

Nuestra

LATINIDAD

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FOUR SOLO EXHIBITIONS FEATURING

DELILAH MONTOYA

JOSHUA PEREZ

GABRIEL VILLA

JAKE PRENDEZ

Written by Elda Silva

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Nuestra Latinidad*, presented by the City of San Antonio Department of Arts & Culture at Centro de Artes, San Antonio, Texas, February 7 – June 2, 2019.

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FOREWORD

In 2018, the City of San Antonio Department of Arts & Culture hosted a national open call for exhibitions and related programming for Centro de Artes, as part of the strategic plan developed for the gallery in collaboration with the community in 2017. The Centro de Artes committee, a subcommittee of the San Antonio Arts Commission comprised of local community members, reviewed and scored 20 of the submitted qualified proposals. Ten of those proposals were selected for the 2019-2020 exhibition schedule.

Nuestra Latinidad is the first exhibition comprised of artists selected through the inaugural Centro de Artes Open Call. It features four solo exhibits occupying both floors of Centro de Artes, including work by Houston-based artist Delilah Montoya, San Antonio-based photographer Joshua Perez, Chicago-based artist Gabriel Villa, and Seattle-based Chicano artist Jake Prendez. These exhibitions represent an array of thoughtful and creative viewpoints from artists of diverse backgrounds, ages, experiences and regions. We ask the visitor to think critically and view works that take one beyond the surface of what it means to be Latino and explore the sublayers of our Latinidad.

On behalf of the Centro de Artes Committee, thank you for visiting and supporting the arts in San Antonio!

Yadhira Lozano, Chair

District 3, Centro de Artes Committee, San Antonio Arts Commission

INTRODUCTION

The term 'latinidad' speaks to the cultural connective tissue that unites Latinos from different geographic backgrounds. But it's also a term that has come to imply authenticity – the sense that someone is firmly rooted in their culture. For Latinos, holding on to your latinidad is another way of saying you're keeping it real. It is the latter application of the term that comes into play with *Nuestra Latinidad*. Organized as complementary solo exhibitions within a larger exhibition, *Nuestra Latinidad* features work by four artists who seek to identify and articulate what is authentic in their respective communities.

Presented by the City of San Antonio's Department of Arts & Culture at the Centro de Artes Gallery, the exhibition is in keeping with the mission of the Centro de Artes as an institution dedicated to telling the story of the Latino experience in the U.S.

Nuestra Latinidad is comprised of work by Delilah Montoya (Albuquerque, New Mexico), Joshua Perez (San Antonio, Texas), Gabriel Villa (Chicago, Illinois), Jacob Prendez (Seattle, Washington), and, all of whom are of Mexican descent. The artists were selected for the exhibition through a call for proposals on the strength of their work and what it reveals about the communities in which they live and make art.

DELILAH MONTOYA

Contemporary Casta Portraiture: Nuestra "Calidad"

An established artist who works primarily in photography and mixed-media installation and splits time between Houston and New Mexico, Delilah Montoya was born in Texas and raised in the Midwest. In her work, Montoya delves into and explores Chicano culture. Montoya was a teenager growing up in South Omaha, Nebraska when she first saw examples of colonial casta portraiture in a book she picked up at a Chicano cultural center.

Commonly created in sets of 16, the paintings, which originated in New Spain, were used to illustrate the inter-racial mixing among Europeans, indigenous people, and Africans. They typically depicted a family unit — a couple and one or two offspring — in a domestic setting. Each family member was labeled according to an intricate, racial taxonomy. These categories had social and legal implications.

“I always remembered there was that whole hierarchy that was going on and thinking to myself, ‘Where am I on that scale?’” Montoya said.

Later, Montoya realized the casta paintings captured the beginnings of racial categorization in the Americas which laid the foundation for the racial structure that remains in place today.

Perceptions of racial identity and their origins are at the crux of Montoya’s *Contemporary Casta Portraiture: Nuestra “Calidad,”* which she describes as “an ethnographic art project that examines the ethnic roots of Colonial Heritage Families.”

The exhibition consists of 16 photographic family casta portraits — printed as dye sublimations on metal — with maps and graphs that chart the results of DNA tests. Test tubes filled with multicolored sand function as visual representation of each family’s biogeographic heritage. A QR code embedded in each portrait leads to an online component — a web page with the subjects’ DNA test results and brief recordings of individual family members taking about the findings.

Montoya began working on the project in 2013. The growing commercial availability of DNA testing kits presented an opportunity to examine the idea of Chicanos as “La Raza Cosmica” or “The Cosmic Race” — a mestizo race composed of a mix of blood from all the world’s races — from a scientific perspective. “And then I began to think about the casta paintings and I thought ‘Why not think about it as kind of an update to the casta painting?’”

Montoya used her personal networks to find subjects from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, including a family associated with prison culture and a family that belongs to the top one percent of wealthy Americans.

To create the portraits, Montoya set up her equipment — a digital camera and lighting — and her subjects “to be actors in their own lives.” Most of the families were photographed at their homes, but Montoya also used other significant spaces such as a church and business. She spent approximately an hour photographing each family, then created a composite portrait from multiple images. Rather than capturing a single moment, each photograph represents a block of compressed time. The resulting images have a baroque quality with an underlying sense of drama, movement, and tension.

“What I was trying to do was be a painter, to make sure I had really tight compositions, and that you would be able to see depth,” Montoya said. “I wanted you to see background, midground, foreground and everything needed to work with each other compositionally and tell a story as well.” In *Contemporary Casta Portraiture: Nuestra “Calidad,”* DNA analysis illuminates the limits of visual perception and our own perceptions of identity.

“I think what I would like people to take away from it is to begin to understand how integrated we all are to each other, that nobody walks away as being any pure one thing,” Montoya said. “And that there’s this history of migration which is really the hallmark of the human race. That’s what we did. That’s what we do.”



Delilah Montoya, *Casta 1*, 2018, Test Tubes, Wood, Sand, Metal Etching and Dye Sublimation Photograph, 38 x 36 inches, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.



Delilah Montoya, *Casta 13*, 2018, Test Tubes, Wood, Sand, Metal Etching and Dye Sublimation Photograph, 38 x 36 inches, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.



Delilah Montoya, *Casta 4*, 2018, Test Tubes, Wood, Sand, Metal Etching and Dye Sublimation Photograph, 38 x 36 inches, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.

JOSHUA PEREZ

Todo Esta Bien, Everything's Good

Born in San Antonio, Joshua Perez spent much of his young adulthood on the South Side of the city, a culturally rich, yet economically challenged area that has struggled with drug-related crime and high dropout rates. His fascination with the life of his predominantly Mexican American and African American neighborhood, and others like it, is at the heart of *Todo Esta Bien, Everything's Good*, a long form street photography and portrait project shot on 35 mm and medium format black and white film he began in 2015.

As a high school student, Perez started painting, gravitating toward street art. He was mentored by Supher, a well-known graffiti writer in San Antonio's hip-hop scene.

"Graffiti for me was kind of that introduction to art," Perez said. "It was real exciting discovering graffiti through magazines or anything I could get my hands on."

He also began taking classes in studio painting. After graduating high school, he attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for about a year but felt his interests did not mesh with the culture of the school. He returned to San Antonio and subsequently enrolled at the University of Texas San Antonio. Though he earned a bachelor's degree in fine art with an emphasis on painting, his interest in medium shifted toward the end of his studies after he took photography classes to fulfill his degree requirement. As part of his course work for a film photography class, he began taking pictures on his long bike ride from the South Side to downtown San Antonio to catch a bus to the university campus. He started close to home, photographing his grandparents' neighbors. He was excited by the images he captured.

"Those two rolls were it," he said.

Making prints in the darkroom, Perez's graffiti art aesthetic began to emerge in his work.

"Size pretty quickly became an issue for me because I think coming from that graffiti street art lifestyle everyone wanted to make everything bigger," Perez said. "That's always the issue: How do we make this bigger? And so naturally with printing, that became the issue. I started buying bigger boxes and then I realized you could buy rolls of paper. That became my new obsession."

From the route of his commute, Perez began to branch out into other areas of the city, but his focus throughout the exhibition remains Mexican American and African American communities. His images capture everyday scenes — an off-duty mariachi, a flea market shopper, two men pushing a stalled car, skateboarders trailing long shadows, hand-lettered signs, a lowrider, a pair of pitbulls on a roof.

One of Perez's most compelling images *Tres Flores* captures three elderly Latino men sitting together on a public bench. The face of the man seated in the middle is hidden by a newspaper, while his companions — one holding a wooden cane, the other with a briefcase on his lap — stare directly at the camera. The title of the image is a reference to the hair pomade as well as the number of subjects in the photograph.

"As I moved along I really had to question myself. 'Why are these people important to me? What is it about the neighborhood that I'm so focused on?'" Perez said. "I think what it's really about for me is acknowledging these people's presence."



Joshua Perez, *Water Bottle on Forehead*, 2018, Gelatin Silver Print, Edition of 3, 42 x 65 inches, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.



Joshua Perez, *Tres Flores*, 2015,
Gelatin Silver Print, Edition of 3, 42 x 65 inches,
Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.



Joshua Perez, *Ostrich Boots on Travis St.*, 2017,
Gelatin Silver Print, Edition of 3, 24 x 26 inches,
Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.

GABRIEL VILLA

Human Dive

A native of El Paso, Texas, Gabriel Villa moved to Chicago in the late 1990s. The artist lives in Pilsen, a historically working neighborhood known as a gateway for immigrants. Villa estimates it took about five years before his surroundings began to take root in his work — figurative drawings, paintings, and mixed media works with elements of abstraction and surrealism. In the years since, Villa’s neighborhood has become a powerful presence in his art as is evident in *Human Dive*.

The exhibition is comprised of works created over a period of about ten years, beginning in 2008. The earliest are portrait-based works on paper from Villa’s “Image and Human Value” series.

“I think at the time I was really thinking about the idea of how we value people. That was a big concern at the time,” Villa said. “I very much wanted to celebrate the underdog, the anonymous.”

For the triptych *Portrait of Johnny: Between Poverty and Capitalism* Villa worked from photographs of a panhandler he took on 18th Street, Pilsen’s main artery. Rendered in black and white, the weathered figure variously gazes away from and past the viewer, conveying a sense of disconnect and isolation. A disembodied set of praying hands floats through the panels, a reference to Albrecht Durer’s *Praying Hands*. Unlike the German Renaissance artist’s almost delicate looking hands, however, Villa’s brown-skinned hands appear rough and worn, like hands that have labored.

Villa began incorporating the motif into his work after he saw a version of Durer’s *Praying Hands* on a religious pamphlet, intrigued by the proliferation of the image in pop culture. It is also, of course, a religious symbol, but in Villa’s work it functions more as a commentary on the lack of charity within what many regard as a Christian nation. It recurs in several works including *MOM*, an exploration of gang culture. Male figures dressed in hoodies — one blue, one red, one yellow-brown — dominate the panels of the triptych. Denied an identity, in effect, each figure’s face has been replaced by a symbol of American culture: praying hands, an eagle’s head, and a coin. Letters in the background spell out “mom,” reminding viewers of these anonymous figures’ shared humanity. Everyone has a mother, after all.

“In Chicago, black people are always turned into these stereotypes or cartoons of thug life,” Villa said. “But I wanted to present this humanity. It’s hard to get all that from just a picture, but those are the things I was thinking of.”

The exhibition also includes double-sided mixed media drawings on raw canvas from Villa’s autobiographical “Flayed” series. The works were originally created for an exhibition with two other artists at the Zhou B Art Center in Chicago in 2015. The works take viewers through Villa’s development as an artist, starting with *Man Baby*, a humorously grotesque self-portrait of the artist as an infant with an adult head. On the inverse side, *Mexican Partridge Family* is a group portrait based on a family photo from the 1970s.

“My mother always had a bunch of family photo albums, and I was a kid that just constantly went through all these photographs,” Villa said. “I think it got my curiosity in terms of history and ancestry and photography. All that became part of my art practice.”

In the image, one of Villa’s brothers, who was not present for the photograph, is depicted with a trophy deer head. Another recurring motif in Villa’s work, the deer head is a reference to his childhood. His father had several hunting trophies, which Villa found scary as a boy. As an adult, however, they have come to represent nostalgia.

“I’ll include those kinds of things in terms of my family and ancestry and memory — like memorials appearing in my work somehow,” he said.

Meant to be viewed as a timeline, the images take viewers to Villa’s arrival in Chicago with *El Rey de Chicago (The King of Chicago)* and *Defiende Tu Barrio (Defend Your Neighborhood)*. The former depicts a political figure as a menacing clown. In place of a barrel, the figure is wearing a housing project building around its midsection. The inverse side of the panels is an image of a surveillance camera, such as those that can be found in Chicago neighborhoods such as Pilsen, mounted over a basketball hoop with a pair of praying hands tangled in the netting below.

Though Villa deals with issues affecting marginalized communities, “my work is not necessarily political,” he said. “I think its really hard sometimes to categorize my work. I’m OK with that.”



Gabriel Villa, *Portrait of Johnny: Between Poverty and Capitalism*, 2010, Triptych: Mixed Media on Paper, 66 x 42 inches, each, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.



Gabriel Villa, *MOM*, 2014, Triptych: Mixed Media on Paper, 66 x 42 inches, each, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.



Gabriel Villa, *Mexican Partridge Family*, 2015, Doublesided, Acrylic, Latex and Gesso on Canvas, 108 x 144 inches, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.

JAKE PRENDEZ

Genetic Memory: Xinachtli to Xochitl

Born in California, Jake Predez grew up in Seattle, Washington. He attended college in Los Angeles and lived there for 15 years before returning to Seattle, where he is currently based. His exhibition *Genetic Memory: Xinchitli to Xochitl* is comprised of artworks that were created over a four-year period beginning in 2014 and deal with issues of cultural identity.

Predez incorporates indigenous symbols and pop culture references into his figurative paintings and digital works intended to show the continuing influence of ancient indigenous culture on contemporary Chicano life.

In Nahuatl, the language of the Mexica, “xinchitli” means seed and “xochitl” means flower, hence the title of the exhibition suggests a journey or development from seed to flower.

“The exhibition is an offering to our ancestors. It is taking the culture of our ancestors (seeds) and showing how it has bloomed into flowers (art) today,” Predez wrote in his exhibition proposal.

The title painting is an image of a young, contemporary Latina holding a potted plant and standing in profile. An indigenous figure outlined on the wall behind her echoes her pose.

In four portraits from his “Cultural Resilience” series included in the exhibition, Predez depicts contemporary Latinos. His subjects — friends and family — are in profile, their faces effectively spotlighted by a circle of color that contrasts with a monochromatic background. Indigenous symbols relating to the subjects’ cultural heritage are outlined over the portraits “to represent this culture we still have,” Predez said. “Our culture survives in the way we cook, the way we dance, the way we sing, the way we work with our elders and our youth. That’s been passed down generation after generation. We’re still here.”

The circle motif takes on a humorous aspect in works from Predez’s “Dulce” (“Sweet”) portrait series. In these paintings, the circles are formed by Mexican pastries or candy that relate to the subject. A painting of a girl — Predez’s daughter — with a pink concha behind her is titled *Don’t Be Self Conchas* while the image of a bearded man haloed by a disk of De La Rosa marzipan is titled *I Fall to Pieces*.

Predez's use of the circles "started simply enough. It gives you a way to make the faces pop a little more," he said. "It's kind of become my signature, so I have to think of creative ways to throw in my little signature."

Works from Predez's "Contemporary Codices" series, digital images on canvas, are intended as an update of ancient codices, with contemporary figures in a style meant to invoke the manuscripts of ancient indigenous peoples such as the Aztec and Maya. The images are playful depictions of figures such as a paleta vendor, a young woman taking a selfie, and the Los Angeles-based band La Santa Cecilia.

The most overtly political of Predez's works in the exhibition are from the series "Norman Rockwell in Post Racial America," re-imaginings of works by Rockwell, known for the cover illustrations he created for *The Saturday Evening Post* magazine. *Dreamers* is Predez's take on Rockwell's *Breaking Home Ties*, a painting from 1954 which depicts a father and son waiting for a train that will take the young man to state university. The father appears tired and worn from years of manual labor, while the son, dressed in a pressed suit and tie, is eager and ready for a new life. In Predez's version, the father is a Latino migrant worker and the young man is one of the millions of undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children who are threatened with deportation under the current political administration.

Chicana in College is based on Rockwell's *Willie Gillis in College* from 1946. Rockwell's painting represents a young World War II veteran in school, mementos from the war, including a medal and helmet, decorating his dorm room. Like Rockwell's *Gillis*, Predez's Chicana student is seated in front of a window with a book. In place of war mementos, the young woman's room is decorated with protest posters.

Rockwell's work "has been used by right wing folks to say 'This is the America we want back, the Norman Rockwell America,'" Predez said. "And the thing is Norman Rockwell was actually pretty progressive. So what I wanted to do was reimagine these Norman Rockwell images in a contemporary (light) with people of color as the subjects."



Jake Prendez, *Genetic Memory: Xinchitli to Xochitl*, 2018,
Oil on Canvas, 36 x 24 inches, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.



Jake Prendez, *Cultural Resilience: Iris*, 2015,
Oil on Canvas, 16 x 20 inches, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.



Jake Prendez, *Dreamers*, 2018, Oil on Canvas, 36 x 24 inches, Photograph Courtesy of the Artist.

ABOUT CENTRO DE ARTES

Centro de Artes Gallery is dedicated to showcasing San Antonio and South Texas Latino/a artists. Found in the heart of the Zona Cultural, an officially designated and state-recognized cultural district, Centro de Artes is dedicated to telling the story of the Latino experience with a focus on South Texas through local and regional art, history, and culture. As a space that is free and open to the public, and located in Historic Market Square - one of the most visited cultural venues in Texas – Centro de Artes is at the center of a cultural and historical crossroads, accessible to residents and visitors, alike.

Since October 2016, the Department of Arts & Culture has managed Centro de Artes and showcased the works of more than 160 San Antonio artists. The City of San Antonio continues to support local artists and provide opportunities for them to show their works. Through a robust community-engaged process to develop the Centro de Artes Strategic Plan, the City of San Antonio set a framework, overseen by the Centro de Artes Committee so this mission of celebrating and honoring Latino arts and culture, with a priority on showcasing San Antonio and regional artists, continues.

CENTRO DE ARTES COMMITTEE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elda Silva is an arts and culture writer based in San Antonio. A former print journalist, she covered the visual arts for the San Antonio Express-News for more than 20 years. She began her writing career at the San Antonio Light in 1990 after graduating from Trinity University with a degree in English and communications. In 1998, she was awarded a nine-month fellowship to Columbia University through the National Arts Journalism Program. She shares her home with husband Gilbert Garcia, daughter Olivia, and a rescue dog named Emma.



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