

Clean Hands

Benjamin Muñoz

In his newest body of work, Benjamin Muñoz seeks to redefine where power lies. With complete admiration and respect for artwork reflecting the real social and political challenges for Latino people, Muñoz looked around and realized he wanted to add something different to the cultural conversation. The works in *Clean Hands* celebrate the Chicano people's resilience, power, and ambition.

“The journey of the identity, of who we are, is complicated and multifaceted. We don't get the whole picture unless we have artwork reflecting all aspects of our experience. I didn't see much work being done in this side of the culture, and I wanted to see it in the world,” Muñoz says of this exhibition.

A second-generation Mexican immigrant, Muñoz grew up in Texas immersed in the rich Chicano culture of the region, and the title of the exhibition calls back to a conversation he had with a group of artists sitting around the studio one night. Every person in the room was a descendant of immigrants from Mexico. As they spoke of their family history, it came out that physical labor was part of everyone's stories. Their fathers and grandfathers had been construction workers and mechanics, worked in oil fields, or did other kinds of skilled labor. It was hard and honorable work, but nothing, the friends admitted, they would want to do themselves. They had clean hands and opportunities that would have never been afforded to them had they been born in Mexico, and their fathers' and grandfathers' hands reflected the labor required to get them here.

This inter-generational labor is cultural as well as personal. On colorful textured backgrounds, a nod to the vibrant walls of Mexico, Muñoz draws on and expands upon his existing iconic Calavera figures to honor the endeavors of past generations. He is inspired by the stories of Chicano people fighting for things like farmers' unions and school integrations. Stories that are hidden in traditional American education from black, brown, and white children alike, as people such as Sylvia Mendez and Emma Tenayuca are left off the pages of history textbooks. Muñoz is interested in how forefronting stories of resilience recenters narratives of power.

In *Miracle of the Masses*, a paleta chart takes center stage. Reworking the narrative of the chart being a cultural object perhaps associated with poverty or even mild pity, Muñoz reminds us that every aspect of this business is in the hands of the Chicano people. The stories of paleta starts with the people who fought and won the right to get minimum wage and days off, who picked the strawberries which go into the paleta, to those who processed them as the sign proudly declares “Assembled in America,” to the

small business owner selling the wares supporting his family. Muñoz wants people to have access to the pride they should feel in this part of Chicano culture and understand what goes into creating the bright confections.

In *Ascendancy*, Muñoz honors the Chicano entrepreneurs who create successful and beneficial businesses in communities, often those deemed “essential” during the Covid-19 lockdowns. These businesses usually thrive despite working against the odds of not qualifying for loans or not speaking the language. To succeed under these circumstances takes incredible grit, intelligence, and ingenuity.

The Calavera in *Viva la Raza* is perhaps the literal or spiritual descendant of the figure in *Ascendancy* as he reads his newspaper from his larger, more established store. The headline reads, “¡Protecting The Culture!”. Below the headline, the image of the barrel refers to a developer, who was quoted in *D Magazine* as calling West Dallas “the bottom of the barrel.” West Dallas is a neighborhood populated by predominantly black and brown residents and is where Muñoz keeps his studio.

The figures and stories in Muñoz's new ambitious body of work (spanning two sites throughout the course of the exhibition) are triumphant celebrations – a love letter to his culture.

Muñoz says, “I wanted to make work that told the story of how powerful we are as a race and as a people. I think it is okay to take a breath and look back at what we’ve done, then go right back to fighting for more.”

— Miranda K. Metcalf
Director, *Hello, Print Friend*