

Sayre Gomez

Halloween City

February 19 - March 19, 2022



Over the past few years, Sayre Gomez has developed a body of work that amounts to a cognitive mapping of late America as seen through the cultural and topographic specificity of Southern California's urban sprawl. As seems fitting, this inquiry has recently taken a ghoulish turn. *Halloween City* follows in the mode of sometimes deceptive hyperrealism that Gomez pioneered in *X-Scapes* (2019) and *Apocalypse Porn* (2021), his most recent previous exhibitions at François Ghebaly. His newest works present a necroscape of abandoned malls and struggling small businesses. This is the built environment that plays host to a curious ritual every October, when Halloween stores descend into the empty husks of defunct big-box retailers, thus briefly granting them a spooky resurrection. As so often, the contemporary moment allegorizes itself here: laid low by e-commerce, physical reality becomes its own revenant.

There is a straightforward documentary impulse in much of Gomez's work. This is what Los Angeles looks like, in its gritty everydayness, in a way that the city's mythologized self-representations rarely capture. Yet upon careful looking, the simulacral precision of Gomez's technique yields to a more complex social semiotics. This art bears witness to the ongoing hollowing-out of the public sphere, to be sure, but also to the stubborn practices of place-making that survive just below the threshold of capitalist spectacle. His ubiquitous stickers (likewise trompe-l'oeil miracles), often of vintage cartoon characters, are evidence of subaltern appropriations of California's most famous export: popular culture. Human figures are almost entirely absent from this image-world (that is, apart from doubly-mediated representations of representations); still, Gomez's work hums with traces of unseen life.

His paintings of unglamorous shop windows likewise mark not so much the easily fetishized absolute newness of spectacle, but rather the simultaneous presence of multiple, temporally-staggered visual regimes as ordinary social actors take them up, piecemeal, in ordinary practice. In any one of these paintings, the viewer might find represented an almost dizzying range of media: neon signs, California Lottery LED tickers, hand-painted prices or logos (sometimes cracking or peeling off from the illusionary glass), Visa and Mastercard emblems, or warnings to would-be shoplifters.

On top of all this, reflections and transient effects of light further complicate surfaces that at first look entirely flat. These contingent, momentary effects slip across indications of a visual culture's aging. Old print advertisements turn cyan after their

black, yellow, and magenta layers, which are less lightfast, fade away over the years. Disembodied hands that clutch flowers or pearls (from the windows of a nail salon) achieve true vernacular uncanniness. Artworks such as these embody the humble ways in which surfaces become signs and then, eventually, become mere material surfaces once again. It is doubtless no coincidence that the shop window paintings share their aspect ratio with smartphone screens, thus suggesting the layering of both old and new valences of spectacle. Elsewhere, we find more ominous harbingers of the new: a “Notice of Pending Design Review” in advance of gentrifying redevelopment; a printout that advises customers with COVID-19 symptoms not to enter.

Sometimes spectacle triumphs unambiguously over the physical world. A meticulous scale-model of *The Reef*—a 12-story ‘creative habitat’ tucked beneath the 10 freeway in Downtown LA—transforms an entire building into a pedestal for the world’s largest digital billboard. This is one of countless instances in which Gomez’s techniques have a strong, dialectical relation to the tricks of the trade employed by the production designers, set decorators, scenic artists, and so forth who labor in The Industry, as it’s universally referred to in Hollywood: LA’s dream-making machine. These dreams are not so sweet. Gomez shows us how, in our benighted pre-apocalypse, the process that the philosopher Martin Heidegger called the “strife between Earth and world” becomes instead the strife between image and decay.

Sayre Gomez (b. 1982, Chicago, USA) holds an MFA from the California Institute of the Arts and a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Gomez uses hyperreal painting techniques to address themes of representation and visibility. His paintings, sculptures, and videos adopt the visual vernacular of Los Angeles, drawing on the postmodern mashup of urban sprawl, car culture, and natural beauty inherent to contemporary L.A. Recent solo exhibitions include Xavier Hufkens, Brussels; François Ghebaly, Los Angeles; and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin. Gomez’s works are held in the permanent collections of LACMA, Los Angeles; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; the mumok, Vienna; the ICA, Miami; the Aishti Foundation, Beirut; Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turino; Arsenal Contemporary, Montreal; and the Rubell Museum, Miami. He lives and works in Los Angeles, California.