



Sayre Gomez *Friday Night* 2021, acrylic on canvas, 2134 × 3048mm, collection Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney (purchased with funds provided by Alberto Fis, 2021). Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

Live Voltage

In the latest of his 'longer looks' at individual artworks, Justin Paton surveys a Los Angeles streetscape where dream and dysfunction collide.

Lightning crackles through a purple sky. The satellite dishes listen for signals. A 'Speedzone' sign starts to glow in the dusk. A few backlit trees wait beyond the hoarding.

Meanwhile, straight ahead of us, looms the form of an aged RV—an icon of American mobility that has come to a profound stop. This is Los Angeles, the mythologised site of a westward push across the American continent. And this vehicle points left, as if recalling those pioneer dreams of upping stakes and striking out.

But the hint of older journeys just drives home the fact: this wagon is going nowhere. The sign may say 'Speedzone' but the house on wheels looks marooned beneath its own metal weight. The dog on the roof—sentinel and figurehead—looks not forward but intently backwards, towards something beyond the picture's edge that's catching up with this (im)mobile home.

I suspect painter Sayre Gomez sees that rooftop watcher as a strangely kindred spirit. For Gomez too is an alert and expectant looker at the streetscapes of LA—a Chicago-born painter who views his adopted city with a weird, stricken avidity. Though it looks 'realistic', his *Friday Night* (2021) is a collage of glimpses and details that Gomez collects while driving—an ambivalent tribute to a place that can feel at once unreal and too real.

The closer you look, the more the painting thrums with ominous energy. The lightning that sizzles through the swelling sky appears to strike the luggage piled on the vehicle. Indeed, it looks like the vehicle itself is discharging this voltage skyward. And its many blind windows heighten the feeling of secrets held, psycho-social pressure. Someone lives here; the dog and the bike echo imagery of family road trips. But there's no seeing in—no openings into empathy. The taped-up windows deny us.

Screening, hiding, masking, taping. These are Gomez's methods. He creates his pictures with trade-painter techniques, meticulously layering and spraying hundreds of taped stencils. And, in using these methods to portray this closed-off home, he's also meditating on his own fraught status—on the painter's role as a starrer at worlds that never asked for art's attention.

LA happens to be one of the world capitals of staring. That's partly because it's home to Hollywood and its associated 'dream factories', where fantasies are industrially produced for the planet's visual consumption. As one of those consumers, I can't help seeing Gomez's painting through a veil of movie-made imagery—all those RVs that trundle through heart-warming road movies;

all those trailer-homes where nastiness simmers in drug dramas and white-trash thrillers.

But LA's status as a city of staring comes also from its dependence on cars—the way that life in the city involves hours spent surveying the world from an automotive bubble. Gomez is a conflicted poet of this close-yet-distant, public-yet-private, fascinated-yet-numbed way of seeing. Drivers in LA pour down streets where calamity lines the sidewalks; the world's fourth largest unhoused population haunts the edges of many views. But movement quells the queasiness; at fifty-five mph, the problem's always passing by.

What does it mean to pause that movement? To make what you see into art? Chloé Zhao's recent film *Nomadland*, for all its acclaim, also divided opinions, with some claiming that its portrait of people reduced by financial crisis to living in vans subtly glamourised their precarity. Gomez, in his movie-like painting, knowingly approaches, even courts, a similar problem. This troubling scene is also thrilling, even magical. The vehicle's aerial touches the lightning like a conductor. Is the van a bitter ruin or a spectral transmitter? Is Gomez a critic or a mystic?

At a moment when art is often expected to 'be good', to semaphore its positive intentions, I find Gomez's unreassuring vision especially bracing. There's an astringency to his way of seeing, an alien coldness of regard, that leaves us with the problem. Look how the streetlights glow blue on the asphalt. This could be science fiction. But we're not sure whether our fascination is appropriate—and the quandary itself is expressive. *Friday Night* accesses, more powerfully than a more obviously 'concerned' work, a feeling in the air at the moment—a sense of unsustainability, of frantic exhaustion, of things stuck yet moving too fast.

Gomez channels what the late Lauren Berlant called the 'cruel optimism' of the American dream. This is not just any Friday night, after all. It's a Friday night in 2021 in America—the era of 'shelter in place', the Capitol raid, the Seattle heatwave, and the Californian wildfires.

That's what lightning does: it starts fires. Perhaps we should take comfort in the fact that this is just art or, as the sign says, a 'test only'. But when I look at Gomez's painting, my unease only increases. The air's electric. Something smells scorched. End of the road. What's coming?