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Jose Alvarez
The Promised Land
May 31 – August 17, 2019

Opening Reception: Friday, May 31, 6:00pm – 8:00pm

Gavlak Los Angeles is pleased to present, *The Promised Land*, a solo exhibition of Jose Alvarez (D.O.P.A.)'s 28 ballpoint pen on paper portraits alongside an exuberant collage. This is Alvarez's second presentation in Los Angeles and his fifth with the gallery. The portraits are of fellow detainees, made during Alvarez's two-month detainment at the Krome Detention Center in Miami, Florida in 2012. Though the drawings in his *Krome* series are in strong contrast to Alvarez's oeuvre, they evoke a similar awareness - the ability to recognize our true selves in another human being.

As Alvarez notes, while much contemporary art today delves into the horrors of modern-day life, his work chooses to also explore the compassion, generosity, bravery, and immense creativity that exists in the world. Alvarez's work connects with the thread of humanity that runs through each of us and creates a place where people can be transformed and restored through grappling with the conceptual, aesthetic and transformative power of art. Working in various mediums, such as works-on-paper, mineral crystal paintings, wall murals, and video works, Alvarez explores the intersection of mysticism, science, spirituality and how the construction of belief systems all connect to the strong human desire for knowledge and transformation.

Born in Venezuela as Deyvi Orangel Peña Artega, a name he would later reclaim as D.O.P.A., Alvarez immigrated to the United States in the eighties to escape a life of persecution as a gay man. When Alvarez's visa expired, the artist acquired false papers and assumed the name of Jose Alvarez. Under this name, he started his art career and performed alongside his partner The Amazing Randi – a magician well known for debunking the myth of psychics. In 2012, Alvarez was brought up on charges of identity theft, ultimately spending two months at Krome Detention Center.

Feeling alone and despondent upon his arrival, Alvarez's cellmate, Julio, prodded him by saying "Get up. Don't let the depression beat you. Who are you? What do you do?" Upon responding that he was an artist, Julio brought him pen and paper and asked Alvarez to draw him. 29 portraits followed, 28 currently installed at eye level in the gallery, each accompanied by the stories these men began to tell Alvarez as he drew them with a single ballpoint refill at his disposal (the whole pen was not allowed, as the plastic could be used as a weapon - one such pen is on view in the gallery in a vitrine). The atmosphere and culture of homophobia and machismo seemed to dissolve as Alvarez provided a safe, comfortable space where these men for the first time felt truly seen. Simple yet powerful, these portraits humanize men that are otherwise portrayed as a statistic. Their stories show the challenges they faced getting to the United States and the families that await their return. In a 2016 interview for WLRN, Florida's flagship NPR member station, Alvarez commented on his fellow inmates, stating, "A lot of them have that gaze. A quiet desperation, I guess. Waiting to see what was going to be their fate." In his drawings, Alvarez absorbs the quiet gaze head-on, portraying the frowning sitters with eyes wide open and unyielding: a mirror for humanity. Alvarez does not know the fate of the men in these portraits and it is assumed that most, if not all, were deported to their countries of origin.

From an art historical standpoint, portraits were reserved for the royal, wealthy, or those of other political high standing. As portraiture has classically been used as a symbol of status, and as an indication of positions of power and wealth, Alvarez gives agency to these illegal immigrants through his hand-drawn renderings. Here, Alvarez empowers these men by giving them a portrait of themselves, and although many are separated from their family, provides a sense of strength. In the current political climate, this space and agency given to illegal immigrants is a vital and important element to help bolster a humanizing conversation about immigration in America today.

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Upon his release from Krome, Alvarez created the first iteration of *The Promised Land*, a large collage work featuring mica, porcupine quills, feathers, and acrylic paint. Though in visual contrast to his austere and dignified ink portraits, the work explores similar themes of truth, compassion, and consciousness. In the current exhibition, Alvarez debuts a new mica collage work – *The Promised Land (I Lift My Lamp Remix)* – the title referencing the quote at the base of the Statue of Liberty, which closes with, “I lift my lamp beside the golden door.” Alvarez’s golden mica works are a door to another reality that offers freedom, beauty, connectedness, and the expansion of the mind and soul.

Alvarez was originally drawn to the use of shamanistic materials in his collage works due to influence by the writings of shaman and anthropologist Carlos Castaneda, who cites items such as porcupine quills and feathers as tools to obtain knowledge. Alvarez’s work is largely influenced by shamanic traditions and traits of the magical world, always interested in exploring the space between the fantastic and philosophical. The genesis of many of the shapes depicted in these works can be traced back to fractal elements of the natural world. Alvarez suspends shapes from the natural world within his mica pieces, creating a rippling effect inside this parallel universe.

Jose Alvarez is now based in South Florida. He is married to his longtime partner, James Randi - otherwise known as The Amazing Randi - who is recognized worldwide as the foremost investigator of paranormal claims. He is the founder of the skeptical movement and a fierce adversary of psychic and faith healers. He collaborated with Alvarez in creating *Carlos*, a supposed 2000-year-old spirit that inhabited Alvarez. Alvarez performed as Carlos around the world from China and Italy to Australia for almost 20 years, video documentation of which was exhibited at the 2002 Whitney Biennial as well as during his solo exhibition at The Kitchen in New York. In 2014, a documentary following the life of Randi and Alvarez, titled “An Honest Liar”, was released to international acclaim. As much of Alvarez’s art, the film paints a life between skepticism and belief.

Jose Alvarez (b. 1961, Caracas, Venezuela) attended the School of Visual Arts and currently lives and works in South Florida. A selection of the portraits in this exhibition will be featured later this year at The Drawing Center in New York as part of the group exhibition, *The Pencil is a Key, Drawings by Incarcerated Artists*. All 30 portraits have been previously exhibited in *Krome: Faces of Detention*, at the Boca Raton Museum of Art in Boca Raton, FL (2016-17). Alvarez’s work has been presented in many solo exhibitions, among them; The Kitchen, New York, NY (2007); and Rosa De La Cruz’ Moore Space, Miami, FL (2008). Alvarez has also been included in notable group exhibitions, including, *Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY (2002); *Beauty Reigns: A Baroque Sensibility in Recent Painting*, Akron Museum, Akron, OH (2015), *Beauty Reigns*, McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, TX (2014); *Altered States: Jose Alvarez, Yayoi Kusama, Fred Tomaselli, and Leo Villareal*, The Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL (2011); *The Big Reveal*, Kemper Museum, Saint Louis, MO (2011); *Natural Renditions*, Marlborough Gallery, New York, NY (2010); and *Cosmic Wonder*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA (2006), among others.

An artist's reception will take place Friday, May 31, from 6-8pm at Gavlak Los Angeles (1034 North Highland Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90038).

For more information concerning the exhibition, please contact Lauren Wood at lauren@gavlagallery.com, or (323) 467-5700.