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Mario Ybarra, Jr. on His Monstrous Show at Honor Fraser and Art Patronage in L.A.



Mario Ybarra Jr. / Courtesy the Artist and Honor Fraser

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A detail of Mario Ybarra, Jr.'s "Invisible Man...", 2012, acrylic on canvas

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by Yasmine Mohseni

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ARTINFO's Yasmine Mohseni sat down with artist **Mario Ybarra, Jr.** shortly before the opening of "Double Feature" at Honor Fraser, his first commercial gallery exhibition in six years within his hometown of Los Angeles. Ten years into his career, the artist takes stock of his new work, patronage in L.A., and how to survive as an artist in the city.

You have a solo exhibition opening tomorrow at Honor Fraser; how long have you been working with the gallery?

This is my first show with Honor Fraser. I started working with her last summer. I haven't had a Los Angeles gallery represent me for a while, so it's nice to be back home.

What is the show about?

The show consists of two different projects: one is the “Scarface Museum” project, which I’ve been doing [different iterations of] since 2005. The second is “Universal Monsters.” They’re both based on a series of portraiture. Scarface is a kind of a portrait of my childhood friend Angel Montes, who idolizes the Scarface character. Angel got in trouble and went to prison for eight years for moving narcotics across state lines. That was the start of looking at this Scarface anti-hero character. L.A. curator Cesar Garcia organized the show, he’s a young curator in his mid-20s — it’s funny for me that I’ve been around long enough now for people to have seen my work only on slides or on the Internet — and he hadn’t seen my work [in person]. He was interested in bringing the Scarface project, [which] started here in L.A., back to an L.A. audience. The first version was a small sketch and it’s grown and been to New York, Zurich and France. And now it’s coming back home. “Universal Monsters” is a self-portrait series where I take on the identity of different famous monsters like the Invisible Man, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. I had been working so much on portraits of other people that I wanted to do self-portraits. It’s odd for me to look at myself as a kind of character or caricature and how in my own character certain points of monstrousness come out. For example, the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde paintings come from me having type two diabetes. When my blood sugar drops, I get what I’ve been calling “hangry,” which is hungry and angry at the same time. The first in the series was this diptych called “The Invisible Man.” I was the Invisible Man in my 3rd-grade elementary school Halloween parade, and I think it was because my mom was always working, so she didn’t have the chance to take me to go buy a costume or to make me a costume. So it was really improvised: I was in a sports coat with an Ace bandage wrapped around my head, sunglasses, a hat, and gloves. It was really cool because, even if I didn’t win any prizes, I really thought I was invisible.

Much of your work is inspired by childhood memories; is this the case with “Double Feature”?

Yes, there was a place called the Carson Twin Cinema that I used to go to when I was a kid, it’s also the theater Quentin Tarantino went to as a young person. It was a ghetto theatre just down the street from the house, so we’d go all summer to watch double features for \$1, which we’d watch five or six times. This exhibition is also rooted in film [and film history]. With the “Scarface Museum,” it’s about an interpretation of the film, and “Universal Monsters” is taking on these kinds of characters from film. [People] go to the movies all around the world but especially here. My style and psychology is informed by film.

In the past, your portraiture and self-portraiture has often been created through the use of objects. But in “Universal Monsters,” you introduce actual self-portraits. Is the figurative a new interest for you?

Yes, I guess that’s a stylistic change because say, the “Scarface Museum” started out with performances and my friend Angel’s collection of objects that his wife was trying to get rid off, which I kind of rescued. All the iterations [of “Scarface Museum”] have been through correspondence: using mail and photos of him in prison to develop a portrait. So, it’s through the exploration of materials that the portrait was formulated. I’ve done that several times since, not only with portraiture but landscape work or sites, like my barbershop installation at the Tate Modern [“Sweeney Tate,” 2007]. I make portraits and landscapes but they’re about people and places. Those works [from “Scarface Museum”] are older. With “Universal Monsters,” I was looking at movie posters, images of monsters and I started watching a lot of movies. I was interested in the way [monsters] were developed as characters through a singular image. And I was interested in going back to this realm of illustration so I started doing paintings to represent that. But there are going to be a few works that aren’t just flat works or paintings. I was also interested in what kind of memories these things and [characters] held. The first VHS video that I begged my dad to buy me when I was little was Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” and the making of. There was the whole sequence of the transformation [of a man into] a werewolf [which] fascinated me when I was a kid. I used to watch it over and over. I always thought I had the really good skill of shaking my hand as though I was transforming into a werewolf. So there’s going to be a video of me transforming into a werewolf.