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Finding the 'Crossroads' at Portrait Society

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MAY 9, 2023

As the title of the exhibition announces, “Cruces|Crossroads” (at Portrait Society Gallery of Contemporary Art through May 13) places us on the verge of several intersections: of two unique artists crossing paths in a single exhibition space, of their lived experiences, and of the artistic histories their work explores. The art of Herman Aguirre Martinez and Rafael Francisco Salas, both of Spanish-American heritage, offer unique visions that pay homage to everything from memorials to victims of inner-city violence in Martinez’s case, to rural Americana and agrarian labor in Salas’s work. The traffic at the crossroads of these unique points-of-view produces more than a few extraordinary pileups.



Herman Aguirre Martinez, ‘Cobija’, 2019. Oil and oil skins on canvas.

The exhibition features 13 of Salas’s earthy, umbery oil paintings and nine of Martinez’s highly impastoed, colorful mixed media wall reliefs. The pairing is casual, with either artist’s work owning its own space and connecting only indirectly across neutral ground. The one brilliant exception is the side-by-side placement of Martinez’s, *Bandera Roja*, and Salas’s *Trellis with Fading Flowers* on the south wall of the main gallery. It’s a spectacular formal moment that is almost lost in their seemingly initial obedience. *Bandera* is a thick and knotty object with accumulated paint and paint skins depicting a foregrounded pictorial space. The red relief of a bandana projects from the left against its green organic stage (a mossy tree, perhaps) and insists on three-dimensions and a very urgent reference to an actual moment in the mortal coil. Salas’s *Trellis* on the other hand, despite all the namable content, feels drawn from a world without objective x and y and z coordinates; of memory, of painting, and finally, of nostalgia itself.



Rafael Francisco Salas, ‘Prize Cake’, 2022. Oil on canvas.

Mental Ghosts, Dreamy Connections

This is not to say that Martinez’s work is totally objective, but that it evokes impressions of street memorials and dedications to specific fallen individuals, in specific places, where Francisco Salas’s imagery feels like a composite of so many mental ghosts. The lattice in Salas’ piece also happens to work as a clever painting conceit, recalling utopian and geometric abstraction and its remove from the world of carbon and organic life. Both works offer trenchant commentary about the softness of memory and the unfortunate hardness of the things that generate them.

The relationship between Salas's dreamy connection to pictorial space and Martinez's memorials charge the exhibition like opposite ends of a battery. Salas's *Ring* is an impressive painting featuring arrangements of candy-colored pennants staked up in a grove of stylized pine trees at deep dusk. Even the candy chroma fades in the gloaming, and it all dissolves like memory or a waking dream. Martinez's *Herida* by contrast projects cold, crisp, full-color existence out into the world of the viewer. Multicolored ribbons affixed to a fence offer a very different point-of-view on the colored fabric array. These swatches of striped cloth reflect the particular chaos, fragmentation, and arbitrariness of loss. The specificity of the scene is punctuated by a hatchback car in front of a distant garage, seen through a gap where one of the fence slats is missing. The scene is sharp and biting precise; there's no Vaseline on Martinez's lens.

The show contains many of these moments of poetic contrast and charged interplay. It's a well paired exhibition that doesn't require forced collisions, only intersections full of moving stories that produce natural impacts. I left the gallery thinking finally about one more strange crossroads, the crossroads of color. Not a color *wheel* but a conceptual junction. Color-as-heritage, color-as-control, color-as-order, color-as-logic, and finally color-as-element in formal painting. I'm still standing at that intersection, incidentally, and a lot of stuff is whirring through my mind.



Herman Aguirre Martinez, 'Maroon', 2020.
Oil and oil/acrylic skins on panel.