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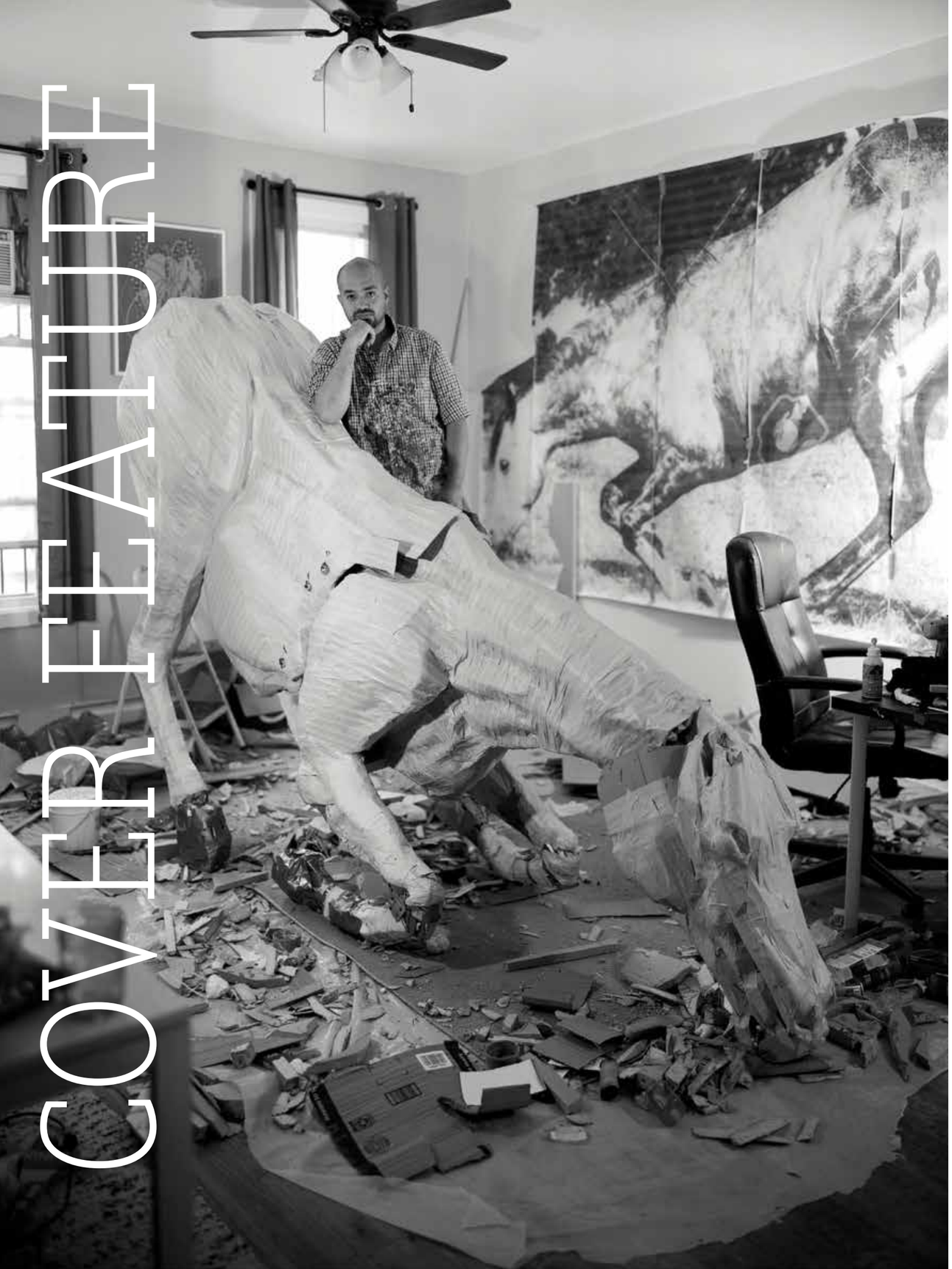

Esteban del Valle

DETERMINING THE WEIGHT

by André van der Wende

ESTEBAN DEL VALLE LIVES IN STORIES. HE DESCRIBES HIMSELF AS AN interdisciplinary artist, a dry term for a creative mind that straddles multiple mediums and manners of visual expression, be it video, performance, installation, murals, sculpture, or a fluid blend of painting and drawing. He is, however, first and foremost, a narrative artist—one who uses multiple means to tell a story that's political, personal, or a combination of both.

"I think I go for the weight of a mood in a story," del Valle says. "If you log in to watch the new Dave Chappelle and you're a Dave Chappelle fan, you kind of know where it's going to go . . . but there's this weight right before a joke starts. My only entry point, in the two-dimensional space, to narrative, is really trying to find the weight of the story that's starting, that we're in the middle of. I don't see it as my responsibility anymore to leave you the breadcrumbs to let you know where the story started or where it might end, or even to communicate a story at all."

Late last summer, del Valle had his third show, *The End Is Near*, at the Albert Merola Gallery, its modest confines ably accommodating his smaller works on paper. But that's the tip of a creative iceberg for an artist who likes to stretch his legs with large-scale murals, epic-sized canvases, multimedia installations, and a stream of noir-ish short films that explore politics with a slightly Surrealist bent.

The COVID-19 crisis has forced him to simplify and scale down. Last summer, as the pandemic ascended, del Valle had to quarantine, and finally abandon his residency and mural project, at Alabama's Auburn University, where he was staying in a one-bedroom apartment with his partner. The space was small, everything stripped down: inks, colored pencils, paper. "The work got to be the size of my desk," he recalls. "I couldn't work any bigger. It was all just colored pencils, and I loved it! It became a meditative space, it became very reflective, the drawings were done in a way that felt very intimate, the content was very very intimate."

Esteban del Valle, with *Worst Day Ever: Which ridge is next* in progess, Brooklyn, 2019 PHOTO BY CHRIS LONGYNE

The End is Near: Happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear . . ., 2020, color pencil on paper, 16½" x 14"

The End is Near: A very long day, 2020, color pencil on paper, 14 11/16" x 12½"

Pandemic-related drawings of washing his hands with his partner, or of the two lying in bed together while he watches the COVID-related news over his phone, are tender and empathetic. One piece in the *Worst Day Ever* series, *Daylight has come and there's no way we're gonna eat all those bananas* (2019), is a laugh-out-loud, mixed-media triumph of marker, acrylic, colored pencil, graphite, collage, and spray paint on paper. Here, del Valle strikes a tone between sexual abundance, vulgarity, and tender domesticity. Even when the images feel full, they are never fussy.

At age thirty-six, under the cloud of the pandemic, del Valle is producing some of his most personal work ever: autobiographical glimpses of a private inner life as it responds to a tumultuous outer one. It's a silver lining for an artist who normally maintains a strong political tone in his work through his gallery installations, oversized canvases, and the open arena of his public murals. He's a master of the large scale and, as an openly political artist, the size matches the provocation of the message.

"I'm trying to explore my everyday life and inject satirical images with a sense of vulnerability. The goal is to create a new 'political cartoon,' one that reflects the complicated nature of our involvement in the social and economic power dynamics at play in America," he says.

For an artist who likes to employ satire, the realities of the past year have presented a particular challenge for him, "because there was nothing funny about COVID!" he says. Returning to his small two-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, New York, in the middle of last summer, he had to put a pause on large-scale work, instead studiously focusing on works on paper and commissions that give him 100 percent creative freedom. He completed one modest mural last November, but things are still far from back to normal.

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DEL VALLE GREW UP in Humboldt Park, Chicago, a predominantly Puerto Rican and African American neighborhood. "That's where I was initially exposed to murals," del Valle remembers. "There were murals throughout my community—graffiti murals, community murals—which has always had a big impact on me, and it is something that I keep coming back to in my own work." Encountering murals that often had a political bent in his everyday life brought about the first stirring of a political consciousness, further reinforced by his father, who was the first hispanic state senator in Illinois history, as well as the first elected to the Chicago City Clerk's office.

"Politics was always in the air," says del Valle, who helped with fundraisers and community political events when his father ran for mayor of Chicago. "He was always a very grassroots-based politician. There were always small community gatherings, never fancy events, and always connected to activism." His father applied his own strong moral code in his political work, but always did so with humility, del Valle remembers.

"I grew up within this community, and also grew up with a father who was a community figure. That had a big impact on the content of my work and the directions I've taken. The work I was already looking at was about community identity, but there was also a lot about labor movements, and activism against gun violence. It was in the content of the art I was looking at and was compelled by."

When he was around seven, del Valle's artistic education expanded when he began visiting the Art Institute of Chicago. The institution offered him an informal glimpse of the formal canon of art history through the seminal works in its collection, which del Valle still references today.

"I just remember always wanting to go back to the Art Institute," he recalls. "I have a very clear memory of my first experience seeing the van Gogh painting *The Bedroom* (1889). That really had a profound impact on me at a young age." It must have: learning that the eye can complete an image even when all the details aren't there is a formative experience for many artists. El Greco's later paintings of pallid figures with elongated, sinewy features would also come to play a part in the way that del Valle renders the figure.

Aided and abetted by his two brothers, del Valle continued to be drawn to graffiti and hip-hop culture, becoming increasingly absorbed in an attempt to deconstruct their typography of shapes, consuming the music and its messages of empowerment while noticing the power of a unique type of persona that was both performer and artist. Born of the streets, the form had given the young and disenfranchised a voice. Del Valle gained an understanding of the culture and its artists in the process of deconstructing its various art forms. "I just started piecing this culture together backwards," he says.

Hip-hop culture remains a pervasive influence in his work. "I like to give hip-hop a lot of credit," he says. "It wasn't just graffiti—it's the way you start to think about the world around you that comes from hip-hop. I think it's such a beautiful culture, the fact that it came out of young people, that young people created it, that it promotes a space of creativity without needing much, and it also promotes constant collaborative effort."

The love of collaboration is what compels del Valle to work frequently on installation projects and community murals as platforms for political and community engagement. Large-scale, collaborative work created in public spaces is a visual salve administered to soothe the collective pain of injustice and loss, and a medium for dialogue and education, creating what he calls "a space of reflection." To date, he's completed more than fifty murals nationally and internationally that address subject matter both personal and political.

"The political content can come organically, depending on the context and the circumstances under which the mural is being painted," del Valle says, explaining that he takes into account both the neighborhood and the function of the space in which he's creating as he works on public projects. Initially, working in such forms required a "fake it 'til you make it" approach for him, and he learned as he went along. Graffiti and mural painting are the media in which he informally honed his visual chops.

Del Valle considers himself more as someone who draws than a painter—except when it comes to murals. "That's where I guess I'm more of a painter, in the sense that everything is reactionary. The work evolves, and I just treat it as a big canvas," he says. He often starts a mural with an abstract background: "Sometimes I cover up a whole part and just lose it. It's why sometimes murals can take longer. I make the decisions as I go along." That organic

Worst Day Ever: Daylight has come and there's no way we're gonna eat all those bananas, 2019, marker, acrylic, color pencil, graphite, collage, and spray paint on paper, 28¾ x 22 inches

Esteban del Valle (lead artist), Jose de Jesus Rodriguez (assistant artist), *P.I.C.T.U.R.E.S (Prison Industrial Complex: Tyranny Undermining Rights, Education, and Society)*, 2014, mural, 18' x 80'

Groundswells Making History mural team is made up of young men in Groundswells Summer Leadership Institute (SLI). Those with a prior involvement with the justice system collaborated with del Valle and Rodriguez to raise awareness around the prison industrial complex and to explore what freedom can mean within this context.

unfolding is related in part to the way he treats his works on paper, in which mistakes are incorporated as part of the process as he works toward a constituent whole.

"I started doing these drawings with permanent marker or shoe polish so that I couldn't take back my mistakes," del Valle explains, "and then I started negotiating those shapes with the abstraction in the background." That process was applied to his mural work, and now it's finding its way into the studio: "Even though I'm using pencil, what I'm doing is leaving what I corrected, and that informs fragments of color, and form. I like working with colored pencil and certain drawing mediums because there are no take-backs, to a degree. In the murals there's a lot more correction, changing, shifting, which is why now when I do murals the people who bring me on really have to know my work—because I can't say what it's going to look like."

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DEL VALLE'S FORMAL INDOCTRINATION into the fine-art world culminated in 2007 with a BFA in painting from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, three-hundred-plus miles south of Chicago. Living in its remote, rural setting, which had "no walls to paint," del Valle instead worked on his rap skills, which helped him practice to connect ideas quickly." Battle-rapping imbued confidence, as both a public speaker and an artist. His practice of the various art forms of hip-hop culture have influenced his work. "The way I shaped my graffiti letters followed into how I negotiate composition and dynamic forms and variants of movement in my work," he says. "Even the way I break down colors is kind of based in and inspired by graffiti."

That influence has surely contributed to the staccato rhythm in much of his work, quick fire bursts of shape and color punctuated by a cadence of textures and forms that coalesce, dissolve, and coalesce again. Things are rarely still in del Valle's work, even if the movement is only a low-level vibration or hum that permeates and scatters across the surface.

"I think at the core, the biggest impact graffiti has had on me is as a grassroots form of activity, reminding you that you don't need much, and you can do it anywhere. You don't have to constantly relay it to anything more than yourself. You want to rap, you rap; you want to write your name on the wall, you write your name on the wall. You don't have to get an MFA to write your name on the wall, you don't have to have a PhD to rap with your friends, and nobody's going to judge you based on those things. That's why I think my dad's kind of grassroots approach keeps coming back for me in my own work."

That passion for marginalized forms of art would cause friction when del Valle entered the master's degree program at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where he soon found himself "constantly trying to defend low-art aesthetics." The work that got him into RISD's prestigious graduate school combined the myth of Narcissus with his graffiti tag, AWES, as in awesome: "It was a self-portrait of me kissing myself, laid over the top of my graffiti letters." The high/low art discourse led in part to an identity crisis that was the result of him straddling "two classes at once." Today, that tension remains a driving force in his work—the source, perhaps, of his frequent questioning of hierarchies, power, and taste within the art world.

While academia felt more accepting of new aesthetics in his undergraduate studies, at RISD the structure felt binding, and sometimes hostile toward outsider forms. "By the time I got to RISD, I realized right away that I didn't know enough about art, that I was just a person that liked art. I spent the first year of grad school taking a lot of undergrad art history courses. I was trying to learn all this stuff that my peers already knew. It was really exciting, it furthered the enthusiasm—it also started to make it very clear that I was going to have to figure out where I fit in this conversation. I wasn't really seeing too many people like me."

The End is Near: Miles to go before I sleep, 2020, color pencil on paper, 17″x 22″

How does one go about applying a cerebral, high-art aesthetic to an outsider form based in graffiti and street art? Del Valle says he only now feels comfortable blending and blurring the two: "I don't need to place them in opposition anymore. At this point, it's one world, but I had to fight for that in my own mind, soul, and spirit. I still feel like I fight for it in my art sometimes. It was a huge problem for me, a huge hang-up, trying to process what it meant to be a political artist. I felt an urgency. I felt if I was going to be making art in this world of privilege, that something needed to be talked about, something needed to be addressed."

He also felt as if his efforts were constantly falling short of the right balance between the personal and political, fine art and street art. Reconciliation of those disparate strands, del Valle explains, came only after he realized that they don't need to be mutually exclusive, but are instead tributaries that flow to and from the same creative well: "I felt like I was two different people. I've been using my work forever to just try and understand who I am. The conflict that I experience in my work and my identities is an internal conflict that I need to figure out, regardless of the art I make."

It's only now that del Valle feels comfortable pulling subject matter and style from any source—high, low, abstract, figurative. The personal can be political, but narrative is what connects it all: "I used to leave a lot of clues about where my influences were coming from, and that seemed to be part of the work. I've stopped leaving breadcrumbs as much as I used to—instead I'm just trying to make my own pie. Part of the process is losing the breadcrumbs and allowing something to rise to the surface."

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AFTER COMPLETING GRADUATE SCHOOL, del Valle "residency hopped" for two years, beginning for a year at Hub-Bub in Spartanburg, South Carolina, before ending up at Skowhegan in Maine. It preceded his move to Brooklyn, a leap of faith that had him help paint a mural for Sanford Biggers at the Brooklyn Museum two days after he arrived. A mentorship and eventual friendship with Biggers ensued, giving del Valle a sense of how one might conduct an independent career as an artist.

It's a trajectory he's followed ever since, and where he's lived ever since. New York is home base to the diversity of his artistic practice, but his mural work takes him around the country and globally. In-between, and pre-COVID, he continued to explore his interest in film and video through multiple residences including his first time at FAWC in 2012–2013.

When del Valle was at Hub-Bub, he started making short films as a way to step back from the pervasive influence of his teachers. It was an epiphany of sorts. "I had to get rid of the tools that would allow me to make work like my professors," he explains. "That's why I got rid of all painting tools and started working on film and animation. In doing so, I realized I had this incredible affinity for storytelling. I just love stories, and I really like film. I love how directing allows you to mirror your own vision back at you. I could see myself choosing a whole other life path and just doing movies."

In film, the narrative moves in a linear fashion; in visual art, the past and future of the moment captured by the artist can only be imagined by the viewer. For del Valle, narrative needs to manifest as language before it can become image: "For the *Worst Day Ever* series, I built it up language-wise, and then the images formed in my head." Once the image is manifest and present in the world, del Valle relinquishes control over how it may be received, no matter how carefully—or not carefully—he has steered the ship in the creative process.

"I've always loved cliché because I think cliché is the skeleton you put the skin on. . . . I see sentimentality right now similar to the notion of zero. It's a placeholder for an abstract concept that's too large for us to always hold onto. Love is too big to experience constantly. You more often are in the memory of love, the recollection of love, than you are in love. I think sentimentality does that for people—it's like a key chain from your favorite place, your favorite vacation spot. My narrative goal has the same premise—I'm trying to figure out how I can give you that placeholder for the feeling that would come with this story."

In other words, he's motivated by the emotional connection we attach to visual images, what they trigger, what they imply, and the meaning that we, in turn, apply to them. "A still image is not time-based, but I think you can have a time-based experience looking at it. I've always wanted to play with the idea of an image not existing and then coming together, and then falling back apart, and coming together again. That's what a lot of my fracturing of the space is—the overlapping of the background with the foreground, and using gestures that disrupt the drawing representation."

In the drawing *Miles to go before I sleep* (2020), part of del Valle's *The End Is Near* series, we question whether the figure—head down, running toward us—is threatening or benign, his charge splintering and merging into a landscape of colored shapes. According to del Valle, his goal is for the viewer not to recognize the figure at first: "At first, you don't see the whole thing, and then as you find those landmarks—the face, the hand—*then* there's the 'Oh! That's what I'm looking at!'"

The conquistador character in his *Worst Day Ever* series is quintessentially del Valle: a man out of time, tied to the past, untethered in the present, moving through a series of daily calamities, like finding a hair in his sushi, or trying to negotiate the subway turnstiles on his horse. Each dilemma is a "can't catch a break moment" that is both pitiful and blithely heroic, or at least poses questions: what makes a hero, and aren't we all just playing a character anyway?

Presented in lucid fragments of color or glorious black and white, the images invite you to stay awhile, pause and linger in the details, the democracy and diversity of marks that take a moment to organize before they just as quickly fall apart and disperse. The black-and-white work could be film stills, dark-humored performances that are commentary on an imperial past, and the ways that history is manifest in the world today.

Del Valle's 2019 mixed-media installation at Framingham State University, *Which ridge is next?*, took *Worst Day Ever* into the third dimension, rendering a sculptural version of the unfortunate conquistador airborne after his horse stops short, and suspending him midair. Is he falling up or falling down? Tethered within the flat facades of del Valle's Brooklyn neighborhood, which are collapsing like a deck of cards, the conquistador will soon succumb to the same forces of gravity. It's essentially a three-dimensional cartoon, built with the same enthusiasm as his drawings, moving with the same invisible current that runs like a pulse through much of his work.

"There's a very intentional effort to bombard you with movement, and gesture, and color," del Valle says of his work, likening the conversation between movement and action in the images to the way narrative works. Stories come together as a series of words that, strung together in a certain order, create meaning—but look too closely, or think too long about a sentence, and its meaning can fall apart again.

There's a rise and fall, a wax and wane of forms, that give an organic, breath-like strata to del Valle's work: an aliveness. According to del Valle, the idea of an image coalescing and then fracturing "is to encourage participatory practice." This circles back to the example of van Gogh's staggered marks and brushstrokes, which imply form without overtly creating it. "As we see a van Gogh, we watch the piece get made, we feel like we made it, and that's something I've always played with in my work: trying to

Studio, 2019 PHOTO BY CHRIS LONGYNE

Worst Day Ever: Which ridge is next, 2019, insulation foam, spray foam, wood, cardboard, tape, glue, metal and plastic piping, wigs, acrylic, black sand, mural, and collage, variable dimensions

bring the viewer into that process. It's why in the mural work, the live paintings, I leave evidence of the mistakes—because I want you to see how the form came, so you feel like you made the form."

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NOT ALL OF DEL VALLE'S murals are political by nature, but the same skills are admirably applied in his gallery works, such as the painting *Build a Wall* (2017). He's equally adroit at creating work big and small. Over seven feet tall and fifteen feet across, there's a monumentality to the work that seems appropriate for the subject matter. A cinematic widescreen of a close encounter at a mega-hardware store, it spotlights and amplifies the nation's political divide, the life-size image color-coded in respective palettes of red and blue. Del Valle's figurative distortion—disproportionately large heads and viperous hands—convulses into a braying spectacle of farce, rage, and outrage. It's a powerful indictment of the cult of personality that creates and inflames division, anger, and hate.

A smaller companion piece at ten feet across, *Freedom from Want* (2017) is an equally unflinching image of a divided Thanksgiving, a long-faced Trump supporter alone with the turkey while the rest of the guests, rendered in blue, comingle amiably behind him. Beautifully painted gut punches to the soul, the power in del Valle's images lies in their provocation and shaded humor. His natural drafting talent and the use of drips and splatters fuse into an untamed process that creates a soft coat of abstraction over the narrative, giving it an organic warmth. No matter how raw the subject, the works are always beautifully painted.

For del Valle, the Trump years provided ample fodder for his art. *#Freedomofspeech (after Norman Rockwell)* (2018) is another oversized indictment of the former president that makes us question our own complicity. A three-quarter view of Trump's bulbous head takes up most of the frame as he tweets out a message before a dense bank of the fourth estate. Exquisitely rendered, accented with drips and monochromatic washes, every corner is painted with equal attention to its relationship with the whole.

"Context is everything," del Valle says, noting that the humor in his work is drawn from the absurdity of real life: "It's laughing at something that's still kind of unfortunate. It's very much connected to the absurd, to satire." Del Valle's humor is served flat, black as night, self-aware and lacerating. Politically speaking, the work is never preachy, contains no rhetorical cant, and del Valle is never above poking fun at himself.

A case in point is the painting *Transplants: The Discovery of Humboldt Park* (2017), del Valle's commentary on young hipsters descending upon and gentrifying his old Chicago neighborhood. Standing before the Puerto Rican flag sculpture that greets visitors, they are the personification of all that's cool, from their clutch of succulents to a printed suitcase, stovepipe pants, and one subject's handlebar mustache. The irony is pointed when you consider the fact that most of the accessories came from de Valle's personal home and wardrobe.

No matter the intensity of the political conversation, there's always love in the work—but a political conscience can take a toll, del Valle says: "In my downtime, when I needed a break from making heady art, I would just draw. I would just draw like I did when I was growing up, and whatever came out, came out—and that tended to be these weird, cathartic, autobiographical works." With no baggage or urgency to say something political, the work opened in new ways. "It really started to develop its own formal language that I never had to explain."

(top to bottom)
Freedom From Want, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 8′ x 11′

Transplants: The Discovery of Humboldt Park, 2017, acrylic on raw canvas, 6′ x 5′

#Freedomofspeech (after Norman Rockwell), 2018, acrylic and charcoal on canvas, 7¼′ x 14′

(opposite page)
Build a Wall, 2017, acrylic on canvas, 7⅓′ x 15′

Worst Day Ever: First Snow in Bushwick (aka Something in the Water), 2019, color pencil, marker, and spray paint on paper, 14″ x 14″

The seriousness of the pandemic also had del Valle questioning what it was he wanted to make, and what was truly important. "What's really interesting is that since COVID hit, ideas for satire felt absolutely flat. It felt very cynical, unparticipatory and removed, and I thought about the way we use sarcasm and humor to deflect I found myself turning to love, my partner that I was with, gratitude and appreciation. I started doing these drawings about things that just moved me, these experiences, and I didn't feel like I put a satirical edge on it." Before, he'd often used sarcasm to deflect; now, he finds himself creating work that invites the viewer in. "I love the idea of art doing that, getting closer to the truth of yourself—that it doesn't need to deflect."

Paintings such as *Worst Day Ever: First snow in bushwick (aka something in the water)* (2019) step away from the angst and slow things down to a pause where we can linger, catch a breath, meditate on a moment and the affirmation that memories can bestow on the ordinary—that in essence, each moment is extraordinary.

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DEL VALLE'S COMMISSIONS are generally negotiated on terms that allow him to make it very much his own work. When I interviewed him, he was working on a drawing for a friend opening a bar, a work thematically based around George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London,* and was modifying his approach to the project in response to the pandemic. "I felt the satire needed to be more open and vulnerable," he explains, "and I ended up landing on this single character who's constantly navigating these crumbling systems of business or luxury."

Del Valle excels in the monochromatic, black or blue and white, sometimes with a lone color offset throughout the frame, like the yellow spots that light the way for his *Down and Out* figure, who is depicted falling through a chandelier. When looking at the work, it takes a moment to notice what's happening; the figure is intertwined with and nearly overcome by falling glass and a blaze of yellow lights.

Del Valle's monochrome work is full of beautiful passages that move through deep pools of black, a gamut of grays, and organic but precise line. There's a little throwback to graphic novels, with their two-tone palette, close framing, and distortions of space and perspective. In *Worst Day Ever*: *Conquistador thwarted by bodega umbrellas, again* (2019), the sky is mapped with broad Abstract Expressionist strokes that pan out to an urban labyrinth of buildings, platforms, and covered stairs before reaching the hapless conquistador, engulfed by a mangled umbrella, a scenario that may arouse recognition, sympathy, and, perhaps most of all, amusement in response the slapstick humor at someone else's expense.

In *The End Is Near: Revisiting St. Christopher* (2020), there's the heightened urgency and panic of St. Christopher being pulled under the water by a malevolent-looking Christ child, but beyond the reaches of the rising water, del Valle draws a hummingbird in front of a bucolic scene of trees flanking the riverbank. The hummingbird, he says, is symbolic of immigration; suddenly the image takes on a broader context aligned to a contemporary humanitarian crisis.

The landscape of del Valle's paintings is a nice place to linger if the central drama or the hyper-fracturing of color becomes too much. That overstuffing of shape and color is purposeful, as both a complement to the black-and-white work and as a way to add

Worst Day Ever: Conquistador thwarted by bodega umbrellas, again, 2019, digital collage study

The End is Near: Revisiting St. Christopher, 2020, china marker on paper, 22″ x 30″

Thunderstorm in the dunes, 2018, ink on paper, 10¼″ x 15″

At the Other End, 2020, watercolor on paper, 14″ x 21¾″

a sense of urgency. It's about the mood, it's about the rhythm, and how both may serve the narrative, del Valle explains. "I see my work musically. . . . it might seem like everything's everywhere, but when I look at it, I always think about it in terms of drums . . . here's the high-hat, here's the snare."

It's a cacophony of visual percussion. Best to just let it wash over you as you look at the vibratory collage of colored notes that can pull you in and overwhelm the senses, the same way music can. "I've always had those two parallels: black and white, and color. They're very much ongoing practices that are very intentional. It's not just random that I occasionally do black and white. The idea with the black and white was always working toward a drawing fluency, of having my own handwriting, if you will."

Sans color, the work becomes more about the marks, the gesture: "It's easier and more liberating for me to let go of form because I'm also paying attention to how it's moving in space. I'm paying attention to the feeling of form. That's what I love about drawing in black and white, it's very liberating for me . . . I have more confidence in that space than I do in color."

The newer work marks a shift in the way del Valle creates his images. "I used to make a collage, put it together and work from it. Now I'm just starting with the idea, getting my reference imagery and just piecing it together on the canvas." Some of the photographic mock-ups he used for his conquistador images are interesting in their own right, like raw mixed-media stills from a lost narrative. Pushing forward without the use of a mock-up has allowed the work to become more fluid and open to change. It's become something more, perhaps, like the chance you take when you drive off the map and explore new places, new ways of doing, new ways of being.

That open approach finds its natural home in his small dune paintings. They're as open, calm, and relaxed as a day at the beach, no agenda than to just be, to allow. Immersed in the rhythms of nature, del Valle gives the experience back to us.

"There are these very meditative, spiritual moments I have when I'm painting murals. When you're just fully present in the wall, it takes all your body, and on a beautiful day, every time that breeze hits, you're in it. You just feel this connection with the gratitude of life and the divine. I get that in the dunes. I just love the dunes, it's my favorite landscape. It's just perfect for me. I love to just sit in there and just look, no obligations.

"I really like having to pack up all of my materials and then be a prisoner to getting something done," del Valle continues. "There's something to surrendering to that as well, there's no distractions. I really like how the dunes hold me accountable to that. It's just you and this place and you can't leave until it's done—or you could but why would you? The only thing you have to prove in this drawing is how much you love drawing."

He achieves that and more. When he has no agenda other than to record the landscape, del Valle relaxes enough to reveal a tranquil center and create some of his most personal work. There are no bad notes here; they're playful, broad but attentive under washes of sky, sea, and sand; eddies of movement, lean strokes and dappled notes that give texture and the suggestion of undulating form. It's enough—on all levels.

"I'm going through a good shift I'm excited about in my work. I'm losing a lot of those separations . . . between sculpture and drawing, the difference between high and low, the difference between the graffiti background, the mural background. I'm so grateful that I'm starting to lose those skins between them," he says. "I'm forever in awe of the magic of art-making."

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PHOTO BY STEPHANIE MADRID

Esteban del Valle

THE BURDEN OF PURPOSE

By James Balla

A feral child meets a young girl leading a blind Minotaur
(Or, how we came to know Esteban del Valle)

IN EARLY WINTER 2018, my husband, Albert, and I went to see an exhibition of the then-current Fine Arts Work Center Fellows' work at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum. We both were struck by the work of an artist named Esteban del Valle, and especially by one small ink drawing: *Feral Child* (after the poem of the same name by his friend H. R. Webster). We each had a similar reaction, and each saw in it a sense of Picasso's etchings of a young girl leading the blind Minotaur, an image that had always resonated deeply with us. We contacted Esteban, and made a date to visit him in his studio at FAWC.

Having owned the Albert Merola Gallery since 1988, Albert and I have made many a studio visit at FAWC over the years, and so there was in our visit a built-in sense of connection and history. We were struck by Esteban's technical virtuosity, but the depth of thought behind each work was more revealing and important. There was a wall-sized, politically themed painting on canvas, but the smaller, intimate, mixed-media works on paper focused our attention.

Later that winter, I went with Esteban to visit Pat de Groot, a true icon of the Provincetown art world. I knew that she would be appreciative of Esteban's drawing ability and interest in social issues. Drawing was as integral and important to her as it was to Esteban and myself. Their respect was mutual, and seeing a link established between the generations of local artists was important to us all. That winter also brought us our first chance to hang out and share food and drinks with Esteban and his partner, Stephanie.

That summer at the gallery, we mounted a curated exhibition, *HEAD2HEAD*, which brought together twenty-one artists from all different disciplines and backgrounds. We included Esteban in that show, and later in the season gave him his own focused exhibition, which helped introduce his work to the public in a broader way, and resulted in a commission for Esteban to create a public works project in Louisville, Kentucky.

During his 2018 Fellowship, Esteban concentrated on bringing together the personal and political. He sought to incorporate autobiography into his social commentary. These attempts began with some portraits of local friends, coalesced later in the series *Worst Day Ever* (2018–19), and eventually came around full force with *The End Is Near* (2020), both of which were exhibited at our gallery.

Feral Child, 2018, ink on paper, 10″ x 10″

Pablo Picasso, *Minotaure aveugle guidé par une Fillette, III* (etching from the *Suite Vollard*), 1934

Don't even give it a second thought
(Or, how Esteban navigates hierarchies in art)

Artists are always fighting against perceived presumptions about art-making. The arguments over "high" versus "low" art have pretty much been resolved, and, to a lesser extent, the public understanding of an artist's appropriation of imagery has come to be generally accepted. The question of hierarchies between drawing and painting, however, seems to be one that still lingers. One of the things that interests me most about Esteban as an artist is that he is constantly fighting to tear down the perceived barriers between painting and drawing. The reason that I almost always refer to Esteban's work as drawings here is because he does as well. The case could easily be made that a number of them are paintings. I feel the artist should make their own determination of what to call the work that they do. And does it matter? Is Picasso's *Guernica* a painting or a drawing? Is it a social and political statement, or a scorching cry of injustice and outrage? The answer to all of these questions is "yes, it is," and it remains one of the most powerful works of art in history. But drawing was as elemental to Picasso as breathing. And I know that it is the same for Esteban. Just yesterday, while I was writing this, he called, and I asked what he was doing. "Oh, just hanging around, doing some drawing," was the reply.

Guernica is a prime example of Picasso's ability to make universal statements out of specific events. He, too, created large-scale works and murals with political content, but it was with the everyday things that he was able to create deep meaning as an artist. In much the same way, Esteban has created large murals and paintings that are political commentary or about social injustice, but his fuel comes from the quotidian: a night in a bar, a trip out to a restaurant, a scene from the neighborhood, or the striking landscape of the Provincetown dunes.

Worst Day Ever

A developing series when we first met Esteban, *Worst Day Ever* soon blossomed into an all-out explosion of imagery and possibilities. The first of these works appeared in his show in 2018, but it was fully developed in his 2019 exhibition, *I intend to land and see what can be found in the neighborhood*. The central character in this series is a hapless conquistador. Hapless, since Esteban places him in contemporary times, primarily in an urban setting, and subjects him to relentless minor First World inconveniences, familiar to all of us, yet totally out of the realm of his understanding and ability to cope. The conquistador is the archetypal embodiment of the destructive forces of colonialism, specifically as it applies to the Americas. Bringing with them horrific deadly diseases that decimated the Indigenous populations, and a brute force that destroyed the ancient civilizations and cultures of Native people, the conquistadors and their administrative followers laid waste to local treasures of minerals and precious metals, imposed a new language and religion on the people, and enforced it all with brutality and enslavement. The title of the 2019 show comes from words recorded in the journals of Christopher Columbus when he first arrived in the Americas, and, of course, cleverly refers to the locales in Esteban's own neighborhood in Brooklyn in which the conquistador finds himself constantly flummoxed.

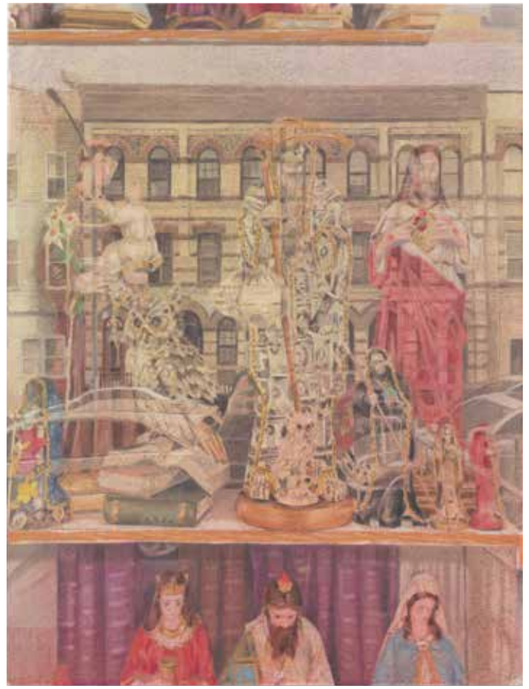
Esteban's openness to looking at his own place in this story reflects back to his childhood. With his Puerto Rican and Mexican heritage, and a prominent politician as a father, he was forced to deal with assumptions made about him that have an almost double ironic twist. He didn't speak Spanish fluently, and this was met with incredulity and sometimes hostility or even ridicule by others—often it was liberal white people who presumed to start speaking to him in Spanish, and then would chastise him for not speaking or learning the language. He was ridiculed in class by his Spanish teacher. Of course, the Puerto Rican heritage encompasses African, Indigenous, and Spanish backgrounds, placing him directly in the stream of this historical narrative.

In the series, Esteban has taken on the persona of the conquistador in order to become the vehicle for the expression of the rebuke to neocolonialism. Much as Picasso adopted different personae, such as the Minotaur or Jester, to provide a vehicle of expression or locus of viewpoint, so Esteban dons these cloaks as a storyteller. (And he literally dons the cloak as he prepares his character and sets up the scenarios in preparation for making the drawings.) The conquistador functions as both a satirical figure and a caricature of the artist, hopefully with some relatable humanity. Esteban is concerned with his own (and by projection, *our* own) responsibility for the damage caused by gentrification and social injustice in our society. Through satire and humor he is able to open a conversation about these and other important issues facing us today around issues of assimilation and the meaning of cultural identity.

Worst Day Ever:
Conquistador finds a hair in his sushi, again

This piece is a tour de force combining all of Esteban's skills as draftsman and composer and storyteller. Just the sight of the conquistador eating sushi in a hipster restaurant in Brooklyn starts us off, only to deliver the ick factor of a hair in the food, something the viewer can immediately identify with. The absurdity of the situation combined with the painting of food that channels a

Worst Day Ever: Conquistador finds a hair in his sushi, 2018, marker, ink, acrylic on paper on panel, 24″ x 30″



Worst Day Ever: Brooklyn Botanica accepts cash only, 2019, color pencil, marker, and spray paint on paper, 16″ x 12″

seventeenth-century de Heem still life is crazy. All those hierarchy questions are crushed and brushed aside in this work.

Worst Day Ever:
Brooklyn botánica accepts cash only

This is one of those pieces that adds to the narrative in a subtle way. I wanted to single this one out because of the incredible technical virtuosity it displays. Reflections of reflections within layers of space combined with references to religious icons all infused with desire and inaccessibility make for a breathtaking image. His process of beginning with watercolor and spray paint, and then sanding the surface and reworking it with colored pencils, is extraordinary.

Worst Summer Ever:
Conquistador, having dropped his everything bagel in the sand, is determined to at least go for a swim

I can't leave the discussion of this series without a quick reference to this work. In it, the conquistador's partner is engrossed in writing or drawing, while the tiny image of a bare-assed conquistador makes an attempt to at least take a swim, while the wind and storm clouds mount, the shark sighting sign looms, and his bagel lies ruined in the sand. The irritations of urban life have followed our protagonist to the beaches of Provincetown. Esteban and Stephanie's love of Provincetown brings them back as frequently as possible. One of his greatest pleasures is to go out in the dunes and draw with ink or watercolor. The landscape sketches of van Gogh reverberate throughout his process.

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The End Is Near

One thing I take note of in this series is a very deep connection to, and exploration of, art historical references—whether van Gogh, El Greco, Caravaggio, or Jacob Lawrence, among others. Many of the works in this show are color pencil on paper, or incorporate ink and other media. "It's not enough to shout out loud and call attention to injustices," Esteban said in a 2016 interview in *L. A. Taco*, "we must also shout from the rooftops about the love and compassion of everyday people."

The End Is Near: ***Nessun Dorma***

For me, the statement made in Esteban's *L. A. Taco* interview found its perfect expression in *The End Is Near: Nessun Dorma* (2020). When I talked about it with him, Esteban said, "Like you, I was incredibly moved by the Italian citizens that came out on their balconies to make music together, and I was especially moved by the opera tenor Maurizio Marchini in Florence, who performed 'Nessun Dorma' on his balcony during the shelter in place. I felt like I could relate as an artist. Not just with the desire to uplift people's spirits and contribute in any way I can, but also the need to let the music out. I felt like he wasn't just singing for his community, he was singing for himself. So I did the only thing I could do, I made a drawing . . . for myself, to let some of the color and light out and brighten up the day."

Marchini is a trained professional who was unable to perform due to the lockdown. Confined to his apartment like a caged bird, he did what he could do, which was sing. To let it out, as Esteban said, as much for himself as for the neighbors. We all have felt this feeling, especially during the darkest days of the quarantine. But how does an artist express this all in a still image?

As in many of the works in *The End Is Near* series, Esteban

The End is Near: (Still Life) The one that got away, 2020, ink, marker, and acrylic on paper, 16½″ x 13¼″

The End is Near: Nessun Dorma, 2020, color pencil on paper, 17½″ x 14½″

The End is Near: van Gogh's funeral, 2020, acrylic, spray paint, graphite, and china marker on paper on panel, 24″ x 30″

The End is Near

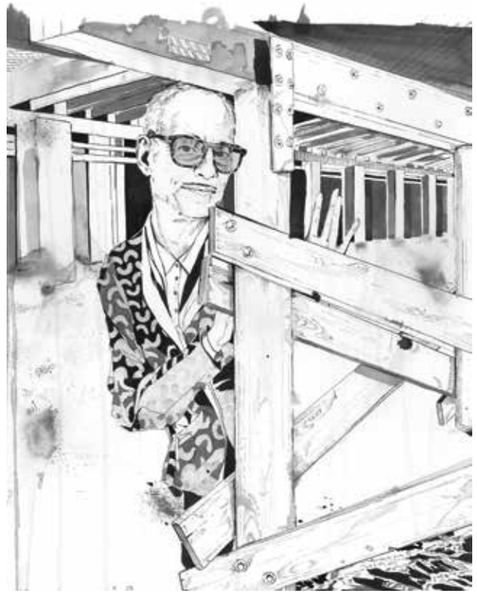
This body of work started as an idea many months before the pandemic. It was originally created as a way of using language as parameters for a series, more specifically, narrative structure. The term, "the end is near," could be interpreted and/or used in many different ways. It could be used as an ominous statement or warning, a description of metaphorical closure, or seen as a basic marker of linear time. I wanted to treat narrative as a medium; looking at the image as a story telling device while exploring the open-ended nature of our relationship to language. The body of work started as a list of phrases: last call at a bar, someone laid off of work, a relationship on its last legs, the final days of winter, the conclusion of a physical and/or spiritual journey, etc. But by the time I started to produce the works, the entire world around me was different . . . a global pandemic completely changed how I related to storytelling as a way to preserve, celebrate, nurture, and navigate life. I was compelled to focus on the immediacy of everyday. It became about solving the problems directly in front of us, and appreciating the resources and abilities we had to do so. How could I preserve, celebrate, and navigate the small, but personally meaningful stories of our beautiful little lives at such a dark moment in history?

In the past, a lot of my work has been overtly political in nature and often rooted in satire. However, during the heightened emotional space of the new day to day, satire seemed to feel flat and stiff, like a playing card I could easily pick up and see all sides. At the same time, the personal and interior journey one faces when confronted with an unprecedented crisis, felt deep, dark, and infinite. One day I could feel like the whole world was imploding and the end was near. Another day, I could feel like things were improving and as far as the pandemic goes, the end was near. And yet again, another day, I could watch systematic racism be held accountable in cities and towns across the world, with the thought that maybe we are moving forward, and when it came to eliminating social injustices, the end was near. But as big as everything felt, I found myself in a small one bedroom apartment, sheltering in place and sitting day after day two feet away from my partner, feeling immensely grateful for the beautiful little life we had, a life that allowed me to continue to tell my story through drawing.

— *Esteban del Valle*

confronts this dilemma of how an artist expresses the body in dynamic movement over a period of time. One way to do this is to elongate and distort the body within the image frame. Drawing on lessons learned from such widely diverse sources as El Greco, Picasso, and comic-book artists, he knew that this manipulation could give visceral form to the idea of time and motion. The mood is further enhanced by that van Gogh–like swirling sky and the vibrant use of color, some chosen specifically from an exhibition of Chris Ofili's work, which had made a lasting impression on him. Esteban cites images from *At the Moulin Rouge* by Toulouse-Lautrec, and even the work of Frank Stella, whose ideas on the content of an image reflecting the parameters of the canvas (or in this case, paper) were important to him. It brings to mind an exquisite drawing by Georges Seurat (*Eden Concert*, ca. 1886–87), in which—by extreme, nearly unworldly stylization—he has managed to freeze the singer's voice in time, allowing the viewer to continue to hear that echo through the years.

One thing in *Nessun Dorma* that didn't register with me immediately is the ghostly image of the bass and trumpet behind the singer. It's as if Marchini had been joined on his balcony by his fellow orchestra members, or maybe musical neighbors, rather than a recording playing from inside. This is such a sophisticated and very subtle acknowledgment of what is not "really" there, or visible, but emotionally present, and it adds another rich layer to the viewer's experience while also working to help expand those "parameters of narrative." All this merely helps to explain some of the material he has incorporated to make the image, but the image's raison d'être is Esteban's great sensitivity to our shared humanity, for the need to express one's self against all odds, and for the beauty of "the love and compassion of everyday people."



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***The End Is Near:* Still Life: The one that got away**

Although it is quite different from *Nessun Dorma* and some of the other pieces, this work illustrates many of Esteban's formal concerns, such as the implications of narrative, and how to depict elements of time and action and social commentary into that narrative. This is not a large piece, or one that refers to a specific greater story, but it demonstrates the depth of thought and wealth of resources he brings to his work. It is a swirling, dazzling, confounding image that never seems to coalesce.

The tradition of still life implies a moment in time, but Esteban understands how an artist such as Caravaggio could subvert that concept, thus making a more profound comment on the human condition. When Caravaggio painted a basket of rotting fruit, it was not an idealized image. He depicted the realities of life, rather than just the icons of decay, which was the style of the day. Yet his manner of painting it was extremely precise and pristine. In a similar spirit were the *Vanitas* paintings of the Netherlands, which were still-life paintings that incorporated elements of wealth and power or earthly pleasures.

In these paintings, objects were often tumbled together in disarray, suggesting the eventual overthrow of the achievements they represent. These paintings were aimed at a certain class of society: the wealthier merchant class. Esteban incorporates these influences while at the same time works to subvert the "still" nature of the still-life genre. The merchant class reflected in the *Vanitas* paintings is now the current upwardly mobile class of the economically well-off. The upended "classy" bottle of *Châteauneuf-du-Pape* (literally "New house of the Pope") is a perfect symbol of this.

If a still-life image moves one toward narrative through apparent dynamic movement, then the viewer is drawn to construct the before and after, bringing to it the elements of time and motion. In this drawing, he has created an amazingly complex visual work that succeeds on so many of these levels, while giving us an overall composition that defies easy or speedy comprehension.

***The End Is Near:* Miles to go before I sleep**

In 2020, Esteban received the prestigious Breeden Eminent Scholar Chair at Auburn University in Alabama. While there, he took his daily runs through one of the local historical cemeteries in an attempt to keep more distance from other people. The irony of seeking safety from disease and death in a cemetery was not lost on him. While he began this work as a straightforward self-portrait, his intention changed when the news of Ahmaud Arbery's murder became known. Arbery had been out running when he was hunted down and killed by white men in Georgia. Esteban removed the other figures from the composition, and focused solely on the single running figure. He changed the configuration from a runner in profile to one with momentum charging right at the viewer.

Although in essence still a self-portrait, the figure has been transformed into a faceless, hooded one. The background around him seems to be shattering, the force of the figure breaking the world behind him. The simplification of form and the idea of a moment of fractured abstraction comes from Jacob Lawrence, specifically episodes in his great *Migration* series, while the extended figure harkens back to El Greco. A powerful image is made from thoughtful, sensitive decisions. The title comes from Robert Frost's famous poem *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*. Though the calm of the cemetery is enticing, the realities of the world and the obligations it demands cannot be denied.

With this series, Esteban has purposefully let the record of his mark-making and decision-making remain visible, and made it an integral part of the final image. In many cases, it is consciously used to manipulate the viewer and affect the sense of time and place.

Throughout all the work, it is Esteban's sensitivity as a human being, his empathy, which comes across so touchingly. In *A very long day* he depicts himself touching the face of a doctor through the screen of his cell phone. This doctor was one of the first to go on camera to show the wounds and scars of wearing the protective masks for endless hours as he tried to tend to the sick. In *Revisiting St. Christopher,* the agonized face of the saint says it all as he struggles with carrying "the weight of the world," while the hummingbird hovers, a symbol for accomplishing that which seems impossible.

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Floating in a pool under a sky full of shooting stars (Or, how Esteban is voyaging through this extraordinary year)

A good artist has certain skills and ideas that they use to create. Esteban has an amazing ability to put down an image. But more than that, to use an inelegant analogy, he is like a giant sponge floating in the pool of art history. He absorbs not just the superficial appearances or style of any given artist, but their thinking and their process. And, like a sponge, he can wring it all out and pour it into whatever he happens to be working on. This is something rare indeed. He challenges himself at every turn to be better, not to be complacent, and to try something that he has not tried before. Albert and I respect him for his dedication to the work, for the extremely high bar that he sets for himself, and for the depth and breadth of his knowledge. Knowing Esteban and Stephanie has enriched our lives, and we cherish their friendship.

As we move forward into 2021 and beyond, the meteor shower of ideas continues to rain down. The year began with a request by the Provincetown Film Society for a portrait by Esteban of John Waters at the Dick Dock, which resulted in an instantly classic image of Provincetown's beloved icon. Esteban's mural downtown is the first project to be commissioned by the Provincetown Public Art Foundation. In addition to having new work at the gallery and working on large-scale paintings, Esteban is developing work for an exhibition next year. We are always excited to see in what direction his artistic search will lead him next.

JAMES BALLA is a painter who has lived year-round in Provincetown since 1985. Along with his husband, Albert Merola, he owns and operates the Albert Merola Gallery.

Esteban del Valle

THE MURAL

By Sam Tager