

Up Close and Personal: Artist Manuel Solano on Their Electric, Formidable Portraits

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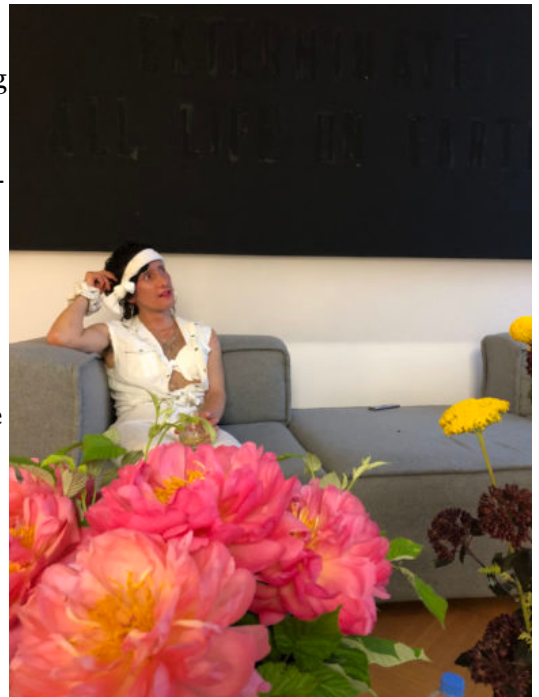
Installation view of “Manuel Solano: Oronda” at Open Forum, Berlin, 2018.
COURTESY OPEN FORUM

The women in Manuel Solano’s wall-sized acrylic-on-canvas portraits are intimidating. Statement hair in bobs or beards, paired with ultra-bright make-up and mega-accessories, pop from the canvas to broadcast the big personalities of celebrities and Solano’s own family members. But the portraits’ potency comes in part because they are painted entirely from memory.

Solano, who is non-binary and prefers plural pronouns, lost their sight in 2013 from an HIV-related infection. Since gradually going blind, they have developed a technique for painting on canvas with acrylics, using tactile markers for their hands, which results in amplified features and fashion. Because Solano draws on memories, the pop stars and formidable female figures they select for commemoration are an autobiographical pantheon of the painter’s formative influences.

Born in 1987 and based in Mexico City, Solano uses a high-intensity palette of acrylic paint, and their work suggests an edgier, sexier version of Alex Katz’s portraits. Following their appearance in the 2018 New Museum Triennial in New York, they have had back-to-back shows in Berlin this summer and fall, and though their art has a distinctly retro-’80s New York energy, the particular pitch of its creativity and urbanity feels distinctly fresh, gritty, and grown-up.

For their solo show at Berlin’s Open Forum this summer, which featured five majestic portraits of women, the artist picked the title “Oronda.” This obscure Spanish word translates as a mix of arrogance and serenity that can become integrity. The show’s subjects—Nicki Minaj, two of the artist’s aunts, and Meryl Streep’s character in *The Devil Wears Prada*—seem to have internalized Pedro Almodóvar’s dictum that “you are more authentic the more you resemble what you’ve dreamed you are.”



While Solano transcends fixed gender in their personal identity, their work has the electric energy that drag generates from the friction between exaggerated gender stereotypes. At Peres Projects in the

German capital through October 26, the group show “Strange Messengers” pairs Solano with Donna Huanca, Dorothy Iannone, Ad Minoliti, and others whose Technicolor worldviews are, in the words of the gallery, “strange and non-normative . . . resisting categorization and slipping out from an often violent, patriarchic gaze.”

In an interview at Open Forum, Solano acknowledged being drawn to subjects who are “flashy, glamorous, and stylish.” When speaking about an aunt who is the subject of the most arresting diptych in the show there, the artist theorized that she wore garish make-up and bold accessories to compensate for her heavy masculine features. Her brother, Solano’s father, criticized her for looking like a drag queen. “Maybe she made all this show to feel a little more feminine,” Solano said, “a little more lady-like, and womanly.” Her personality, which the painter described as “campy,” is tempered by a vulnerability in her portrait. Facing the viewer, she looks formidable and light-spirited, but her sloped shoulders and downward gaze appear frail from the side. Solano presents her as a sympathetic clash of bluster and sensitivity.



Manuel Solano, *With a Beard*, 2018.
COURTESY PERES PROJECTS

In the same way, the portrait of the musician Peaches that Solano contributed to “Strange Messengers” is captivating for the contrast between her wide, blue eyes and thick, black Shenandoah beard. Taken from the cover of her 2003 album *Fatherfucker*, Solano’s rendition draws out Peaches’ vulnerability, creating a mystical vibe.

Solano spoke about growing up in a New Age cult in Mexico, where a female leader persecuted difference as defiance, and routinely confronted Solano with a direct stare, seeking to read loyalty or resistance. As an adult, Solano’s loss of sight has enhanced a painterly insight into strong, conflicted female characters. Solano made a show about these childhood experiences but worries that the work cannot help them to heal because, “to me, there are things that are very important to me in my work. My work needs to be funny to me, on some level. These childhood images are not funny to me or beautiful to me.” Instead, Solano picks—and projects onto—similarly larger-than-life women, explaining that the impulse in painting a laughing Meryl Streep as her Anna Wintour-like character is “to pull them down and close.”