

W



Photo by Stephanie Noritz

STUDIO VISIT

Lowriders and A.I. Collide at Mario Ayala's New SFMOMA Show

"Sitting on Chrome," a three-person show also featuring the works of rafa esparza and Guadalupe Rosales, opens August 3.

by **Michael Slenske**
Photographs by **Stephanie Noritz**
Aug. 4, 2023

A few years before the ascendant Los Angeles-based multimedia artist Mario Ayala was born, his father, a long-haul truck driver originally from Cuba, was fixing up an early 1980s Chevrolet Monte Carlo. "He had it all tricked out with hydraulics and Dayton rims, and it was painted coke-white with an all-red, button-tufted interior," Ayala says from the sitting area of his sprawling studio in Boyle Heights, just east of downtown Los Angeles. Although the artist now has his own green 1974 Monte Carlo with hydraulics, Ayala was never able to see his dad's creation. "He abandoned that car when he had me and my sister. The way it's been described to me, it was like sitting inside a coffin."

Dressed in black Vans, paint-stained Dickies, and a black t-shirt, 32-year-old Ayala sips an espresso and smokes American Spirits. Meanwhile, he holds forth on his early education in lowrider culture—the inspiration behind "Sitting on Chrome," a collaborative exhibition on view from August 3 to February 19, 2024 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that he's participating in with his friends and fellow Angeleno artists rafa esparza and Guadalupe Rosales. Ayala's interest in the lowrider world began in earnest as a kid growing up in Fontana, California. Considered the Inland Empire trucking capital, halfway between L.A. and Palm Springs, Fontana was home to the California Speedway, a mecca for hot rod enthusiasts.



Mario Ayala, *Earth Angel*, 2020.
Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

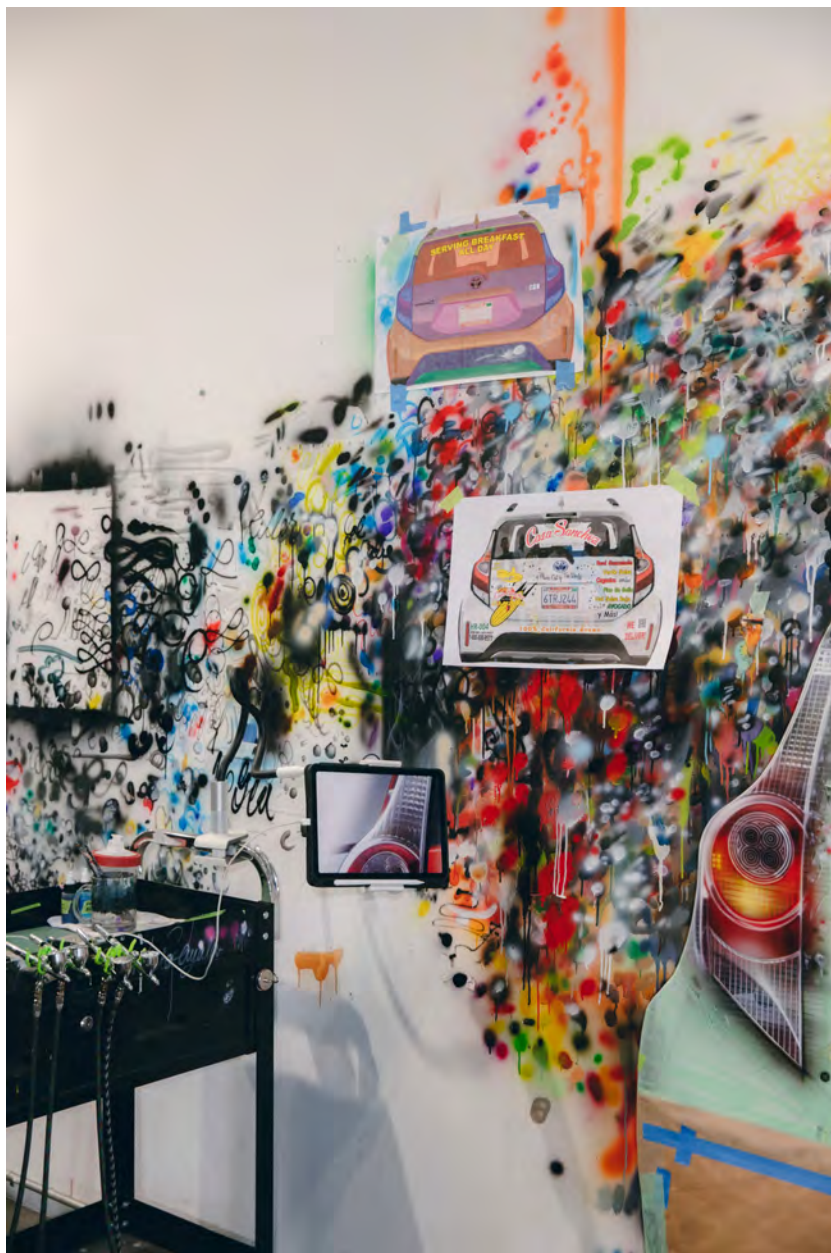


Photo by Stephanie Noritz

Fontana also inspired Ayala's most ambitious solo exhibition to date, "Truck Stop," which opened last fall at Jeffrey Deitch's New York gallery. There, Ayala populated the gallery with a sculpture of himself as the Muffler Man (holding an airbrush gun in his hands), a to-scale roadside chapel like the ones he'd visited with his father as a child, and a few dozen of his signature airbrush paintings—which are equal parts social realism and hyper-realism—made with precise stencils and cutting-edge paints like Lumilor, which allows some of his works to literally light up. Ayala's canvases are dense layer cakes filled with icons from both art history and his own personal history, embedded with references ranging from Diego Rivera murals to Art Laboe, the radio DJ who coined the term "oldies but goodies" and was instrumental in integrating dance halls across Southern California.



Photo by Stephanie Noritz

Ayala became an expert in custom paints and airbrush techniques after graduating from San Francisco Art Institute in 2014. While the ballpoint sketches his father made of dogs, cars, trucks, and religious iconography on his loading receipts sparked an early interest in the creative process, Ayala had to venture to L.A. to get his first taste of the art world. In addition to the occasional visit to LACMA, he followed the work of street-style artists like Barry McGee and Cleon Peterson, as well as gallery spaces “that gravitated toward skateboarding, graffiti, and street culture,” he says. “The graphics on skateboards were a very early interest to me aesthetically.”

Right before Ayala graduated high school, he made a fateful skateboarding trip to San Francisco and fell in love with the Bay Area. Later on, while studying at SFAI, he met Audrey Revelle, who owns the Dore photography studio in San Francisco.



Photo by Stephanie Noritz

Revelle also published an untitled zine supporting Latinx stories (from addiction to fatherhood) in the vein of *Teen Angels*, an underground publication celebrating Chicano street culture that was founded by the *Lowrider* magazine artist David Holland (aka Teen Angel) in 1979. Ayala made a suite of paintings inspired by *Teen Angels* for the Hammer Museum's 2020 "Made In L.A." biennial, and often refers to his archive of brown zines in his practice.

Last December, Ayala joined the roster of David Kordansky Gallery. He is currently preparing for his solo debut at the gallery this fall. He will show ten paintings, including a shaped canvas of a lowrider viewed from behind, and another in the shape of an old projection TV that depicts the tiki bar scene from *Goodfellas*. "I feel like I'm constantly living in fear that my life is a simulation or something," Ayala says about his recent rise in the art world. "It was only four years ago that I was painting in my basement and working for another artist."

Now Ayala has a few of his own studio assistants, who are busy helping him finish "Sitting on Chrome" at SFMOMA. The crux of the show is the "hybridity of languages and histories" that inform the three artists' respective practices. Rosales favors community-generated archival projects; esparza, an institutional darling known for his performance practice and paintings on dried earth, has long been involved with the queer Latinx scene around Los Angeles. (SFMOMA originally wanted esparza to do a performance responding to the Diego Rivera mural *Pan American Unity*, currently installed at the museum—and it was he who suggested that his friends come along for the ride.)



Mario Ayala, *Reunion*, 2021.
Courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery



Mario Ayala, *Pyramid*, 2022.
Grant Gutierrez, courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery

At the museum, the trio will transform four of the second-floor galleries with a newly commissioned mural, sculptures, photographs, paintings, and archival objects that examine how lowrider culture collides with queer experiences, surveillance, and the growing integration of man and machine in the time of A.I. Additionally, Ayala is organizing a massive group show with more than 100 of Ayala's artist friends at the House of Seiko project space in a former watch repair shop in San Francisco's Mission District. It is the third iteration of similar exhibitions Ayala put together at L.A.'s In Lieu and Leo Fitzpatrick's New York gallery Public Access, which have included rising talents like Diana Yesenia Alvarado and Alake Shilling.

"I love the idea of celebration and I'm happy these group exhibitions coincide with bigger moments—it's all kind of unplanned and instinctual," says Ayala. "I want to create interesting conversations with artists who are happy to contribute. I'm not entirely sure what comes from that—but even if it's just friends and family showing up, that's enough."



Photo by Stephanie Noritz