

NEW AMERICAN PAINTING

Written by Jeffrey Deitch, May 2021

On a tour of the San Francisco Art Institute during his last year of high school, Mario Ayala encountered one of Henry Gundersen's paintings hanging in the courtyard. Before having even entered the main building, he decided that if this was the type of painting being made at SFAI, then that was where he would go to art school. Henry's painting was actually not at all typical of what was being taught at the school, but both Henry and Mario were able to take what they needed from the curriculum and find their own path. In fact, they did not meet in a classroom; Henry was a year ahead of Mario, and they connected through a shared enthusiasm for skateboarding. They came from different backgrounds, but they had a lot in common.

Mario now lives in Los Angeles, and Henry in Brooklyn, New York, but both consider themselves to be California artists. Mario was born in Bellflower, just east of Compton, spent his early years in Inglewood, then moved with

his family to Fontana, a trucking hub in the Inland Empire. Mario would take the red line into Los Angeles to explore the city. Henry grew up in Larkspur in Marin County, and would take the ferry or the bus into San Francisco to skateboard. Mario and Henry grew up steeped in California car culture, visiting car shows and auto races with their fathers, who were both interested in car customization.

Mario's father, who emigrated from Cuba to Inglewood in the 1980s, is a car and motorcycle enthusiast who developed a passion for classic cars and low riders. Mario would often accompany him to mechanic shops and truck stops and ride along with him while he was trucking. Henry's grandfather was a truck driver like Mario's dad, and his father, an aircraft mechanic, would take him to the maintenance facility at SFO where they repaired jet engines.

As a teenager, Henry absorbed the homegrown aesthetic of the San Francisco Mission School. Mario was a devoted follower of the cult underground zine *Teen Angels*. Both artists are inspired by vernacular culture and fuse old-

school crafts like sign painting and car customization with fine art traditions.

The artistic influences they found in San Francisco's skate and graffiti subcultures shaped their work as much as their experience in the classroom. They gravitated to the community of local skaters and graffiti writers. It was past the prime years of the Mission School, but its presence was still strong. Both showed their work at the legendary Fecal Face gallery and at the Luggage Store.

I first met Henry in New York through artist Jamian Juliano-Villani, who had worked with him in the studio of Erik Parker. Jamian shared her enthusiasm for Henry's work and, at her suggestion, I visited an exhibition of Henry's paintings on the Lower East Side. I bought a conceptual rendering of the numbers 1 through 10, which reflected Henry's interest in traditional sign painting. It still hangs in my office. I became especially intrigued by one of Henry's artistic projects, the Water McBeer Gallery. When advertised online, as almost every exhibition is these days, the works in the gallery appear to be full scale. When a collector

would rush to buy a trophy painting by one of the hot artists in the show, they would find a tiny model of a gallery with real works of art in miniature scale. I invited Henry to present a Water McBeer exhibition in my own gallery, and he proposed to show Water's private collection in his "townhouse," which would feature miniature works by all of his favorite artists. It is in one of the rooms of this dollhouse-scale "townhouse" that I first saw the work of Mario Ayala. Henry presented his first Water McBeer gallery while he was still at SFAI, the name chosen as a mocking reference to the Walter McBean galleries where students would show their work at the institute.

Henry shared an interesting anecdote about his interview with Erik Parker for a studio assistant position. Looking at Henry's work, Erik asked, "do you skate?" Henry said, "Yes." That was enough for Erik who told Henry to report to work Monday morning. Erik's work is sometimes seen as part of the lineage of Bay Area funk art. Peter Saul lived in Mill Valley, the neighboring town to Larkspur. In working with Erik, Henry felt that he had come full circle,

embracing his Northern California artistic heritage while working in a New York studio.

I got to know Mario in Los Angeles during the preparation for the *Shattered Glass* group exhibition, which was curated by Melahn Frierson and A.J. Girard at my Los Angeles gallery. The first impression of my visit to Mario's Boyle Heights studio was his 1974 Monte Carlo parked outside the loading dock, looking like it could take off to outer space. Inside the studio, the mood was set by the continuous bebop jazz soundtrack. It was clear that his studio was a place of intense work with a drawing table for studies, a compressor for his airbrush, and several paintings in progress showing his meticulous process. I became enthralled with a painting of the tailgate and cab of a pickup truck, a remarkable fusion of Mexican-American car customization with Pop Art. We included the painting in *Shattered Glass*, paired with a similar work representing the pickup trucks driven by Mario and his father.

An astute gallery visitor, standing in front of Mario's paintings with me, remarked that the

works reminded him of the artist who painted "those large sneakers." "You mean Henry Gunderson?" I asked. "Yes, that's the artist," he replied. "Uncanny," I exclaimed, telling him that I was about to write a text on an upcoming joint exhibition of Ayala and Gunderson. He had been able to see the subtle connection between the two artists.

What do Mario and Henry have in common besides their shared experience at SFAI, their participation in the local skateboarding and graffiti scene, and their shared interest in car culture? Both incorporate industrial painting techniques like airbrush and stenciling into their fine art practice. Both explore subject matter that is uniquely American. They expand the terrain of Pop Art into a discourse with the subcultures that generate mainstream culture. The work is exuberant, but there is also an undercurrent of darkness. The work depicts strangeness and the surreal quality of much of the contemporary American experience.

Mario and Henry are proud of their paintings' working-class sensibility. They are both serious students of art history, and their works are

infused with art historical references, but it is essential for them that their work remains accessible. They hope that automobile mechanics as well as art connoisseurs will be able to engage with the imagery.

“Cool school mixed with Mission School” is how Mario characterizes his work. He fuses Southern and Northern California aesthetics. His approach, which has parallels in Henry’s work, connects the hard-edge finish fetish of Cool School artists like Billy Al Bengston with the vernacular craft influences of the Mission School. He incorporates Ed Ruscha’s interest in billboards and signage. Mario sees a direct lineage from the Ferus Gallery artists to his own work.

Los Angeles Mexican-American painting is also an important precedent for Mario. He cites Mr. Cartoon in particular as an access point, bringing a more hard-edge aesthetic into the discourse with the expressionistic brushwork of Los Four, who were also an essential influence.

Diego Rivera’s celebrated mural, *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City* (1931)

remains installed just around the corner from where Henry's painting was hanging during Mario's first visit to SFAI. The mural made a lasting impression on both artists. Mario remains fascinated by the work's subject, a mural about the making of a mural, an illusionistic play on the construction of a painting. Its industrial aesthetic relates to his own work. He is incorporating elements of the Rivera mural in one of his paintings for this exhibition.

Henry remembers "having his mind blown" when he first saw a James Rosenquist painting at the old San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Rosenquist's collage concept of image-making is a major inspiration for both Henry and Mario. Both of them draw on advertising imagery and its visual strategies. They create juxtapositions and mash-ups of familiar objects, offering a contemporary California version of Pop Surrealism.

Both Mario and Henry use a combination of industrial and fine art techniques in the construction of their paintings. Both collect images from the Internet and other sources and

build their paintings from these found images. Henry uses a projector, some Photoshop, and sometimes airbrush. He has created his own mix of techniques. Mario begins his composition on the computer, using Photoshop to help create his sketches. He masks his paintings with digitally cut-out vinyl stencils, a technique usually used for stickers and automobile graphics. After art school, Mario took an automobile painting class at the Los Angeles Trade-Technical College. The combination of industrial applications and a practiced artist's hand gives his work a unique sensibility.

The work of both artists demands hours of focused, solitary effort, but both are also deeply engaged with their artist communities. Henry, through his Water McBeer projects, is in regular dialogue with his artistic circle. Mario and six of his artists friends divide the ground floor of an industrial building and are in constant conversation. They are not working in isolation but are part of something larger.

Henry and Mario have created new paintings for this exhibition. Henry's works reflect the challenging year of the pandemic and the

contested election. His painting of a medical dummy surrounded by hospital paraphernalia is an unsettling portrayal of the pandemic experience. It depicts the sense of unreality and uncertainty around the COVID crisis. It represents the mood of the past year more effectively than a more realistic rendering of a patient in a hospital bed. His painting of a scrum of broadcasters' microphones reminds us of the year's cacophony of media scrambling to cover current events. There are no people in the image, only microphones taking on a life of their own.

Mario has spent months creating *The Reunion*, an ambitious painting for this exhibition that reflects his experience as an art student in San Francisco, his art historical and pop culture influences, and his engagement with the present. The structure of the work mirrors the Diego Rivera mural at SFAI that remains a foundational inspiration. He flattened the mural's architectural setting and incorporated graphic and representational images from his own trove of personal cultural references. As he developed the composition, he began to see the echo of an old master painting that continues to

resonate with him: a late Medieval – early Renaissance altarpiece by Bonaventura Berlinghieri depicting Saint Francis. Mario sees his own compositional structure as part of a lineage that runs from this 1235 altarpiece through to Rivera’s famous 1931 mural. It is not only these landmarks of art history that inform his composition. He also references the cover and page layout of magazines like *Lowrider* that helped to shape his aesthetic. The painting is a complex self-portrait portraying the artist degenerating into a cockroach, surrounded by an array of his artistic influences.

With their fusion of fine art and industrial techniques and their inspired mix of art historical and pop culture subject matter, Mario and Henry are defining a new artistic approach. It combines Cool School and Mission School, funk and finish, Latin and Anglo. It is both Pop and Conceptual, high and low. This is the New American Painting.