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## **Sayre Gomez: *X-Scapes***

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*By Patrick J. Reed*



Installation view: *Sayre Gomez: X-Scapes*, François Ghebaly, Los Angeles, 2019. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

## **François Ghebly**

September 20 – November 3, 2019

In his current exhibition, *X-Scapes*, Sayre Gomez's pastiched visions of Los Angeles suffuse urban alienation with the lurid glow of a sunset existentialism particular to the coastal West, land of limitless absurdity. We might imagine Los Angeles, in and of itself, as the cliché omega point of recombinant pastiche, a place where Gomez's fictionalized scenes seem a likely future reality. This plausibility might have diluted his efforts if the underlying sentiment of Gomez's work did not suggest that there is, in fact, no future. There is only pastiche—only more of the same.

The exhibition, which is the artist's third solo effort at François Ghebaly Gallery, includes sculpture and video elements, but its real focus is the acrylic-on-canvas paintings that were produced using traditional commercial techniques (set painting, sign painting, et. al). Their scale pushes *trompe l'oeil* effects into performance mode—meaning, they do exactly what *trompe l'oeil* was invented to do. Take *7th & Los Angeles* (2019), a depiction of a bed in a storefront window that measures 84 inches high by 120 wide. Complete with reflections rendered on the faux glass pane and the word "comforters" applied in a clownish font, the illusion is so convincing one might feel compelled to ask "how much is that duvet in the window?"



Sayre Gomez, *7th & Los Angeles*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 84 x 120 inches. Courtesy the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

Other examples, like *Venice Door* and *Glendale Door* (both 2019)—which are, per their titles, paintings of doors—attempt a similar feat. Their hyperreal achievements notwithstanding, these works read too much like theater set pieces to destabilize one’s sense of reality. But *Orale Raza* (2019) sits somewhere in between, neither trying nor failing to fool the viewer. Photographic from a distance and crisp up close, this composite image of shopping plaza signs, barrier walls, and a Boyle Heights mural aglow in the dusk is the clearest presentation of Gomez’s general project: to catalog visual culture writ large by way of its totems.

In an exhibition critically engaged with the landscape of consumer capitalism and conversant in postmodern irony, we should not be surprised to find artistic renderings of poverty, as we do in *Open* (2019) and *The Entrepreneur* (2019). The former shows a snippet of the tent cities sprawling with increasing prominence across L.A., while the latter, an ambiguous image, captures a spectral figure crouching by what appears to be an open flame. Whether the figure is seeking warmth or committing arson is beside the point: the distinction is moot in the face of dire need.



Sayre Gomez, *The Entrepreneur*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 50 x 72 inches. Courtesy of the artist and François Ghebaly, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

These works, however, are out of place in the exhibition—a fact signaled by their uncharacteristic blurriness. In all likelihood, their sources were photographs taken from a passing car, but in comparison to the jewel-tone clarity of the neighboring paintings, the blurriness of these two reads as an indelicate and perhaps uncertain attempt at grappling with hard truths. It is unfortunate that *Open* and *The Entrepreneur* lack finesse, because the seeds of an important message—that the housing crisis in California is a defining issue of our era—are nonetheless present elsewhere in the show. For example, the piled sundry personal effects in the bottom left corner of *Orale Raza* evoke long-term itinerancy with a sensitivity for human dignity that is foreclosed by cynicism (i.e. soured pastiche) in the depictions of homelessness found elsewhere in the show.

Gomez's sophistication returns full throttle in a series of cardboard, PVC, and polyurethane foam sculptures that replicate yellow parking stanchions so precisely they seem sturdy enough to bear weight. The titles are the various ranked positions within a corporate hierarchy, and their dimensions match the level of seniority. Thus, *CEO* is the highest at 72 inches, while *Store Manager #1* and *Store Manager #2* are only 23 inches tall. Here, the title makes the man, and value accrues from status tokens like a "good parking spot out front"—marked by a barrier pole that denies access to the less privileged, naturally. By replicating these poles, Gomez undermines their structural integrity and negates their authority. And, in titling the works *President*, *Department Head*, and *Senior Regional Manager*, he puts a name to the obstacles that have made a lost soul of the ghostly titular figure in *The Entrepreneur*.

The tightest summation of *X-Scapes* is found in two untitled videos tucked among Gomez's giant paintings. The first is a loop of a toy car driving on a partially-formed, semi-circular track. As the car approaches the end point, a mechanical claw picks up a portion of track from behind and places it perfectly before the car. This operation continues uninterrupted, allowing the car to drive in an endless circle. The other video, also a loop, is an excerpt from Disney's *The Sword and The Stone* (1963), in which a kitchen is enchanted to clean itself. Gomez's version is simply an endless cycle of plates dropping in and out of a sudsy tub. *Trompe l'oeil* smiley-face stickers are painted on the monitors for both videos. Their expressions mock the tortuous labor over which they are superimposed; their flat joy mocks the forever beleaguered human spirit.

## **Contributor**

### **Patrick J. Reed**

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