

Miranda, Carolina A., "Painter Raul Guerrero skewers American history in wry solo show at David Kordansky Gallery," *LA Times.com*, August 14, 2021

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Painter Raul Guerrero skewers American history in wry solo show at David Kordansky Gallery

By Carolina A. Miranda | August 14, 2021



"Chez Jay: Santa Monica," 2006, by Raul Guerrero — from the artist's solo show at David Kordansky in Los Angeles. (Elon Schoenholz / David Kordansky Gallery)

In Raul Guerrero's solo exhibition at David Kordansky Gallery, you start at the end. Specifically with the word "Fin," which is painted in the undulating style of a cinematic end credit over an image of a stagecoach in the middle of a violent robbery. A man lies prone as if wounded. A woman pleads with a cowboy on horseback. Assorted bandits go about their ransacking.

The painting may depict an end of sorts, but in many ways, it's a beginning — an excellent primer on Guerrero's attitudes toward his subjects. The piece, "Ataque de Una Diligencia," 1995-2021, marries his eclectic interests: cinema, colonial history and the ways in which culture is mediated. "That's how we understand our history — as cinematic," says Guerrero via telephone. "We know it through media."

As with much of his work, it features a rich color palette and comes pre-loaded with a dose of absurdity. (The handsome lettering of the words hang like an elegant scrim over a scene of pure chaos.) The painting contains a

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"Ataque de Una Diligencia," 1995 - 2021," by Raul Guerrero — on view in the artist's solo show at Kordansky. (Elon Schoenholz / David Kordansky Gallery)

mournful aspect too. As far as the European settlement of the West was concerned, episodes such as this did spell an end of sorts. But it wasn't for the settlers; it was for the Indigenous cultures who lived in their path.

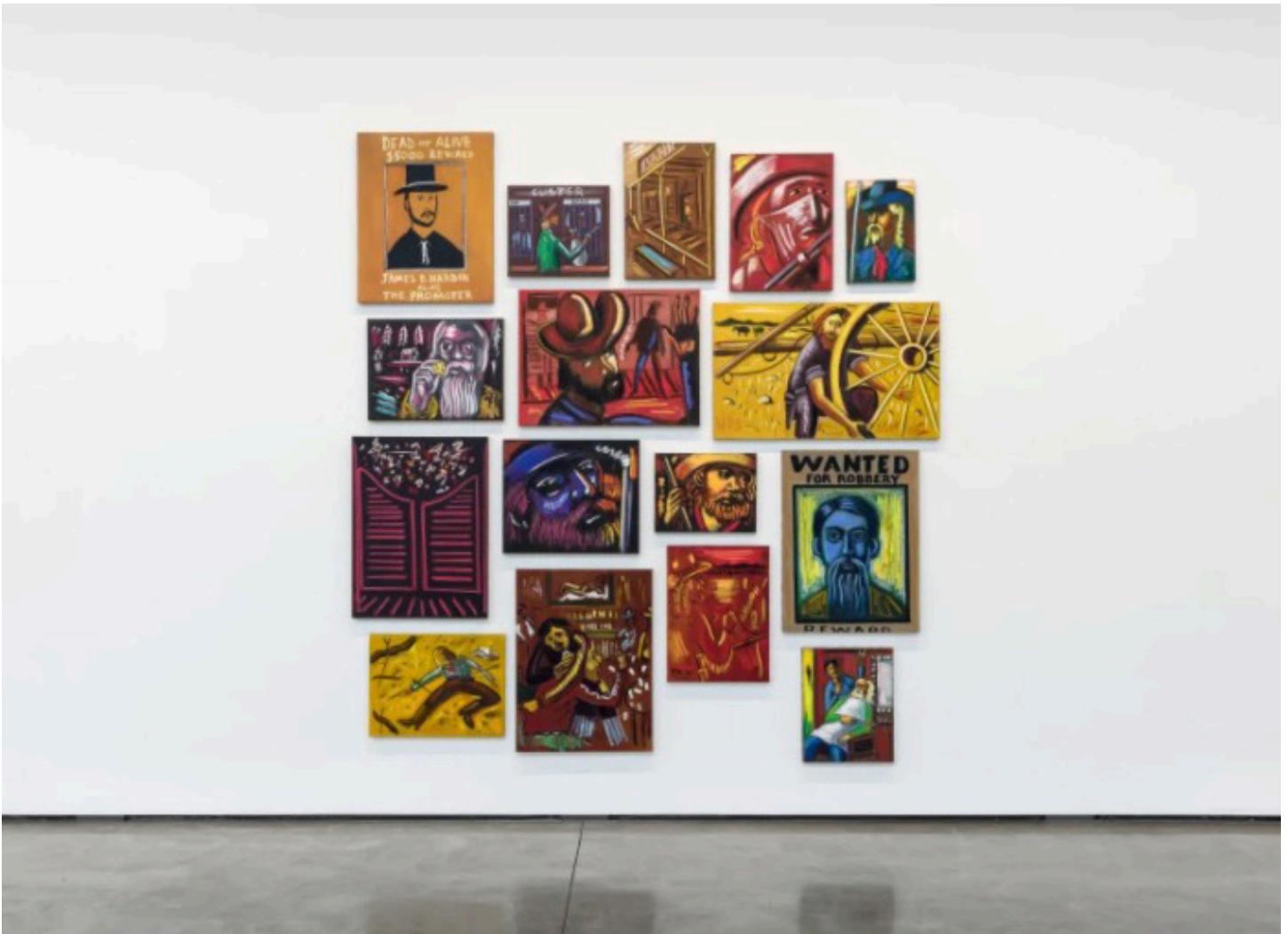
Guerrero's one-man show, "Fata Morgana," at Kordansky through the end of the month, offers a generous sampling of the sorts of images and ideas that drive this long-time Southern California painter's work.

Born in Brawley, Guerrero grew up in National City and lives in San Diego. His father's family was Indigenous — Tarahumara or Apache, he says — while his mother's relatives were descended from Spain and France. He occupied a hybrid reality in more ways than one: Like a lot of Mexican Americans who grow up along the border, he spent his life traveling back and forth between Mexico and the United States and inhabiting a territory (Southern California) where those realities overlap in myriad ways.

"You are going through these paradigm shifts and these different reality shifts," he says. "That inspires the imagination, simply because you are living in a shifted situation."

Now 75, Guerrero has never settled into one reality, and the show at Kordansky — which features paintings from various stages of his career — reflects that. This includes paintings of food, bar interiors, invented histori-

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An installation view of paintings from Raul Guerrero's "The Black Hills" series, painted in 2021. (Jeff McLane / David Kordansky Gallery)

cal scenes, canvases inspired by filmmaking and his appropriations of romantic 19th century paintings of Native Americans.

One series was inspired by his journeys through South Dakota in the 1990s. Driving through the Pine Ridge Reservation, he hung out with a group of Indigenous women who had car trouble. This was followed by his own automotive break-down in the Black Hills where he ended up in a joint worthy of a Hollywood Western.

"The first night I walk into this bar/restaurant/saloon and it's 1990 and my hair is dark and I'm Mexican ... and I thought, I'm going to get killed," he says. "These men are all at the bar and they all have long hair and beards and they look like they are straight out of a movie. I realized that everything I knew about this place was through media — movies, television."

In the wake of that journey, he placed some of those faces in paintings inspired by the history of Western settlement, but also by Westerns. There are barroom standoffs and "Wanted" posters and Gen. George Custer getting shot with arrows. All of this is delivered in a deeply saturated color palette that Guerrero describes as "Looney Tunes."

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Raul Guerrero's painting "Hot Dog: The Weinerschnitzel," 2006. (Elon Schoenholz / David Kordansky Gallery)

It's an interesting parallel. The ways in which U.S. history is recounted can sometimes feel like a cartoon.

A pair of paintings depicting a hot dog and a chorizo platter in sickeningly garish colors show an artist who likes playing with his food. (He crafts faces out of mustard and jalapeños.) They also serve as his observations on the ways in which food travels across cultures.

"If you think of Mexican food ... it's chiles, it's tortillas de maíz, it's carnitas, aguacates [avocados]," he says. "These are all Indigenous foods. I find it interesting that it's taken ahold of the society. Everybody creates or digs Mexican food. But what they are really digging is Indigenous food.

"Could it be that Indigenous philosophy is spread through the food?" he asks. "That's an interesting premise."

What do paintings of hot dogs and the Black Hills have in common? Guerrero's perceptive eye. These are works that are less about the objects than the ways in which they are perceived. The paintings, taken together, function as a humorous ethnography of our culture — the American one, the Mexican one, the Indigenous one and the ways in which they fuse and collide in this place we now call Southern California.