

Embodying Common Ground & Transformation

When Luna Anaïs Gallery invited Narsiso Martinez to curate for the first time he took the opportunity to feature the works of Tidawhitney Lek and Gloria Gem Sánchez, fellow artists he knew and admired from the Long Beach art scene. Recognizing a need to share his platform and highlight works of artists who come from underrepresented communities like himself, he chose Lek and Sánchez specifically for their vibrant and expressive works of everyday life moments extracted from often female domains and infused with traditions that are respectively intimate and personal all the while inviting us to consider broader themes of universality and interconnectedness.

Lek's and Sánchez's bodies of work explore elements of the home and everyday life through very different mediums and processes. Lek takes a traditional approach by expertly painting instinctive compositions of social life through skillful layers of pastel, acrylic, oil, and the occasional glitter onto canvas in a manner akin to the painting styles of Kerry James Marshall and Luis Valadez. Disorienting the viewer with elements of the unreal, she expresses nuanced reflections of her Southeast Asian roots in a realistic manner that is flowing with natural energy and striking emotions.

"I try to boil an image down to a simple goal - I'm looking for common ground, finding a space where everyone can relate. The architecture I include (fences, gates, bricks) help familiarize the setting but I mix it up with distinct elements such as a sticker or graffiti tag that is recognizable to certain individuals. My paintings are lifelong friends you didn't expect to be with, creating a connection and experience through drawing and space," she says.

While Lek creates expansive figurative narratives of everyday life, Sánchez's style is more abstract and symbolic and reminiscent of works by Amalia Mesa-Bains and María Magdalena Campos Pons. Sánchez weaves an array of materials to create striking sculptural compositions from materials such as fibers, corn husks, hair, and snake skin that carry significant spiritual, personal, and decolonial perspectives connected to her Chicana-Filipina background. Her works function as objects for performances or altar-like shrines that carry transformational and spiritual aesthetics. The work moves the intergenerational and systemic trauma of violent capitalism and prescriptive socio-political expectations placed upon women and bodies of color towards an emancipated spirit.

Despite the major visual differences between their bodies of work, Lek and Sánchez share a quality of embodied presence. Each of their works evoke an immaterial or soul-like quality that pulls us deeper into their fictional worlds. In Lek's acrylic and oil painting, *Encounter* (2021), a cement wall flowing with blossoming orange roses separates two figures, one peering over with expressive eyes at the glittered acrylic nails gripping the wall. The painting is beautifully textured with impasto-like strokes and hints of black glitter sparkles in the enclosing twilight background. Strikingly, the placement of the hands and dreamy gaze beyond the canvas' edges breaks the painting's fourth wall, this includes us or at least makes us consider our interaction

with the painting itself and the neighboring encounter it conveys. For Sánchez, the embodied presence of her works lies in the conceptual nature of the materiality and titles she uses. Two of her works, *Tonalli* (2020) and *Linisin:Limpia* (2021) beautifully convey the spiritual and cultural aspects of her oeuvre but they more specifically reflect a body in transformation or healing. Composed of walis tambo--a Filipino broom made from palm leaves--covered in gold spray paint, *Linisin:Limpia* literally translates to cleaning in both Tagalog and Spanish. The work itself is not a didactic representation for cleaning but rather a symbolic representation of a body in healing. Similarly, *Tonalli* is a Nahuatl symbol for sun but also speaks on the Nahuatl belief of a soul component within the body that channels growth and change, which is aptly reflected in Sánchez's use of snake skin sheds.

As a whole, *Cultural Undertow* flows between relative and universal positionings. The show presents us with visions of life and traditions that are specific to each of the artists but with a divine quality that binds them together. Walking amongst the various works of textiles, paintings, and sculptures, we are drawn into each of their stories and leave with a feeling of calm fulfillment knowing that we are not alone in this rapidly changing world.

-- Marissa Del Toro
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