

Hely Omar Gonzalez
Workhorse

May 7 - June 1, 2022

When he was growing up in San Jose, California, Hely Omar Gonzalez took family road trips every summer in his father's 1988 Toyota Hi-Lux mini truck to visit his grandparents in Tecate, Mexico. "It was always a scene with my dad's truck because it was really flashy with these clean wheels, this metallic crimson paint job, and a lowered profile," recalls Gonzalez, "we rolled into Tecate like rock stars."

As the eldest son in his family, Gonzalez was preparing to inherit this beloved truck but hard times forced his father to sell it just before his 16th birthday. "I was heartbroken, but that truck really got me into cars, car culture and this California Chicano lowrider scene," says Gonzalez, who poured over reader-submitted art in the back of lowrider magazines before going deep into social realism and Romanticism. "Seeing how creative people were with their cars got me into drawing and painting."

To inaugurate the gallery's new Project Space in Los Angeles at 6150 Wilshire Boulevard, Praz-Delavallade is thrilled to present *Hely Omar Gonzalez: Workhorse* (opening May 7, 2022 | 6-9PM) The exhibition, curated by Michael Slenske, is a two-year painting study by the Long Beach-based artist focusing on the labor, humanity, and socio-political currency behind the Toyota Hi-Lux mini truck, from local leisure pursuits to international rebel insurgencies. Grounded in a neon-classical palette, Gonzalez's cinematic landscapes and Romantic portraiture are part self-portrait, part social commentary.

"At this moment in human history it's a beautiful thing to find this commonality between people of different belief systems, cultures, races, and creeds even if it's over something as simple as this little truck that could," says Gonzalez, who studied painting at the Laguna College of Art & Design. After earning his BFA, he moved to Long Beach and began a series of conceptual portraiture projects that led him to live and work in the marijuana harvesting scene around Mt. Shasta in 2016 (which resulted in a series of paintings inspired by *The Gleaners*, the seminal 1857 oil painting by Jean-François Millet depicting three women gleaning the stray stalks from a wheat field after a harvest). During the pandemic, Gonzalez happened upon an ad for a 1989 Toyota 4Runner, a 4x4 passenger version of his father's Hi-Lux, which served as the impetus for *Workhorse*. "I essentially bought this truck as a work truck, but in researching the history of the Hi-Lux I found that the uses spanned from SoCal lowrider culture to being this war machine that helped the Chadians defeat [Libyan president Muammar] Gaddafi and

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his fully funded army in what became known as the Great Toyota War,” explains Gonzalez, referring to the late 1980s conflict that gave birth to the Technical, a light-weight civilian pickup truck that was easy to fix and could safely navigate minefields while carrying machine guns and anti-tank missiles. He also studied *The Toyota Way*, a business manual on the advanced production system developed by the Japanese industrialist Eiji Toyoda that relies on efficiency, innovation, and heavy investments in workers.

“At the end of day the Hi-Lux is a tool of uprising,” says Gonzalez, who also teases out formal connections in the iconography, profile, and color values of the trucks. The hard-edge lines, which almost evoke Manga comics, always seem to rise to the foreground in Gonzalez’s paintings whether the truck is located in Los Angeles, Africa, or Afghanistan. “From an aesthetic and narrative perspective, it’s a very fruitful subject that connects my work to this tool for specialized labor, be it metal scrapping in the alleys of Long Beach, to the makeshift taxis in Thailand, even to guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan. As someone who’s worked as a specialized laborer, I know that this pursuit is a common one. These people are all getting a job done to lift themselves out from obscurity, poverty, or tyranny.”

Hely Omar Gonzalez (b. 1984) lives and works in Los Angeles, CA and graduated with a BFA from Laguna College of Art & Design. Born to immigrant parents, Gonzalez grew up in a culturally rich and diverse home in North Highlands, CA. Gonzalez’s work derives from his personal experiences and investigates a desire to communicate through representations of labor, race and leisure. His work has been exhibited in group shows at Tlalo Studios, the Watts Better Initiative, domicile (.n) gallery and Sotheby’s and will be featured in forthcoming shows at Charlie James Gallery and the Museo Museum and Cultural Center in Anaheim.

Michael Slenske is a Los Angeles-based writer, editor and curator. He is a contributing writer for Los Angeles magazine, a contributing editor for Galerie, and has served as the editor-at-large of CULTURED and LALA and as a contributing editor at the Los Angeles Times’s DesignLA, Modern Painters and Art + Auction. Slenske runs and curates the artist-led pop-up The Street & The Shop (@thestreetandtheshopla), which has been staged at Tin Flats, Frieze LA, and at NeueHouse Bradbury. Slenske has also curated exhibitions at Wilding Cran Gallery, The Landing Gallery, domicile (n.) and Spring/Break Art Show.

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