

HYPERALLERGIC

A Blind Artist Looks Back at Growing Up in the '90s

In 2014, Manuel Solano lost his eyesight from an HIV-related infection. His new works treat that experience as the generative event for his art.

Devon Van Houten Maldonado August 8, 2017



MEXICO CITY — Manuel Solano is one of few emerging painters finding success in this city, which can be hostile toward the traditional medium. But in Solano's case, the artist's aura and identity — he is a blind painter — are as much a part of the work as his loosely rendered narrative paintings. In his solo show *Desafiando a la Autoridad* ("Defying Authority"), currently up at Karen Huber gallery, Solano is exhibiting new paintings, videos, and a literary project in collaboration with the writer Benoît Loiseau. The work can't be separated from its sensationalism, but it's also a challenge to engage critically with art so closely tied to the artist's biography, and, in this case, the incurable illness that left him blind but also serves as the conceptual foundation for his work. I think it's appropriate to talk about feelings here: nostalgia, displacement, dysphoria, and unexpected joy, to name a few of the emotions bubbling in these paintings.

The new large-scale paintings, all from 2017, make up Solano's most autobiographical show yet. Every work or group of works here is illustrative of a memory, rendered abstract or indecipherable by the artist's rough marks and palette of flat, primary colors. His aesthetic is partly explained by his working method, which is borne of necessity. Over just a few years, his vision has worsened into total darkness, so that he now prepares each paint-

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ing by first “drawing” with thread and then feeling his way around the canvas to paint. These narrative canvases reference the artist’s childhood, tying together personal memories and anecdotes that are more universally relatable. The paintings include both lighthearted memories, like family road trips and Solano’s first communion, and more dissonant, lonely recollections of grade school and adolescence.



Like in all of Solano’s work, “Blood and Homosexuals” — a phrase attributed to his aunt that is also the title of a particularly tense diptych — are front and center in this show; they serve as shorthands for HIV and queerness, the artist’s curse and blessing. In response to his aunt’s longstanding request for a living room-friendly painting, Solano created the aforementioned diptych, “Blood and Homosexuals,” which features a version of Goya’s “Saturn Devouring his Son” (1819–23) alongside a portrait of said aunt with a cigarette in one hand and an expression of frumpy grumpiness on her face. Even through the layers of distortion and stylization, the aunt’s intolerant personality can be felt through Solano’s wry humor.

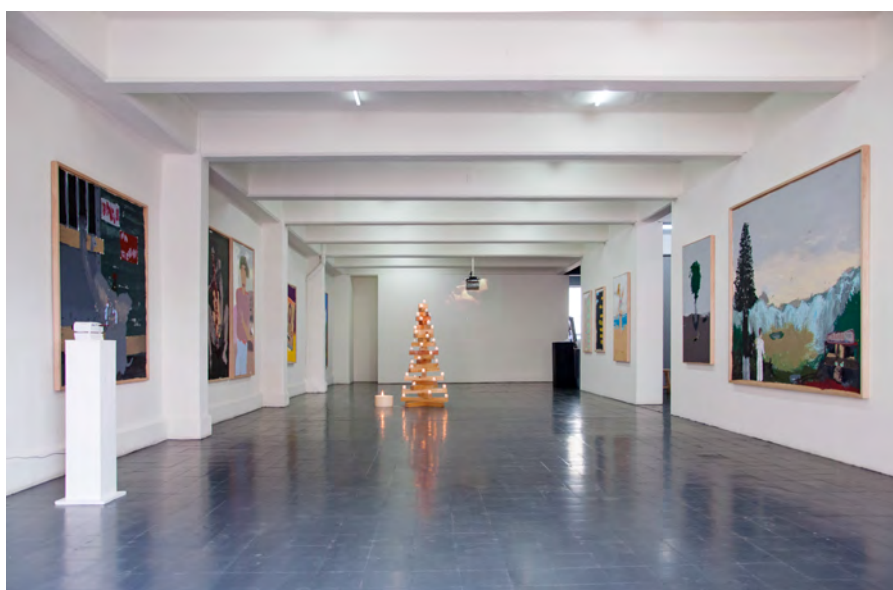


But not all the works in *Desafiando a la Autoridad* are as downtrodden; there’s a seam of humor woven through the show. “Burbujas 1” and “Burbujas 2” (“Bubbles 1 and 2”) show lonely chains of unanswered and illegible WhatsApp and Grindr messages, creating two quiet moments of introspective minimalism amid the overt imagery in the rest of the paintings. Hanging on the same wall as the two threads of unanswered messages, one of the most plainly figurative works in the exhibition shows a blond woman running across the beach in a bathing suit. The piece is titled “At The Age Of 37 She Realized She’d Never Ride Through Paris In A Sports Car

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With *The Warm Wind In Her Hair*” after lyrics from a song by Marianne Faithfull, which captures Solano’s mix of self-deprecation and fascination with pop fame.

The entire show — even the cheesy stance of anti-authoritarianism articulated in its title — evokes the 1990s, when the 30-year-old painter came of age. The sensation of the end of more innocent times, the end of modernism, the end of childhood, the looming threat of Y2K, and the coming uncertainty of the 21st century is most poignant in “Male,” one of three video works in the show.



In “Male,” grainy footage of Solano before he was diagnosed with HIV is mixed with clips from ’90s music videos by androgynous pop stars including Michael Jackson and Marilyn Manson, set to “Porcelain” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. “Are you wasting away in your skin,” croons Anthony Kiedis in the angsty emo classic. The rock ballad soundtrack, excerpts of familiar music videos by Jackson and Manson, and selfie-style videos of Solano, are edited together so that the artist — wearing a wig or eating an orange, among other random acts performed as is for a YouTube tutorial — mirrors the pop stars. He looks healthy and happy. Then, in one short clip, he’s crying and looks skeletal — he’s just been diagnosed. Even though the emotional charge of “Male” is expected for viewers familiar with Solano’s biography, the video manages to sustain an unexpected lightness that carries through the show.

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Solano's friends and fans in Mexico have long been privy to the artist's struggles with HIV — for which, due to medical negligence, he didn't receive treatment until an infection left him pockmarked and blind. Now that his health is stable and he's receiving the treatment he needs, what comes next? Can he divorce his work from his autobiographical journey as a tortured artist, or is that the foundation upon which he paints? Below the teary, adolescent surface of the work in this show, there's an effervescent humor and self-consciousness, which could provide Solano with a launching pad to rise above a one-dimensional, romantic caricature.

Manuel Solano's *Desafiando a la Autoridad* is on view at Karen Huber gallery (Bucareli 120, first floor, Col. Juarez, Mexico City) until August 12.