



Daily Artefacts



Sayre Gomez

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Interview by MARTIN ONUFROWICZ. Photography by SAM RAMIREZ



Sayre Gomez's practice is deeply rooted in his home base of Los Angeles. Living in the California metropolis for over the past 15 years, the Chicago-born painter and sculptor is drawn to the darker aspects of the city, from the ever-present ethos of greed still going strong since the times of Ronald Reagan and the growing wealth inequality amongst its residents to the unsettling feeling of déjà vu caused by its formulaic architecture. Gomez explores these subjects in works that are artefacts of his daily routine - painting facades that he passes by on his commute, creating models of abandoned houses left in bureaucratic limbo and depicting haunting landscapes of the city on fire. As he prepares for his largest show to date at Xavier Hufkens' St-Georges space in Brussels (opening at the beginning of next year), the artist speaks to us about using the city as a backdrop, his interest in painting temporality and thriving under routine.

The urban landscape of your home, Los Angeles, is the setting for most of your works. What is your relationship with the city?

I moved here right after college and I think that plays a big part in how I see this place. I'm from Chicago, and for people from the East Coast, LA has this "Wild West" quality to it. It's a weird place but I'm pretty fascinated with it. There are just so many contradictions here happening all at once.

What are some of these contradictions that make it a compelling backdrop for the themes that you're exploring in your practice?

It's interesting that you call it a backdrop because I'm quite fascinated by that even as a concept. LA is probably one of the most photographed cities ever - it's in the background of so many commercials that you see playing on TV globally. If you look at almost any car commercial, it's usually shot in LA. It's a very malleable city. If you're going for the gritty urban-core of New York or Boston, you can do that, but then you also have the beaches of Malibu or the mountains if you go more inland. So it's very transformable in terms of representation and super interesting on a superficial level. Then, it has all this history and at its core, it still has that old West kind of feeling when it comes to politics. Ronald Reagan was based here and I think that the lineage of that sort of ethos [that he represented] is still pretty pervasive here. The distribution of wealth is not equal in any way. The society here is very bifurcated and there's not much room for a middle ground - it feels quite extreme. And you know, since I have been living here, the homeless situation has skyrocketed. So that adds a whole other layer of catastrophe on top of the already very complex ecosystem of this city.

That side of LA tends to be often omitted from the city's representation, but it's quite prevalent in your work.

Yeah. My work is very much an artefact of my daily routine. I've had this studio in Boyle Heights since 2008 so I have been here for a very long time. And so, what has been influencing me greatly is that commute and having to see the same sort of landscape for so many years. It forces you to pay more attention to things you maybe would not necessarily notice unless you were driving past it for the last 15 years. For example, there's this building [around here] that has this ledge with a number of different figurines from various horror movies that I'm currently depicting in one of my paintings. Or these advertisement vinyl printouts that they put in the dollar store that's nearby - when I first moved into the studio, I noticed them and thought that I should paint them, but for whatever reason, I never did. And then sometime last year, I was driving by and noticed that the vinyl had faded in the sun and was crackling apart. And I was like, "Oh, now they're even more interesting." So I made a series of paintings based on them, and then maybe a month ago, they got rid of the whole thing. So now it's all gone. And for me, it's really interesting to paint these little moments that are really temporal. Things don't last, especially around here - there's a lot of change happening. On top of that, I feel like facades play such a big part in our experience of navigating the city.

What do these facades signify to you?

All the slogans and branding [that I paint] relate to this abrasive culture where we're constantly bombarded with stuff. And that speaks a lot to what I'm trying to unpack - I think a lot about formatting. The architecture here is very formulaic. Everything gets kind of reduced to doppelgangers in a way, everything is a stand-in for another thing. For example, with strip malls, it feels like you could pick them out from a catalogue: do you want the kind where you drive in and all the shops are in one strip or do you want two shops flanking on the right and two on the left? There's not that much variety and probably 90% of the structures here are strip malls. And so I think that really speaks to the experience of living here and the uncanniness of feeling this déjà vu of, "Oh, I think I've been here before."

Would you say then that you're magnifying in your work this eerie quality to this repetition and déjà vu that you're coming across every day?

Yeah, you could say magnifying or focusing on it. I mean, that's the thing that's the hardest to describe or picture, and for me, that's one of the things that I'm most interested in doing - looking at things that are less pinpointable. You know it when you see it but it would be hard to put it into a textbook definition.

Earlier in our conversation, you said that your pieces are the artefacts of your daily routine. As a creative, how important is it for you to have a set routine that you stick to?

It's really important. I have been working in that way even since before becoming a dad. It's so funny because until I adopted this sort of "square" approach to making art, it was really hard for me to stay on top of it. In my twenties and early thirties, I was out a lot and partying a lot. And it was fun, but my work wasn't focused. For me, the actual process of making the pieces is the bread and butter of my practice, rather than the social aspect of being an artist. Since I was a really little kid, I've always been into drawing and painting, so that has naturally remained the primary focus of my work. Everything I make is laborious - it requires a lot of attention to detail and actual physical work. And you can't do that as much when you're out all the time.

Sayre Gomez is represented by Xavier Hufkens Gallery

His upcoming solo exhibition will be on view from January 12th to March 2nd, 2024 at the gallery's St-Georges location









