full story." On top of being immensely talented and hardworking, we agree that Mario is a good person. "I don't believe in much, but I believe in karma. And there's a lot of good karma for Mario! I'm still fantasizing about the art show we will do down the road. There's no big story, I'm just a really big fan."



Not dissimilar to the solo exhibition arranged with Alberto Cuadros, Ayala does not seem to rush or force connections with people. Instead, he allows things to happen organically, which is another ode to his ride or die ethos. "It feels cool. I owe a lot to skateboarding. It was an early access point for me to engage with art, so it feels like a full circle." A full circle seems right for Mario, an artist who is continually humble, always looking to pay credit where credit is due, and is constantly using his platform to engage with other artists. When we talk about success, he tells me simply, "If I can stoke out a kid that was sort of like me when I was younger, then I guess that would be it."

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THIS PAGE: *Clover*, 2017. Customized barbecue, chrome aluminum, automotive candy paint, flake, variegated gold leaf, diamond tuck, roll pillow, airbrush (20 × 20 × 36 inches / 50.8 × 50.8 × 91.4 cm) courtesy the artist and Ever Gold [Projects] OPPOSITE PAGE: *Sign Language*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas (64 × 48 inches / 162.5 × 121.9 cm) courtesy the artist and Stems Gallery.