



VISUAL ARTS

Despite losing sight, non-binary painter continues to create inspirational art

BY CHIKA OJUKWU



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Artist Manuel Solano's "In the Metro or She's Not Pretty," 2018. Acrylic on canvas.

"I don't want to wait for our lives to be over/I want to know right now what will it be/I don't want to wait for our lives to be over/Will it be yes or will it be sorry?"

Those are the iconic lyrics that millions of weekly viewers heard Paula Cole croon as they watched the opening credits of TV's "Dawson's Creek." The tune is also the inspiration for the title of a new art exhibition, "I Don't Wanna Wait for Our Lives to Be Over," at the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami (ICA Miami).

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It is the first U.S. solo art exhibition by Mexican-born artist Manuel Solano. Located in the Ray Ellen and Allan Yarkin Gallery, the multimedia exhibit utilizes painting, photography and video to create an interwoven story that asks the pivotal question: “What does it mean to be alive?”

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Artist Claudia Lozano’s portrait of her child, Manuel Solano, “Chico,” 2018. Acrylic on canvas.

“We were so impressed with Manuel’s work, and their story, and how art was central to their life, that of course we included their work in the exhibition, and this installation at ICA Miami continues upon that collaboration,” says Alex Gartenfeld, artistic director at ICA Miami, who brought Solano’s work to the U.S.

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Solano identifies as non-binary, meaning they don't see themselves as either male or female in gender. They prefer the use of they/them pronouns.

“Every time in my life when I have had the chance to do what I want with my appearance and my life and my fashion, I have tended towards androgenizing myself and towards blurring the lines of my gender and making myself more ambiguous,” says Solano on the concept of their gender identity.

In 2014, Solano was struck with a severe HIV-related illness and became blind. Even after losing their sight, Solano chose to continue to pursue art in all its mediums. “I had to lose my eyes and all of my life to be absolutely sure that this is my obligation, this is what I love to do, and I will stop at nothing until I have expressed myself.”

Solano paints from memory and relies on friends and others to help them with small details and colors.

This exhibit, consisting of five art pieces, joins an ever-growing line of Solano's solo exhibits, such as “Punchis Punchis Punchis Pum Pum Punchis Punchis Punchis” in Mexico City and “Oronda” in Berlin. Just like their previous solo exhibits, Solano's “I Don't Wanna Wait For Our Lives To Be Over” consists of larger-than-life acrylic on canvas paintings that demand to be noticed.

Of the five pieces, two of them, named “Claudia” and “On the Metro or She is Not Pretty” follows this time-tested signature that Solano has perfected. Both pieces are similar and different in many ways, in that they both showcase an aching vulnerability and Solano's own personal experience. “I want change. I want to change. I want to grow. I want to change how I live. I want to change how my body looks, I want to change my art,” says Solano on what motivated them to create this exhibit.

“Because change is inevitable. Because I don't want to wait any longer for change to happen. I can no longer wait for my life to be over.”

The three other pieces in the exhibit challenge Solano's usual mediums and take advantage of both video and photography. “Chico” is the piece that is paired with “Claudia” and is placed across from that painting in the gallery space. It is a black-and-white portrait photo of Solano shot by their mother. The remaining two pieces, “The Victory of Good Over Evil” and “Masculina” are the premiere of Solano's public video work.

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Solano really wanted to expose that they are more than just a painter. “It is important for people to see that I am not a painter. It is easy to receive a painting. It draws attention that I am blind, and a ‘painter at that.’ People become fixated on this and forget the fact that I am an artist. I do sculpture, I paint, I perform, I write, I make music, they are all equally important to me.”

It is also what Solano says is their most personal exhibit yet, that reveals a myriad things that they have never published to the world before. Solano’s previous showings, for example, “Songs of Sabotage” in The New Museum, was one that was littered with pop culture references that captured the essence of the character Solano was trying to portray. But in this exhibition, Solano chose to change their approach and instead of looking outward for a muse, they found their inner muse.



Artist Manuel Solano’s portrait of mother “Claudia,” 2018. Acrylic on canvas.

“This is the first time I am shifting attention to self. Pop culture forms identity and constructs identity and this can be seen in my work. But this time, the product I am selling is the self and not just the objects portrayed,” says Solano on the difference of this exhibit to the ones they’ve done before, “My work is more than that.”

And it sounds like the message is being heard loud and clear.

Says Gartenfeld of the exhibit: “I think people are really moved. To meet Manuel, to speak with Manuel, is to know what a passionate, enthusiastic believer in art they are, and I think any person who comes across them is touched. You really see a new voice in art and creativity because it’s something that Manuel takes so seriously and has a profound impact on their lives.”



The entrance to Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, in Miami's Design District.

IF YOU GO

- What: "I Don't Want To Wait For Our Lives To Be Over"
- When: 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., Tuesdays through Sundays. Closed Mondays. Through April 14
- Where: Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami, 61 NE 41st St., in Miami's Design District
- Free

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