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How graffiti, neon signs and Pee-Chee folders taught artist Patrick Martinez to see Los Angeles
By Caroline A. Miranda



"Then They Came For Me," a neon work by L.A. artist Patrick Martinez appears at Charlie James Gallery in Los Angeles. (Michael Underwood / Charlie James Gallery)

Graffiti taught Patrick Martinez how to look at Los Angeles. As a teen, the born-and-bred Angeleno joined his brother and friends on frequent graffiti runs, tagging up bits of municipal infrastructure and old industrial sites.

Martinez says that much of what he produced in those days was rather forgettable. "Looking back," he says, "it was all right."

But the act of hunting for spaces in which to paint forced him to examine Los Angeles in highly analytical ways.

"That's when I really started observing the landscape," he says. "How things are treated, the colors, surfaces — honing in on things. How does a wall look? How does a fence look? You look at the time of day, how the light hits the wall."

That way of looking at L.A. has inspired a lot of Martinez's work — paintings that evoke the texture of stucco, along with bright neon pieces inspired by the

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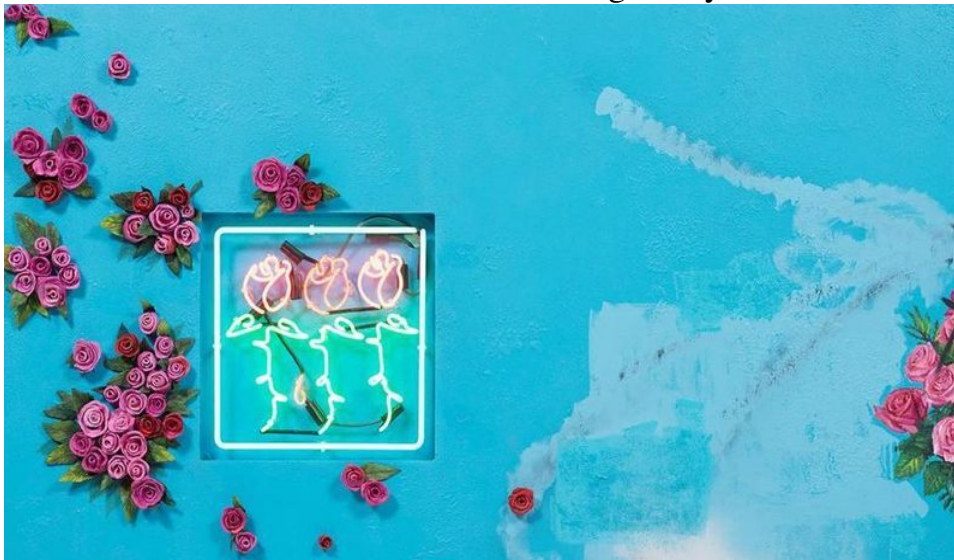
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signs that hang plaintively in small grocery stores advertising hot food and cold beer.



"American Memorial," 2016, by Patrick Martinez. (Michael Underwood / Charlie James Gallery)

In some works, he combines elements of the two — as if he were smashing the various ingredients that make up Los Angeles into a single wall-hanging. It is work that, as of late, has been catching the eye of the art world.



Patrick Martinez, "los angeles flower still life," 2016, as recently seen in "Roll Call: 11 Artists From Los Angeles" at Venice's L.A. Louver gallery. (L.A. Louver)

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Recently, a suite of Martinez's prints was acquired by the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art at UC Davis. He was part of the just-closed L.A. Louver show "Roll Call: 11 Artists From Los Angeles," curated by Gajin Fujita. And he was one of the artists in the Getty Research Institute's massive "Getty Graffiti Black Book" and subsequent "Scratch" show at ESMoA in El Segundo.



Patrick Martinez adds to a flaming tree he painted on a wall curated by Defer for "Scratch," at ESMoA in El Segundo. (Gloria Plascencia / ESMoA)

This spring, he will have his first solo museum show at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum in Florida. He has a painting — part of a series inspired by the design of the iconic Pee-Chee folder — in the ongoing exhibition "Tastemakers and Earthshakers: Notes From Los Angeles Youth Culture, 1943-2016" at the Vincent Price Art Museum in Monterey Park.

Martinez is also the subject of a current solo exhibition at the Charlie James Gallery in Los Angeles — his first with the gallery.

His paintings at Charlie James, on view through Feb. 18, capture some of the city's forgotten corners: a bakery in Boyle Heights, tidy funeral wreaths for sale against an anonymous wall, a shock of pink bougainvillea peeking out from over a fence — as well as pieces that abstract all of these elements into vivid assemblages.

The neon signs, which Martinez once showed in a one-day exhibition at a now-defunct supermarket in Bell Gardens in 2013, were inspired by the artist's frequent trips through downtown as a young man.

"I used to live in Montebello," recalls the artist, who also grew up in Pasadena and other parts of the San Gabriel Valley. "And I'd drive home on Whittier Boulevard. I'd go through that area around Sixth and Alameda, and at night,

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it'd be

empty.

You'd fly through, and everything would be dark except for the neon: 'Laundry-mat.' 'Cash.' 'Liquor.' "

He found meaning beyond the words in the neon signage.

"There's something about it that is very straightforward, almost desperate," he says. "So I took that and remixed it and re-represented it."



A series of neon works by Patrick Martinez that riff on rap lyrics and patriotic slogans, on view at Charlie James. (Michael Underwood / Charlie James Gallery)

Works of wry social commentary are the result. His signs illuminate words such as "Rise" and snippets of lyrics by Tupac Shakur: "Currency Means Nothin' if You Still Ain't Free."

In a glowing installation in the basement at Charlie James, he has a sign that features a phrase from the Declaration of Independence. "All Men Are Created Equal," it reads — except the word "equal" remains dark, calling into question whether equality truly exists.

James says that he was first drawn to Martinez's work because of the skillful ways in which it presents social issues tied to race and inequity.

"For me, all art becomes artifact, meaning that the best work should be evidence [of] the period of its making," James states via email. "Patrick's work locates itself specifically from an ethno-cultural perspective, but it's aesthetically so successful that it transcends its origins, crosses over and shrinks distance between viewer and the work."

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Martinez has perhaps gathered the most attention for his Pee-Chee works: prints and paintings that riff on the golden folders produced by the Mead Corp. used by countless schoolchildren to haul their papers.



Paintings and prints by Patrick Martinez inspired by the Pee-Chee folder design, at Charles James Gallery in L.A.'s Chinatown. (Michael Underwood / Charlie James Gallery)

The artist gives these a political twist, employing elements of the design to feature individuals who have died as a result of police violence: figures such as Walter Scott, who was shot by police in South Carolina in 2015, or Eric Garner, who died of asphyxiation in New York, after being held in a chokehold.

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"All Female Portfolio," by Patrick Martinez, features Loreal Tsingine, killed by police in Texas. (Michael Underwood / Charlie James Gallery)

It was an idea he had explored briefly as a student at Art Center in Pasadena, where he graduated with a degree in fine art illustration in 2005. But he returned to it as the killings of Garner, Scott and others began to pop up on the news.

"I'm interested in issues of youth and authority," says Martinez, whose family background is Mexican, Filipino and Native American. "I've seen all kinds of situations. The L.A. Riots. My brother and my friends in and out of jail. I've seen how they've been treated by the authorities since they were young teenagers. It's something that a lot of people hear about, or you read about it, but you don't necessarily see the images."

Capturing phenomena that the public doesn't usually see is something that ultimately drives all of Martinez's work — be it in paint, on paper or in neon.

"You know, the things that are overlooked, taken for granted," he says. "It's trying to find a way of communicating some kind of truth."