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Iconic 'Pee-Chee' folders reimagined with familiar scenes of police brutality

By Jorge Rivas



Artist Patrick Martinez in his Los Angeles studio.

Jorge Rivas/Fusion

The center of Patrick Martinez's art studio is occupied by large wooden panels reminiscent of the school folders he once used as student.

From afar, the panels look like giant Pee-Chee folders, the same type that American students have been using to carry their homework in since the 1940s. The original Pee-Chee folders featured drawings of athletes emblazoned on peach-and-yellow colored covers. But Martinez's version are decorated with a much different type of American scene.

"I'm taking situations where police have gunned down youth," Martinez told me in his studio in South Los Angeles.

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Patrick Martinez holds folders he's reimagined with contemporary scenes of police using excessive force.

Jorge Rivas/Fusion

Martinez, 35, has appropriated the idyllic Americana scenes and reimagined them with images of police officers moments before they killed Oscar Grant, Laquan McDonald and Sandra Bland. His work includes other controversial scenes of police using excessive force, like the UC Davis officer pepper-spraying a group of students at close range, or a young undocumented woman in a cap and gown being arrested by police officers.



Courtesy of Patrick Martinez/Charlie James Gallery

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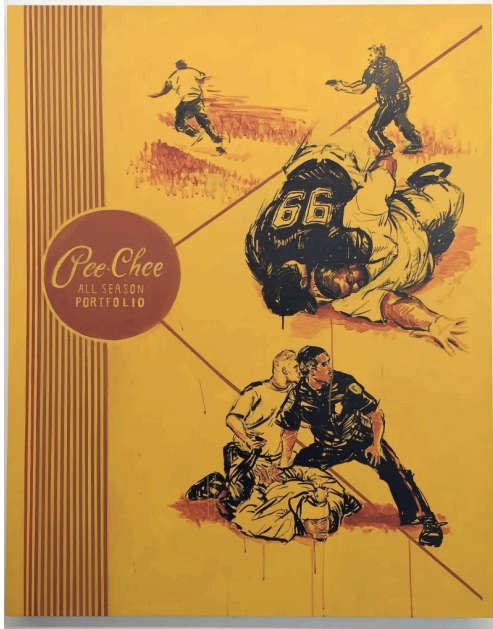
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The contemporary mixed media artist says his work "is about honoring people who have been mistreated or have lost their lives" in altercations with the police. He says he wants to freeze those images "in a fine arts context."

In one of Martinez's most recognizable paintings he illustrated a black man getting wrestled to the ground in a choke hold by a white male. At quick glance, the striking image of two men wrestling feels similar to the sports scenes on the traditional folders, but at closer glance it's recognizable as a scene millions of us have seen on YouTube: The police attack on Eric Garner.

At the top of Patrick Martinez's acrylic on panel work from 2015, Walter Scott is depicted moments before he was shot by police. Eric Garner is seen at the center of the panel.

Courtesy of Patrick Martinez/Charlie James Gallery



The white man pinning down a black man is wearing a jersey with the number 99 on the back, the same digits on the shirt worn by the undercover officer that wrestled Eric Garner to the ground.

Martinez says his work focuses on the subtleties he sees in online media and around L.A. neighborhoods. He was born and raised in the City of Angels by a Filipina mother and a Mexican-Native American father. He grew up in North East L.A., which historically has been home to Latino families.

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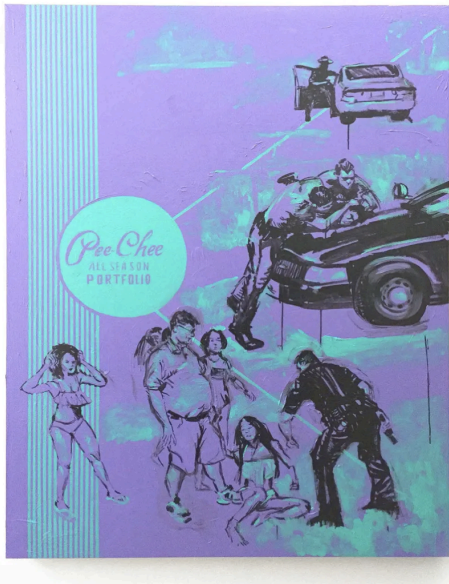


Artist Patrick Martinez in his studio. **Jorge Rivas/Fusion**

When I asked Martinez if his work was inspired by his own experiences with police officers, he first spoke about his brother who was in and out of prison growing up.

"I've seen [my brother] and my neighborhood friends be mistreated by the police at a very young age. I've been harassed simply because I was in the area," said Martinez.

Martinez says he also finds inspiration for his work by searching for videos of police misconduct on YouTube, and by stumbling across other clips on World Star Hip Hop. All the images he paints are of real life situations that have been taken from film or photography.



This 2016 work titled "Po-lice misconduct misprint 2" depicts a scene captured from police dash cam video moments before Sandra Bland was arrested. Below a Texas police officer is seen after slamming a black teen to the ground.

Courtesy of Patrick Martinez/Charlie James Gallery

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“These videos are digested at blog speed,” Martinez told me. “The videos are there one day and gone the next day. If I paint these scenes, art is a way of cementing that moment in time.”

Martinez sells his paintings and limited edition folders at the Charlie James Gallery in Chinatown. And like the original Pee-Chee folders, which until recently were sold for less than \$1, Martinez makes his work accessible to students by giving his folders away for free to students.

He smiles when he tells me that teachers send him pictures of students using his folders—images he shares with his nearly 20,000 followers on Instagram.

It's art, but it's also activism.

“I want viewers to see these horrific injustices from another angle and show that this is affecting our youth,” Martinez told Fusion.