

## SAYRE GOMEZ

## APOCALYPSE PORN

Interview by Dalya Benor



Image courtesy of the artist and Xavier Hufkens, Brussels.

"There's no pretty sunset anymore," artist Sayre Gomez tells me from his Boyle Heights studio. He begins our studio visit by telling me to look up at the ceiling. Initially caught off guard, I realize that he has placed a TV monitor among the rafters. Gomez tells me it will screen a new video piece that flashes on and off, like a billboard advertisement for an accident lawyer. He says it's a way to "disrupt the familiarity of traditional viewing experiences" and, at its most basic, a replica of a *mise-en-scene* on the freeway. The mirroring of reality, simply as it is, appears in much of Gomez's work.

There's no question that Gomez draws his references from his immediate surroundings: The 110 freeway overpass, the LA River, the Chicano murals outside his studio. These are scenes so realistically depicted in Gomez's oeuvre that a geographically-inclined Angeleno could drop a pin on their locations.

Interestingly, Gomez is not a local, nor is he necessarily obsessed with the "idea" of Los Angeles, like so many that flock here to chase a dream. Born and raised in Chicago, he moved to the sun-soaked city to attend graduate school at CalArts. Confronted with the glaring reality of the city's "false promise" as he calls it, both in school and the world outside, Gomez's paintings serve as his outsider's cultural commentary on the glaring socio-economic inequalities of the city that only seem to worsen by the day. The city's stratification of wealth and the current housing crisis are blatant issues that force the question of just what the city is doing to help.

With an attention to detail that is hyperreal to the point of becoming unsettling, a painting of a storefront is drawn to scale, with window signage and doors so realistic it often fools its creator. "I look at it from far away and I'm always like, why am I not reflecting?" Gomez says. Using a range of airbrush and print techniques that stem from his training in design, both the internalized and observed anxiety of LA's nomadic displacement readily appears in his work.

For his recent solo show, at Francois Ghebaly in New York, an image of a bombed-out RV titled *Aloha* depicts a scene so violent it could be a war zone. But no, "this is just Los Angeles," Gomez seems to be saying. The vehicle's charred remains are left behind as a sinister memorial, a stark contrast to the once-cheery Tiki bar behind it.

Quoting stand-up comedian Eddie Pepitone, Gomez asks, "When the fuck did murder become entertainment?" His paintings echo this sentiment, with phrases like "Entertainment Tonight" written on an image of a demolished vehicle.

The Ghebaly show, titled "Apocalypse Porn," signals a departure from Gomez's previous work, as he moves away from his signature scenic backdrops of sunset skies imbued with an underlying optimism. His paintings now turn towards reality and make no attempt to sugarcoat his environment with feigned positivity. It begs the question, are these paintings cynical, or is this just the state of the world? Perhaps they're meant to be mirrors for us to take a closer look at the world outside and ask whether we're actually consciously aware or just complicit bystanders.

**DB** Your show at Francois Ghebaly has these new power box sculptures, which are new for your practice. Where do those come from?

**SG** It's meant to look like one of those power boxes you see in strip malls that control the flow of power. There's this walking path along the LA River close to where I live.

The unhoused situation there got pretty condensed and it just struck me. It got to a point where we couldn't walk on the path anymore. This tiny chain link fence separates two worlds: one side, a \$2.5 million property, on the other, people who have nothing. Different worlds colliding is a through-line in the work.

**DB** You're not from L.A., but it's the main star of your work. Why do you choose to paint the city as your subject matter?

**SG** If you're not from it, you can see it better. I'm still blown away by certain aspects of the culture. I am very interested in LA and its history, but if I lived in another city, I would probably paint that city. Every city has an interesting story. LA happens to be particularly interesting because of the film industry. I would imagine it's the most reproduced city in the world.

**DB** What's been the most eye-opening thing about L.A.?

**SG** The disparity or gap between class stratification and the level of extreme wealth. It's jarring to witness. I've been here long enough that I've watched it get crazier by the day. I don't even know how to understand it or what it's becoming. Venice Beach is interesting because when I first moved here, it was still kind of rough, and then it got extremely fancy. This juxtaposition of class and those collisions—I've always been interested in how to incorporate contradiction as a subtext.

**DB** Your studio is in Boyle Heights, which has been a contentious place for artists in terms of gentrification. How do you feel about being here?

**SG** I've been in this building for 15 years. There are all these murals across the street that I always wanted to make paintings of and it just took forever for me to give myself permission to do it since I'm not from here. It's a sensitive thing because it's public housing. When I was a little kid, my aunt gave me this book on Chicano muralists. When I moved into this building, I recognized a lot of those murals from when I was 12 years old. I ended up using one in a painting. I know that I'm not unique and that I'm complicit in this system that uses artists to start gentrification.

**DB** How has your art progressed since your last show?

**SG** I feel like it went way darker. This idea that I've been appropriating aspects of the city from my commute is a quaint idea and sure, it's a little bit dark at times, but it also has beautiful sunsets. I've been leaving those out, lately. There's no pretty sunset anymore. I'm moving away from the blurriness. When you put something in full focus, you're putting importance on what you're looking at. The more recent work is a little more confrontational.

"Apocalypse Porn" is the latest show of artist Sayre Gomez (American, b. 1982) at François Ghebaly Gallery, stemming from a shift in the relationship between the artist and Los Angeles that favors a darker side of his city of adoption.

