

Enrique Chagoya
Borderless

April 7 – May 13

The George Adams Gallery is pleased to present *Borderless*, a presentation of new work by Enrique Chagoya across various mediums. The exhibition will feature three new large paintings and a new codex, all on Amate paper, as well as a survey of his use of that format over the past 20 years. This will be Chagoya's ninth solo exhibition with the gallery since 2000.

As with much of his recent work, Chagoya continues to explore the colonial construct of “boundaries” – those that are created artificially through racial, social, economic and territorial divides. By conflating the ancient and the modern, the social and the political, the serious and the humorous, Chagoya pokes holes in the assumption of boundaries as being a necessary aspect of modern civilization. Himself a Mexican immigrant to the United States, his identity as an “alien” has long informed his work, allowing him to approach his subjects as an insider and outsider simultaneously. Pulling from a wide, cross-cultural vocabulary, Chagoya brings together such disparate visual idioms as comic book heroes, religious iconography, traditional Mayan figures and ethnographic illustrations, juxtaposing these disparate elements to create a wholly new visual language. By addressing such constructs as the “Enlightened Savage,” “Illegal Alien” or “Romantic Cannibal,” many of his works purport to be “Guides” to the so-called Western World. However, instead of clarifying the inner workings of, for instance, the economy to a supposed outsider, Chagoya instead highlights the absurdity of the systems that control our lives.

In Chagoya's most recent paintings, his attention is focused on the complexities of immigration, specifically in the United States. The four canvases completed this year each touch on contentious aspects of the country's immigration policy through the lens of the nation's history. In *Detention at the Border of Language*, he envisions a “trans-continental Border Patrol” as “a reminder that all nations in the Americas were created by undocumented immigrants from Europe.” Similarly, *Everyone is an Alien* reminds us that identities are fluid and in societies like the United States, xenophobia amounts to hypocrisy. A more sobering statement of the very real impact of immigration policy is his new multi-panel codex painting, *Wild Spirits that Shine Obstinate Beyond Walls*. With a graphic representation of the southern border wall running across it, Chagoya adds expressive portraits of so-called “Dreamers” in red-white-blue paint, smiling in defiance of the barriers – both physical and social – they are forced to overcome. Issues of assimilation and polarization also come into play in his other codex painting, *The New Codex Ytrebil*, which takes the form of small books made by indigenous peoples of Central America in the 16th-century. While these books were used in the instruction of the catechism, Chagoya's secular version taps into the hysteria of modern day concerns such as “ycarcomed”(democracy), “dadlaugi” (igualdad) and “egnahc” (change).

At the core of Chagoya's work is the violent history of Central America, in which the ancient Indigenous cultures were decimated by the Spanish conquest. Chagoya began creating his own versions of Mesoamerican books in the late 1990s, in part as an engagement with his personal heritage but also as a tool for critique. As few original Mayan codices survive – most were destroyed by conquistadores – and of those, none pre-date the conquests, Chagoya uses this dearth of information to bring a revisionist approach to history. While on the one hand his codices follow the traditional format of right-to-left reading, eschew written text in favor of images and are done on handmade Amate paper, the appearance of modern day symbols such as jet planes or Spider Man, bring them into the present. Colonizing actions, from military invasions to artistic appropriations, are upended in the Chagoya canon, as he imagines an alternative past where the roles have been reversed. Over the course of the past twenty years he has produced many codices, both printed and drawn, eight of which are on view here. Collectively they highlight the evolution of Chagoya's practice and the range of subjects he brings to bear in his work – in the codex format and beyond.