

Hacking Hockney: the Mexican American painter bringing Latino culture into art

Ramiro Gomez's work has playfully riffed on Californian classics to bring awareness to the lack of representation for the Chicano community in art



Mulholland Drive: On the Road to David's Studio (after David Hockney's Mulholland Drive: The Road to the Studio, 1980), by Ramiro Gomez. Photograph: Ramiro Gomez

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In the 1960s, a young David Hockney, infatuated with the sun and sensuality of the west coast, introduced the world of high art to the markers of Los Angeles domestic bliss. He was dazzled by an array of immaculate modernist houses with backyard swimming pools and lawns equipped with sprinklers, a total novelty to an artist who had grown up with English rain. His paintings crystallized a quintessential image of Los Angeles in popular culture, despite failing to capture the entire picture.

Enter the work of Ramiro Gomez, a young LA painter born in California to two undocumented Mexican immigrants (who have since obtained legal citizenship). In 2014, he reproduced Hockney's *A Bigger Splash*, a painting of an LA backyard seen beyond the tip of a diving board, noted for the implied subject, presumably under the splashing water. For his version *No Splash*, Gomez added the implied characters; not the diver, but a pair of faceless, dark-skinned workers raking the water for impurities and squeegee-cleaning the house's floor-to-ceiling windows. Employing the same technique, he subsequently turned Hockney's *American Collectors* into *American Gardeners*, and *Beverly Hills Housewife* into *Beverly Hills Housekeeper*. Diverting from Hockney's focus on southern California splendor, Gomez's painting calls attention to those whose labor is required to maintain it, both as homage and soft-spoken rebuke.

"I've been asked if I'm filling in the gap that David Hockney omitted, or that art history itself is omitting," Gomez says in his sunny-hot LA studio, reclining in a plush armchair as streaks of paint dry on his arms and jeans. "It's both. It's a way of expanding on David's work and increasing that awareness of its limitations; I'm talking about representation in art history and inclusion," he adds, noting the work of artists of color such as Kerry James Marshall, or the Chicano LA activist collectives Los Four and Asco, as his predecessors.



Ramiro Gomez's No Splash. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Osceola Refetoff

Gomez knew these limitations intimately well. His parents work as a custodian and a truck driver, while he himself worked as a live-in nanny in West Hollywood in his early twenties. The family's backyard pool and sliding glass doors were a vision of Hockney's Los Angeles, although not at all hours of the day. Gomez witnessed a twice-daily shift exchange: in the morning, the predominantly white population would exit the Hollywood hills just as the predominantly brown hired help would arrive. Latino men and women who resembled his uncles and aunts adhered strictly to an unwritten hierarchy: unlike Gomez, the men who came to the house regularly to clean the pool and manicure the lawn would never set foot inside. The women who cleaned the interiors would never use the kitchen for something as simple as getting a glass of water; one had to be offered. And at 5pm, they would exit the hills as the second shift exchange took place.

Noting the conspicuous absence of any paintings devoted to these figures, Gomez set to creating them himself. (Before becoming a full-time nanny, he had attended the California Institute of the Arts for a year, leaving after his struggles with financing and the death of his grandmother became insurmountable.)

"His technique is quite specific: loose, gestural, intentionally an almost low-tech way of painting," says Pilar Tompkins Rivas, co-curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Lacma) exhibition Home - So Different, So Appealing, one of two

concurrent shows where Gomez's work is now on view. Both shows are a participant in Pacific Standard Time's LA/LA, a Getty initiative that this year focuses on Latin American and Latino art.

"The initiative is a tremendous opportunity for US Latino and Latin American art to achieve a much greater level of exposure and visibility," Tompkins Rivas adds. "Historically, we have seen intermittent major exhibitions that focus on US Latino or Latin American art, but then years would go by without another significant project taking place, especially at the city's largest, mainstream institutions."



Ramiro Gomez and David Feldman - Movers, El Tovar Place, West Hollywood, 2012. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Michael Underwood.

At Lacma, his works are painted directly onto pages torn from glossy shelter magazines, on which he's inserted dark-skinned domestic workers. They look in on the dining room, standing as a seated white family enjoys dinner; they chase white children under the coffee tables of opulent living rooms; they clutch the straps of their purses as they anxiously wait for their paychecks. In their rough-hewn renderings, absent of identifiable facial features, his protagonists stand in as abstracted composites of people he's met throughout his life. (The titles are more specific: *Delia*, of *Delia Preparing Dinner* or *Instructions for Delia*, for example, was a housekeeper who once failed to show up for work and was replaced the next day.) What comes across distinctly in the subtle slouch of their shoulders and averted gazes - coping mechanisms, as Gomez calls them - are the palpable markers of shame, tension and frustration.

Like Hockney, Gomez paints in acrylic, although his approach is decidedly *rasquache*, the Chicano answer to Italian *Arte Povera*. "It means just figure it out; make it work," says Gomez, who deploys these quiet interventions across a variety of scavenged materials. Before painting his first Hockney reproduction onto a piece of wood reclaimed from a Hollywood set, he painted on cardboard, mostly sourced from a dumpster behind the Best Buy at the corner of Santa Monica and La Brea. He transformed these discarded big-screen TV boxes into life-size cutouts of movers, valets, nannies and gardeners, and planted them throughout Beverly Hills and West Hollywood lawns, playgrounds and street corners. They were subsequently stolen, discarded or destroyed, but their remnants - large, square-format photographs taken by his husband, David Feldman - are the subject of Gomez's other PST show, *In West Hollywood*, mounted by Charlie James Gallery at the West Hollywood library.

In 2013, Gomez had a warm, emotional meeting at David Hockney's studio, and shortly afterward gave the older artist his final reproduction: two men and their pickup truck superimposed on Hockney's 1980 Mulholland Drive as it was printed on a postcard in the Lacma gift shop. *No Splash* is now in permanent collection of MCA San Diego, and other paintings from the series are, ironically, hanging in a number of wealthy collectors' homes. But despite its wild popularity, Gomez is no longer interested in repeating his Hockney series. His collectors are not who he paints for.

In late May, during a residency within the Whitney Biennial as part of an installation by fellow Chicano artist Rafa Esparza, Gomez spent three days in the museum painting its custodians and security guards on scraps of cardboard refuse, noting parallels in staff hierarchy between an artistic institution and a West Hollywood home. Rather than display his paintings, he gave them to his subjects.

"I was surprised by the emotions that triggered," Gomez recalls. "One custodian looked at my painting and said, 'Hey, that's me.' And then when he asked if he could take a picture of it and I just gave it to him, that really caught him off-guard. Seeing him recognize himself in the painting was cathartic; giving recognition for labor is incredibly important for me in my work."

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