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Leslie Martinez: The Secrecy of Water
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The Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston is proud to present the first solo museum exhibition of work by the Dallas-based artist Leslie Martinez.

Martinez (they/them/their) creates immersive, spellbinding paintings that explore ideas of place, climate, landscape, and personhood through unconventional methods of applying and interlaying various materials, textures, and hues on canvas. Their signature style of abstract painting features viscerally tactile and spatial atmospheres created with physical ingredients like fabric rags, recycled clothing, and crushed stone that reveal discordant visual intersections of destruction and emergence.

Born in the Rio Grande Valley of the South Texas-Mexico border, Martinez frequently traveled to and from their birthplace to Dallas. The ten-hour journey required crossing one of the deadliest Customs and Border Patrol checkpoints in the United States. Their encounters in this borderland space guided their interests in considering how racist and xenophobic perceptions of belonging and exclusion relate to the structures of existence for queer and trans peoples, as well as ideas of shapeshifting and coding necessary for survival.

Martinez translates what they consider embodied, generational knowledge of boundaries, relationships to land, and the journey through struggle as forms of ancestral wisdom that can be harnessed to generate an evolving blueprint in abstraction. Through their deeply physical painting techniques, Martinez's trans, non-binary identity plays a key role in their experimental approach and methodology. Their large-scale canvases sometimes seem to emulate a body or skin-like surface manipulated, restructured, and recombined into organic compositional shapes of radiating, flowing gestures. Alternatingly, their paintings' large pools and tiny flecks of color are the result of Martinez's exceedingly deliberate, delicate brushwork—a symbolic transference of care from the artist's own queer body to the painting. They also maintain a no-waste studio ethos, which uses a revolving repository of scraps and rocks that include failed attempts of past work and cast-off materials.

The works made for this exhibition invite readings of the current “climate”—both our physical environment and the larger sociopolitical timbre (or the political mood). Throughout our histories, the “climate” has drastically affected the ways in which people are able to exist or move through the world. The paintings are also partially inspired by a period of severe drought in Texas and across the United States in 2022. Martinez witnessed blackened patches of crops while driving through the state and likened them to scabs over a human body—dehydrated and trying to heal. Over the course of several months, Martinez watched as the scorched vegetation slowly came back to life—revealing water as an active gradient of healing. In this way, the artist came to see parallels in the pervasive, fickle nature of the societal climate and global climate crises within the quiet healing brought by rain. Simultaneously, the process of liquid evaporation—or the dissipation/disappearing of water—came to be likened to a revealing of the entangled histories that brought us to the current political and environmental climates we occupy today.

In Martinez's work, we encounter poetic, abstracted meditations on the state of the world that are fused with fluid experiments in material, color, and gesture. In the textured, painted worlds made by the artist, we are invited to imagine a queered future that offers opportunities for self-determination, resilience, and joy.

Leslie Martinez (born 1985, McAllen, TX; lives and works in Dallas, TX) received a MFA from Yale University School of Art in 2018 and a BFA from The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in 2008. Martinez has recently participated in solo and group exhibitions at Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York (2021); Commonwealth & Council, Mexico City (2022); Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York (2022); and AND NOW, Dallas (2020, 2021, 2022). In 2023, their work will be featured in solo exhibitions at Chapter NY, New York, and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles. Martinez is a recipient of the United States Latinx Art Forum's Latinx Artist Fellowship, and their work is in the collection of the Dallas Museum of Art.

Leslie Martinez: The Secrecy of Water is organized by Tyler Blackwell, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Speed Art Museum and former Cynthia Woods Mitchell Associate Curator at Blaffer Art Museum.

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