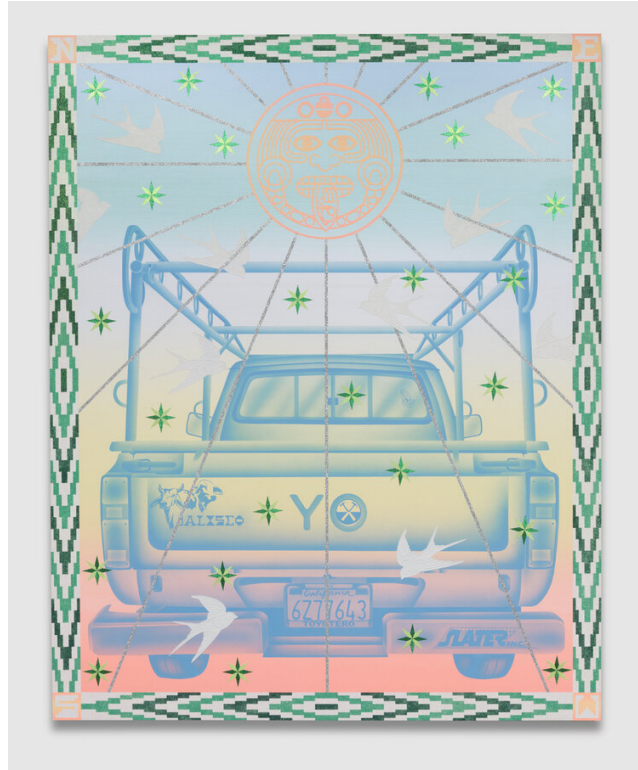


Toyoteria: Jaime Muñoz's Apparitions of Faith



“LA Commute,” original illustration on which the Fred Segal blanket was based. Acrylic, airbrush, glitter, and flocking on panel, 2020, 60” x 48”.

Pomona, California—Behold the work truck, the Toyota R-Series you drive behind on Los Angeles freeways, complete with bumper stickers, rack, and altered lettering. In artist Jaime Muñoz’s “LA Commute,” we have in its pastel sea of blue and blush, a holy apparition. The image, with its layering of Tonatiuh and its sun god glitter rays, is a reality and a memory of driving, but also a mark of faith in the reliable Toyotita. It makes me think of an estampita of a deity you carry and pray to when your car breaks down or need another miracle. The moment takes place in yet another galactic sunset, beset and bedazzled by fires, smog, and lined up

planes. Everlasting R-Series Toyotas can be spotted early in the morning, their racks decorated by landscaping and construction tools, jugs of water, ladders. Those are the objects easily recognized, but then there are the other things you cannot, a body memory that gets passed down in blood and aesthetics. This is the heart of Jaime Muñoz's work: to make art for people to see themselves.

"I grew up working class," Muñoz said over Zoom, "and when I started creating work about aspects of my identity, I had an affinity for the work truck. It's symbolic of the working class identity in the sense of objectified labor, of being seen as an object, a machine." Muñoz, who earned his B.A. in Fine Art from UCLA, first became interested in the Toyota when his half brother sold him one for \$250. Muñoz has been restoring Toyotas like the one pictured in "LA Commute" with his other brother who studied auto mechanics and anthropology, with an emphasis on pre-Columbian art. I can picture them like my mechanically-inclined family, exchanging ideas as they make their trocas run better and more beautifully.

Muñoz didn't always see himself as an artist, much less someone who belonged in a museum, quite literally. "My first experience going to a museum, I didn't feel [seen]. It was the first time I felt class difference. I felt embarrassed of what I looked like." Along with his sister, they were the first ones to pursue higher education in their family, and art was a far away dream. He was attending Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga and working construction in 2008 when he got laid off and couldn't find work. His family, though encouraging of his pursuit of art, persuaded him to learn a more profitable set of skills, so he picked up graphic design. The skills translated into the fine layering, composition, and organizational elements of his art making, working first on a computer and then entering a layering process with various materials, like paper and glitter.

One day, he walked into the L.A. County Museum of Art to see “[Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Art Movement](#),” a show curated by Rita Gonzalez, Howard Fox, and Chon Noriega. “It was the polar opposite,” he said about the experience. “This is what it looks like! I identify with this. This [art] looks more realistic to me.” He said that the catalog text in that book was pivotal to him once he began to make art and helped him find direction. “[It was] incorporating aspects of [my] identity and politics. [They were] trying to make work that means something [...] instead of just some formal positionality and making art for art’s sake.” Muñoz saw an opportunity, that a platform for Chicano art he could make himself, had cracked into a predominantly white space and that artists with similar working-class backgrounds like his, had an audience. “That [show] motivated me to pursue [art],” he said. Although Chicano art has been around as long as we’ve been identifying ourselves in this way, many of us for many reasons (including class, education, and access to the arts) do not come to see ourselves as artists until we physically get access to institutional resources. Although I grew up in southeast Los Angeles, I had never seen Estrada Courts murals until I went to college and saw them in a catalog for 1990’s [CARA: Chicano Art, Resistance and Affirmation](#). Although Muñoz grew up in Pomona, he had not yet seen art that reflected or called to him, such as Rubén Ortiz Torres’s wildly modified cars, until he experienced “Phantom Sightings.” El arte se le apareció.

When I look at images from his latest show “Modern Times” and from prior works available on his [website](#), I see Mexican Americans remembering and organizing themselves. I noticed toy caballitos, baby sheep, the Pick Your Parts Octopus I grew up washing off my wrists after visiting the junkyard with my dad. The gradations of color you see on concert posters stapled to freeway exit signs are here too: pinks, oranges, greens. Organized in grids and almost as dioramas, I saw virgenes of varying sizes, a valve gasket cover, bumper stickers, a motorcycle

engine, peace signs, mecanica, the four directions represented as crosshairs, and Olmec clay deities I am still trying to identify. Ultimately, Muñoz is taking apart and reassembling the engine of faith that he learned from his grandmother and mother, in particular in the piece called “Sun Worshippers.”



“Sun Worshipers” 2019.

In the mid 90s, his whole family and their friends drove to the Mojave Desert to witness an apparition by Nuestra Señora de Fátima, who first appeared to three shepherd children in Portugal, 1917. In Muñoz’s image, we see his interpretation of the day he visited, but also of the past faith that brought them to the desert. Here is Tonatiuh again, the pre-Columbian sun god being worshipped by a split image of Fátima’s first witnesses. The believers are looking up at the sky looking for Fátima to appear. She was said to arrive as either white rose petals falling from the sky or as a dancing white sun. Muñoz and his family were looking at the sun all day too. “Maybe it was heat exhaustion,” he said, “but I saw it too, a dancing white sun in the sky.” On his Instagram feed, there is a photograph from their journey: his grandmother, seemingly overtaken by something, laying on the ground, perfectly made up, bien peinada y vestida because that’s how you greet a miracle.

“There is an aspect of our blood memory that they can’t colonize, even if [we’re] still expressing it through Christianity,” Muñoz said. “We were subconsciously worshipping the sun out there.” For many of us who are disconnected from our origins by displacement and/or colonization, our faith feels like it needs to be documented to be true. Muñoz’s mother had a camera and was actively trying to capture Nuestra Señora in the sky--traces of her grace. It was Muñoz’s mother who documented her mother being overcome by her faith.

That’s how I imagine Muñoz felt when he walked into “Phantom Sightings”--overcome, overwhelmed. To see images, materials and color pallets that told him he existed, that what he made and who he was had value. We need proof of ourselves in the world to know we exist. Sometimes we have to make our own apparitions out of faith and most of all, need.

When I saw “LA Commute” appear as a blanket on [Shizu Saldamando’s](#) Instagram page, it was a revelation. The trocas I’d seen my whole life were being revered, blessed by a forgiving Tonatiuh, but also personalized with a “YO.” I am. I exist, not just because I think, but because I believe.

“It serves as an index of contradiction to modernity,” Muñoz said about incorporating the Toyota pick-up in his art. “This machine is progress, but at the same time it’s not, it’s commodifying brown bodies.” It’s the big question for many Chicax artists: How can art avoid the commodification of our experiences and reduce it to a product? How can we make art that isn’t so exclusive that it’s completely moved out of reach of the people it came from?

Muñoz has a vision of utopia where everyone has enough resources to not only live, but to be able to buy art, to live off of making art. In the end, this is why he decided to do the collaboration with Fred Segal, a Beverly Hills boutique, a place so far from the Toyota but implicitly tied to it: Beverly Hills does not exist without the labor of immigrants and people of color. Muñoz worked to lower the price point of the wall-sized cobija, and arrived at a price that mirrored the cost of his first Toyota truck, \$250. He wanted to make it more affordable because so often art is not.

“It’s important for me to make work that I identify with but also that’s accessible to other communities where the iconography is familiar, where they see themselves,” Muñoz said.



“LA Commute” blanket in Fred Segal’s Art at Home Series, 54” x 70”.

The first thing you see in “LA Commute” is the sun and its rays bisecting the troquita. Your eyes are drawn to the white doves, the holy spirit birds which flank the truck’s license plate, almost as if it were a banner they are holding. Do you see the Brahma bulls and Jalisco? Inside that radio you might hear corridos, and if your commute is like Muñoz’s, it was six hours a day of different genres: dark wave, punk, and Tupac (a category all his own). When your eyes reach the top of the image again, maybe you’ve noticed that the stars are shaped like daggers. The shimmery color palette reminded me of lowrider paint, and of how we decorate objects that mean a lot to us. In Los Angeles, this means our cars. For some of us, that also means our work.

I asked what he would want to do to make his art accessible to everyone. “I want to contribute to the history [of our art]. I want to see a distribution of wealth that’s more horizontal, so everyone could afford it.” I had to pitch him my idea, though: stickers, the most meta item of them all. A sticker of a truck with stickers on it, that I would stick on my Toyota. And what do you know? He already makes these, but he gives them away. “To Toyoterros?” I asked. “Yeah!” he said. They’re designed to go on a pane of glass, a badge of honor: Toyotero. Por vida.

And so the truck saunters down the 10 freeway heading east, east of east, on just another ride home.