

The Forest and the Trees: An Interview with Alex Becerra

BY WILLIAM KHERBEK | OCTOBER 03, 2019



“Frau Kupke,” 2019, Oil on linen Öl auf Leinwand 79 x 71 in 200 x 180 cm
(Courtesy Weiss Gallery)

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The title of [Alex Becerra](#)’s exhibition at Weiss Gallery is “Waldeinsamkeit.” It is a difficult word to translate into the English language; literally it would be something like “forest loneliness” or “woodland solitude.” The weight of German Romanticism lies heavy in the word, as do the dark shadows of the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales. It is odd, then, that the word generally seems to have a positive connotation, conveying something of a sense of oneness with the natural world as much as isolation. The title may be an incongruous one for Becerra, a painter from Los Angeles whose heritage and geography place him in the milieu of Chicano painting, the leading exponents of which include figures

like Carlos Almaraz, Frank Romero, Patssi Valdez, and Melesio Casas. While it is true that Becerra's images often evoke the signifiers of LA Chicano culture (the lowrider car for example), and he frequently takes inspiration from the commercial assault that is the Los Angeleno visual ecology (screaming billboards, escort directories...), his painterly idiom has as much connection to Max Beckmann as to Raul Guerrero. It is perhaps because of a determination to create an embracing form of painting that Becerra's art is able to connect across culture, striving toward the kind of unity between artist, viewer and painting that underpins "waldeinsamkeit." We spoke on the opening evening of his exhibition, which runs through 22 July.

Could you discuss the ways in which you approach your source materials, both in terms of finding sources — be they digital or analogue —, and in your approach to the production of your images? Your practice of layering or stacking images evokes the way images appear online, for example in various open tabs or windows, but of course uses the historical painterly support of canvas.

I would say it's a combination. There was this moment after I did the show in Chicago with my gallery there where I had time to take a step back and really reassess the processes, trying to not let technique become style, and to not let the mastering and manipulating of material become the thing that I'm recognized for. There's so much experimenting that still needs to happen for me to get where I think I need to go.

I really like digging through my drawings. Often it ends up leading to a new idea, and that leads to new bodies of work. It extends from an abundance of material that, for whatever reason, shouldn't necessarily make sense together. There's something about my drawings that's not translating into painting. There's a lot of erasing that happens in my drawings and I feel like that should be a technique in my paintings. But how does that translate into painting versus [treating] erasure as a mistake? For a lot of people that I talk to about painting, the only

time you would cover something up is because you messed up, rather than using that as a way to potentially create another problem to lead to a solution.

In terms of the materiality of the process of creation, could you speak about the way embodiment features in your work? I find there is often a tension between presence and perception in your paintings: they are objects, but their allusiveness refuses to disclose a full narrative.

Whatever a painting is physically, it becomes a very personal thing in the gesture and the action. I always like to think of the artworks as not necessarily a finished process, but that in making the works, I got to experience the best part of it. It's amazing that people can support the practice, and obviously it keeps me going, but the type of work I end up making comes out of these gestures.

Though it's a somewhat fraught question, could you say a bit about how you position your work in relation to the history of "Chicano painting?" Is it a lineage that you are appealing to directly, or is it something you're attempting to redefine or even escape?

It's tough. I've had this discussion with a lot of my friends who are Latin in LA, especially that dialogue around the current emergence of Chicax or Latinx. I don't want to say I'm so far removed from it, but I think for me that "x" stands for the newer generation adapting Chicano. I would never use "Chicano" for my own description of the work, aside from certain images that I'm pulling from that culture originally. It's tough, because that word is so charged in LA. Chicano is a very specific time and political ideology — a rebellion against the kind of whiteness that was repressing that culture. I look back at my older work, and it's so informed by the iconography and these symbols and the language [of Chicano painting], but I was never using it politically as a statement, more as a compositional thing.

Your works also exhibit a strong 20th-century European dimension as well. Could you speak about this strain of influence and the way it informs your painterly concerns, perhaps especially with regard to how you approach the figuration versus abstraction dynamic?

I love that combination! The more I ended up in some ways rejecting what were these prolific Latin painters in LA and going through this kind of European cycle, the more I've ended up returning to them. I'm such a romantic with painting, and looking at stuff like Die Brucke, Nolde and Kirchner, then looping back to the Chicano muralists and painters, I wasn't in the heaviness of it — in the student protests and this really large rebellion — but I ended up coming back to it and realizing it was a resistance through the understanding of this European resistance to the Germanness of their culture.

I've been attracted to that attitude in painting. I think part of my growing up was that I had to reject my own culture to do the full circle. To be like, "Why did nobody tell me about Asco — this great performance group that was in LA — the most legendary Chicano performing arts and muralist group?" How did that come *after* German Expressionism for me? It's odd, but I didn't have Latin teachers, and some didn't think it was important to learn. Then you get to Mario Ybarra Jr. and Ruben Ochoa and people who were doing stuff in LA, again, directly linked to that experience.

There is considerable difficulty in reckoning with such distinct intellectual lineages. How do you manage that tension?

There is a full embracing of it. My painting could be described as those worlds colliding. Often there are these images that keep coming up. [For example], while I'm not so fully in love with the lowrider culture, there are certain aspects of it as objects, like the mirror under a lowrider car to show the undercarriage, that to me has a lineage in European painting as [the depiction of] a reflection. It really becomes a language of image-making, and it ends up as a clash of both of those [histories].

For some reason, I'm still using the rims and baby Dayton's [wheel rims] as an object of desire, but also as it's a very specific thing, it's hard because I think that I have to keep using it to still accept it. The lowrider car is dealt with as a figure, and it's done in a way that is fetishized, and they put these women on them. This shit is ingrained in you: every billboard, even if it's selling a belt, has got the most gorgeous woman, or the most handsome guy, selling you underpants. Everything is hypersexualized. In LA, the car and the body are always present. It is fetishizing, but it's also a way of understanding beauty through a body. There are these things that advertising has done in LA that are so crazy, but it is also a source to pull from. It's no coincidence that the body is falling into my lap as source material.

To return to that abstraction question, in some of my older paintings from a few years ago, it should not make sense visually why that's a figure, and that was the beginning of them leading to abstraction — some sort of abstraction. The eye needs very little, just a part of something for the mind to register figuration. I've just recently been thinking of this as a way to achieve abstraction through figuration, because the minute it gets transferred to a painting and material is pushed around, we're in a whole new ballgame.

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