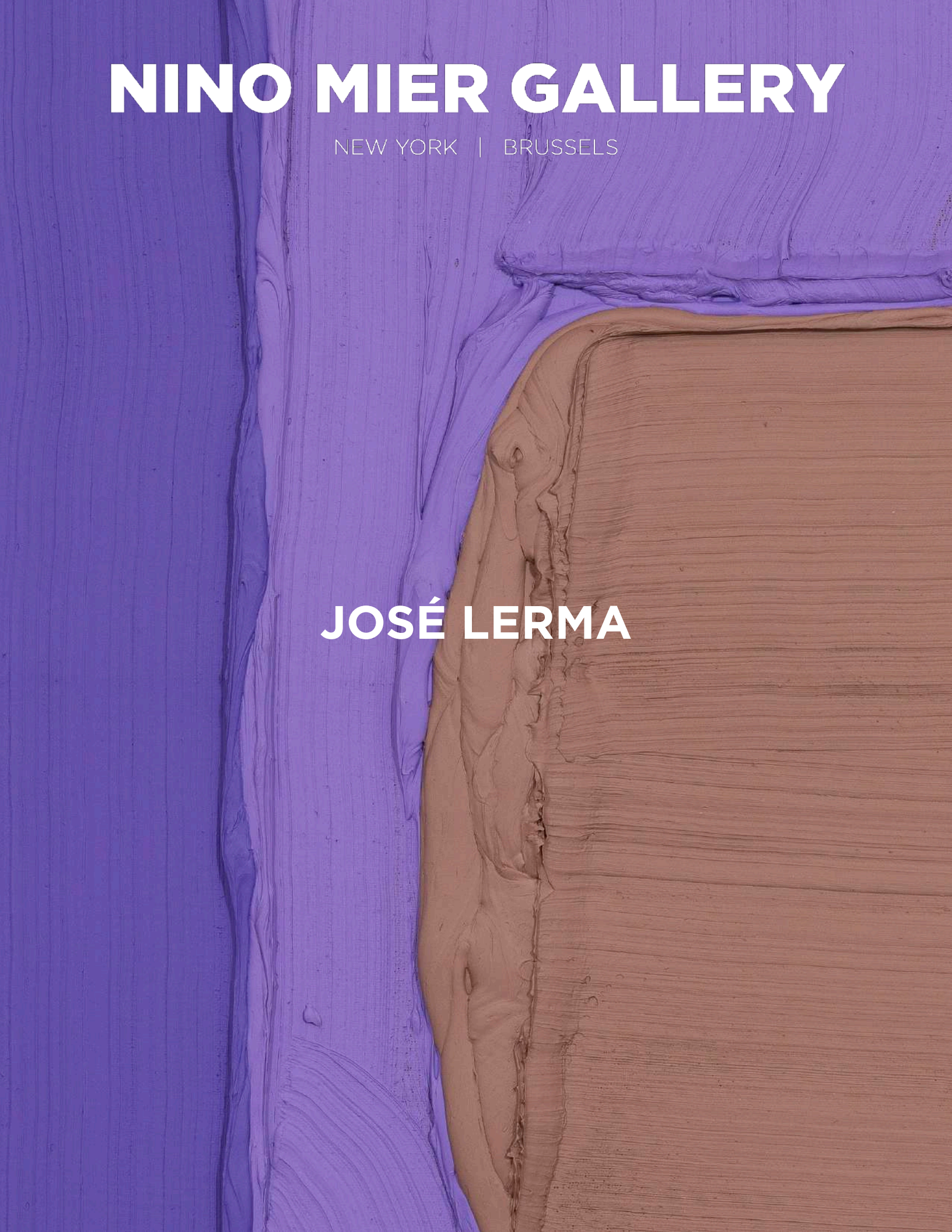
NINO MIER GALLERY

NEW YORK | BRUSSELS



JOSÉ LERMA

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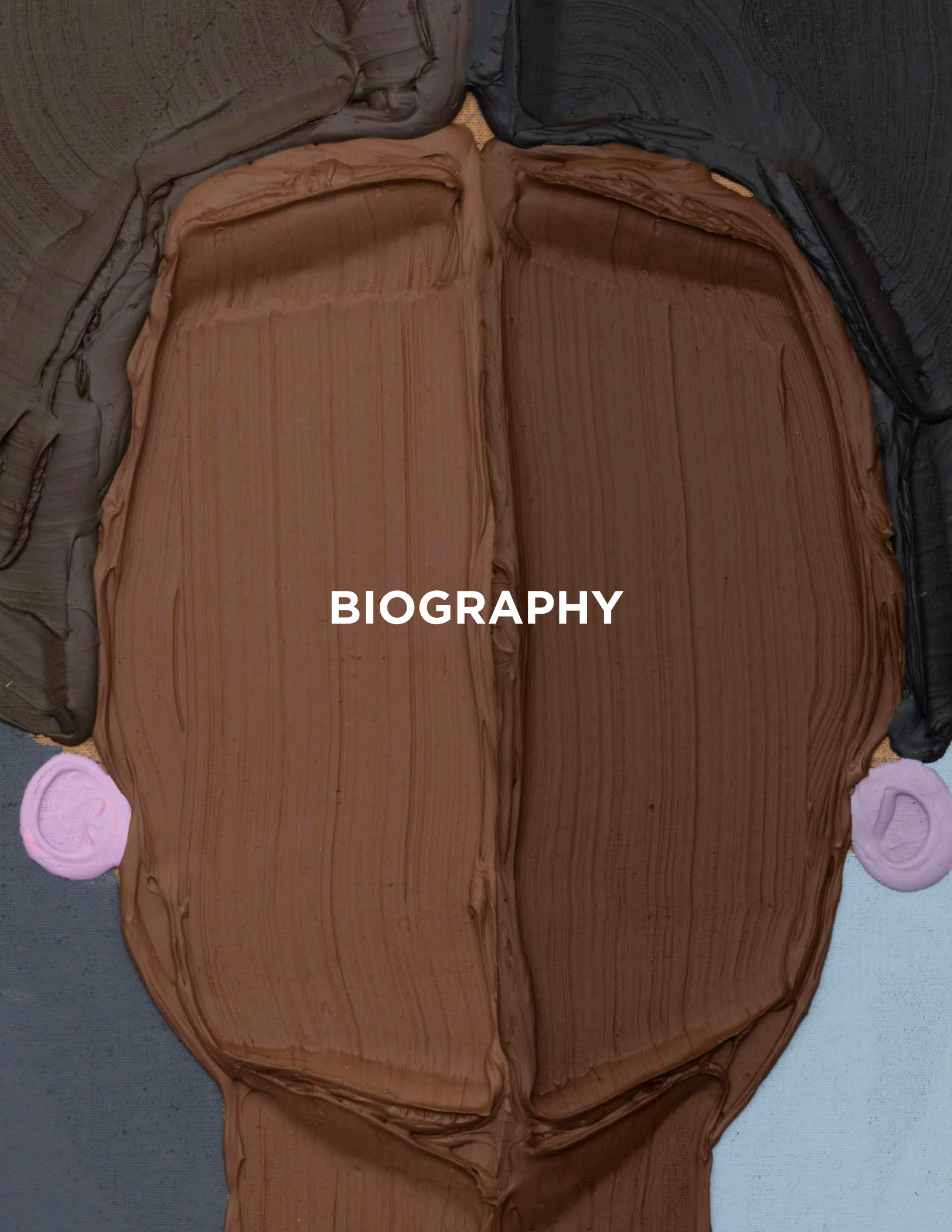
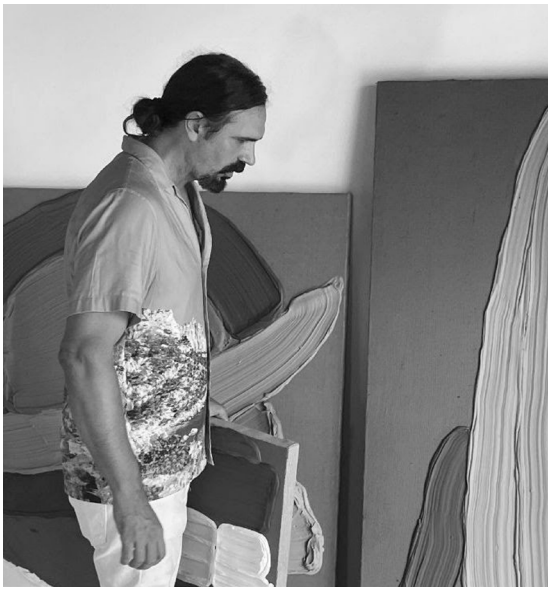


BIOGRAPHY

JOSÉ LERMA

b. 1971, Sevilla, ES
Lives and works in San Juan, PR



José Lerma is a multimedia artist who works primarily in portraiture. Lerma's practice is most responsive to not only the social and material conditions of the cities he inhabits, but also to the works of art put on display by their institutions. He has described his practice as akin to that of a landscape painter, turning his eye into a sieve able to distill and record telling details about worlds physically proximate to him. Of particular interest to Lerma is art history, and how artistic representation produces social and political power. His recent suite of portraits is known for its rejection of character psychology and its distinctively haptic materiality, produced with a custom-mixed acrylic paint that allows for a signature impasto.

José Lerma (b. 1971, Sevilla, ES; lives and works in San Juan, PR) received his MFA from University of Wisconsin, Madison in 2002. He has had over twenty solo exhibitions at galleries such as Almine Rech in Paris, FR, Nino Mier Gallery in Los Angeles, CA, Kavi Gupta in Chicago, Xavier Hufkens in Brussels, BE and Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, US, and at museums such as the Museo de Arte Puerto Rico, PR, Kemper Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, MI, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, IL. His works are represented in numerous collections, including The Saatchi Collection in London, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Lerma served as an Associate Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago until from 2009 through 2023. Later in 2025, Lerma will have solo exhibitions at MOCA, Madison, WI, US and at Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY, US.

SAMPLE WORKS

*sample selection does not reflect current availability

Leda, 2025
Acrylic on burlap
72 x 48 in
182.9 x 121.9 cm
(JLE25.010)

Ismaela, 2025
Acrylic on burlap
32 x 24 in
81.3 x 61 cm
(JLE25.009)

Ágata, 2024
Acrylic on burlap
48 x 36 in
121.9 x 91.4 cm
(JLE24.010)

Danelis, 2024
Acrylic on burlap
48 x 6 in
121.9 x 91.4 cm
(JLE24.010)

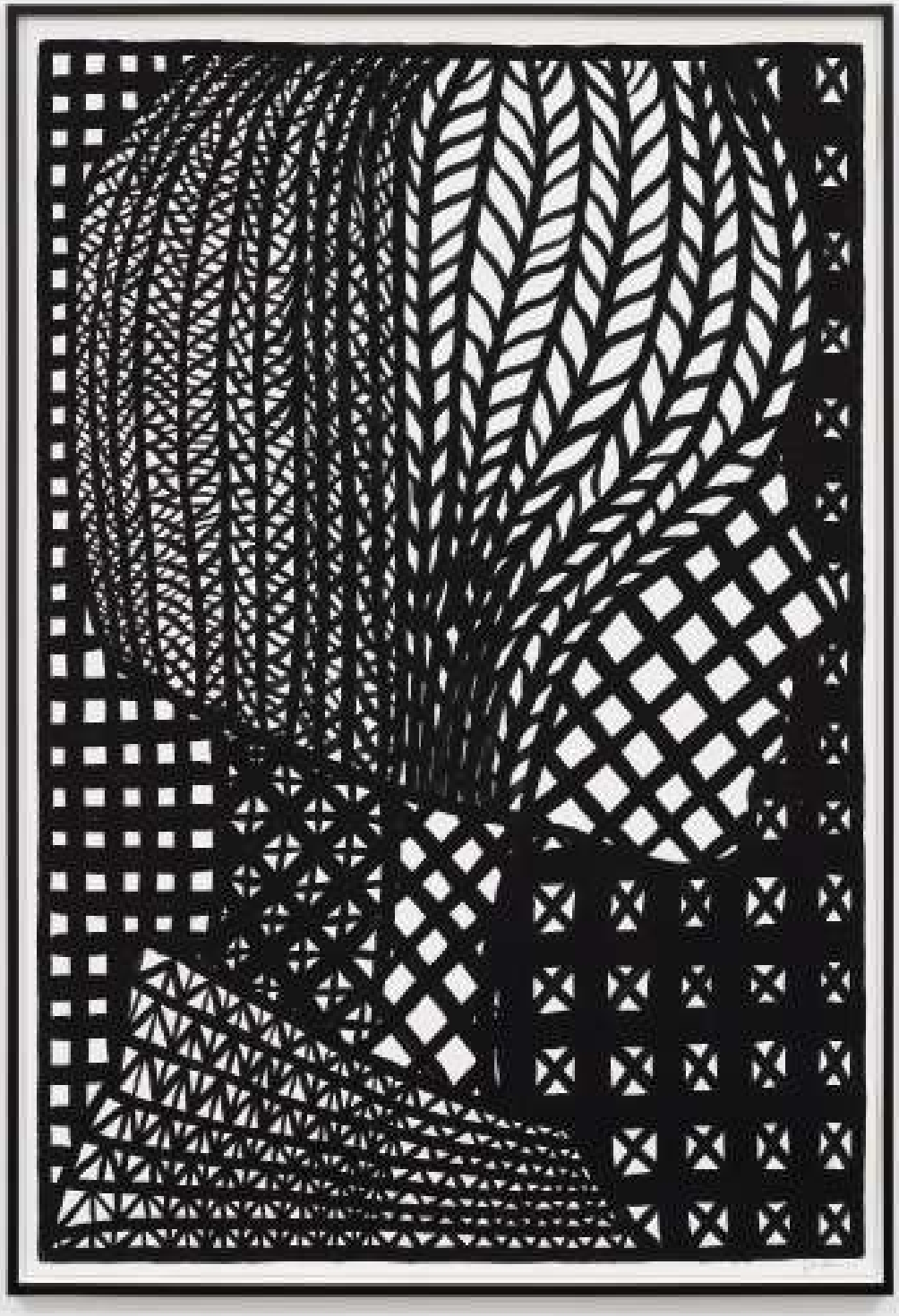
Ingrid, 2023
Acrylic on burlap
48 x 36 in
121.9 x 91.4 cm
(JLE23.023)

Simona, 2023
Acrylic on burlap
72 x 48 in
182.9 x 121.9 cm
(JLE23.001)

Rodolfo, 2021
Acrylic on burlap
72 x 48 in
182.9 x 121.9 cm
(JLE21.012)

Full Ana, 2021
Acrylic on burlap
32 x 24 in
81.3 x 61 cm
(JLE21.011)

Untitled, 2023
Acrylic on polypropylene sheet
86 1/2 x 62 1/4 x 2 in (framed)
219.7 x 158.1 x 5.1 cm (framed)
(JLE23.038)



Untitled, 2023
Acrylic on polypropylene sheet
86 1/2 x 62 1/4 x 2 in (framed)
219.7 x 158.1 x 5.1 cm (framed)
(JLE23.032)

Cafresi 2, 2021
Acrylic and silicon on burlap over board
30 x 24 in
76.2 x 61 cm
(JLE21.001)

SELECTED EXHIBITONS AND PROJECTS

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND PROJECTS

BAYAMONESQUE
2025
NINO MIER GALLERY
BRUSSELS, BE

RELATOR CON AMARGURA
2024
MUSEO DE ARTE DE PUERTO RICO
SAN JUAN, PR

A TRAZOS
2023
NINO MIER GALLERY
LOS ANGELES, CA, US

FICHUREOS
2023
ALMINE RECH
PARIS, FR

QUIETO, QUIETUD, QUIETUDES
2022 - 2023
ALMINE RECH
SHANGHAI, CH

PARECIDOS
2022
DIABLO ROSSO
PANAMA CITY, PA

UT QUENANT LAXIS
2021
NINO MIER GALLERY
LOS ANGELES, CA, US

Photography by GRAYSC.

BAYAMONESQUE

2025
NINO MIER GALLERY
BRUSSELS, BE)

In a world where noise and commotion are increasingly prevalent, and where it seems out of fashion to not make one's presence loudly felt, José Lerma gives a face to the bystanders and the silent witnesses in the back. But only in moderation—the faces he presents to us are, after all, stripped down to their most basic features. Highly stylized and rigid, they retain only the bare essentials of facial structure in what the artist calls "the summary of a portrait." His paintings go beyond mere representation, teetering on the edge of abstraction.

The profile paintings in *Bayamonesque* are a cornerstone of José Lerma's oeuvre. Over the past decade and a half, since encountering Jean-Léon Gérôme's 'Reception of the Grand Condé by Louis XIV' at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, he has been captivated by the sparse brushstrokes with which Gérôme rendered background figures. Most of Lerma's works are created in a single session. His medium—a heavy, unwieldy blend of construction materials and acrylics—dries quickly, leaving little to no margin for error. The immediacy of his process closely aligns with his goal of capturing the quickness of a sketch.

Though the roots of Lerma's ideas lie in the neoclassical and romantic traditions of Gérôme, he also draws inspiration from the sketch-like qualities of the Bay Area Figurative Movement and the work of Belgian artist Bram Bogart. The latter reference comes as no surprise: Bogart, a key figure in informal art, became known for his thick, cement-like canvases. Lerma holds Bogart's impasto-rich works in high regard: "Bogart set my blueprint. I just hyper-stylized it." As with Bogart, so too with Lerma—his plasticine-like textures evoke an almost primal, childlike urge to reach out and touch their provocative surfaces.

Bayamonesque marks the end of an era. The past fifteen to eighteen years have led to the culmination of this profile series as we know it. José Lerma sees this body of work as the conclusion of his current artistic cycle, bringing the viewer back to his homeland and the familiar faces of his past to complete this chapter. There are subtle shifts, however—the skin tones and surface colors now reflect more vivid blues, reds, and greens, lending the figures an otherworldly, almost artificial glow. They seem less illuminated by natural light and more like they exist under an entirely different spectrum.

The title of the exhibition reflects the interplay of opposites, a recurring theme throughout Lerma's career. He grew up in Bayamón, an industrial suburb on the outskirts of Puerto Rico. Though not known for its picturesque qualities, Bayamón holds a special place in the artist's heart, infusing this exhibition with a sense of everyday life. The quotidian nature of his hometown is made poetic by the suffix he adds to it, embodying the incongruity he delights in exploring. The profile paintings, after all, are built on a similar contrast—balancing the excess of thick impasto with the sparseness of just a few brushstrokes, and using large canvases to capture what are, essentially, sketches. Then again, the abundance of material makes a Lerma work impossible on a small scale.

The subjects, some real-life acquaintances from Lerma's native Puerto Rico and others pure invention, are chosen with a keen eye for detail—or rather, for the lack of detail he requires them to be portrayed effectively. The artist quickly discerns whether someone lends themselves to this series based on certain defining characteristics. As Lerma himself puts it: *"The abstract painter in me is, above all, drawn to certain people for specific features that can be broken down to their bare minimum as paintable elements: an expressive cowl, a striking nose, a distinctive shape of lips."* Anyone can be captured in a portrait, but only a select few can embody the essence of José Lerma's paintings.

RELATOR CON AMARGURA

2024
MUSE0 DE ARTE DE PUERTO RICO
SAN JUAN, PR

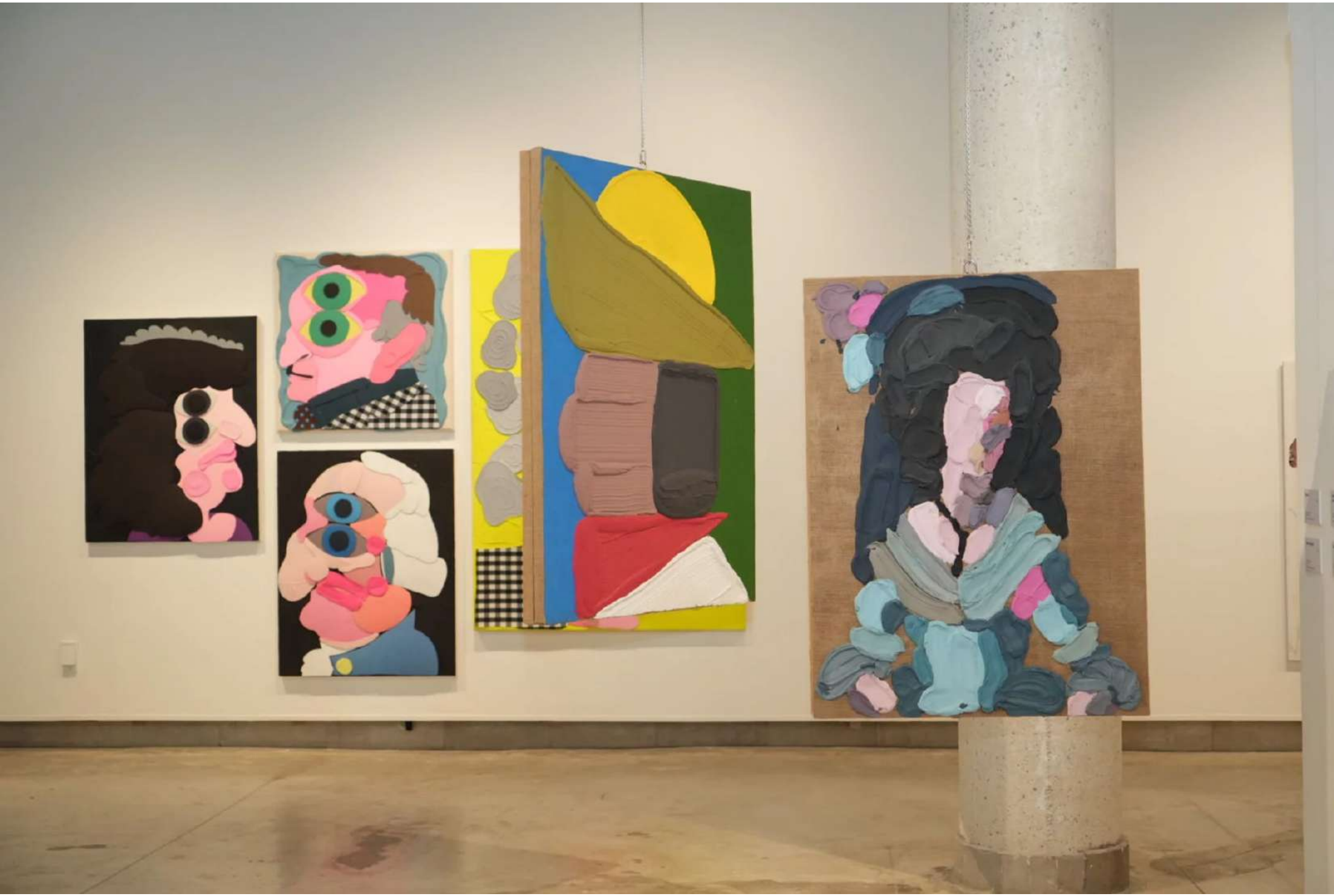
Internationally acclaimed Puerto Rican artist José Lerma presents ‘Relator con Amargura’, his first panoramic exhibition on the island.

The Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico (MAPR), is pleased to announce the opening of the panoramic exhibition ‘Relator con Amargura’, by Puerto Rican artist José Lerma. The show, which consists of more than 60 works of various formats, techniques and stylistic stages, is presented at the Helen Ann French Gallery and the Bertita and Guillermo L. Martínez Gallery.

“This exhibition shows for the first time the complexity of an exceptional Puerto Rican artist who, following the legacy of previous generations of artists, opted for painting at a time when the international art circuit - where José Lerma moves to the full - was turning its gaze to other media that were less complex and less immediate to execute. He has thus demonstrated how tradition can be united with contemporary research”, said María C. Gaztambide, executive director of MAPR.

For his part, Juan Carlos López Quintero, curator of the MAPR, mentioned that “despite the fact that the work seems disparate at first sight - because here they broke with chronology and the works speak to each other - ‘Relator con Amargura’ is a pictorial installation where nuances and colour palettes are respected, although it is a resoundingly contemporary exhibition. That’s something that has never happened to me before”. On the process of working with Lerma, he added: “it has been very beautiful, a constant dialogue, intense, even emotional, but very respectful. I have been able to express my ideas, listen to his and produce together. I have learned a lot from him in all this time”

‘Relator con Amargura’ is part of the series ‘Regresos /Homeward Bound’, a project initiated by MAPR in 2023, with the aim of inviting contemporary Puerto Rican artists living abroad who have exhibited their work internationally but are little known on the island.



A TRAZOS

2023
NINO MIER GALLERY
LOS ANGELES, CA

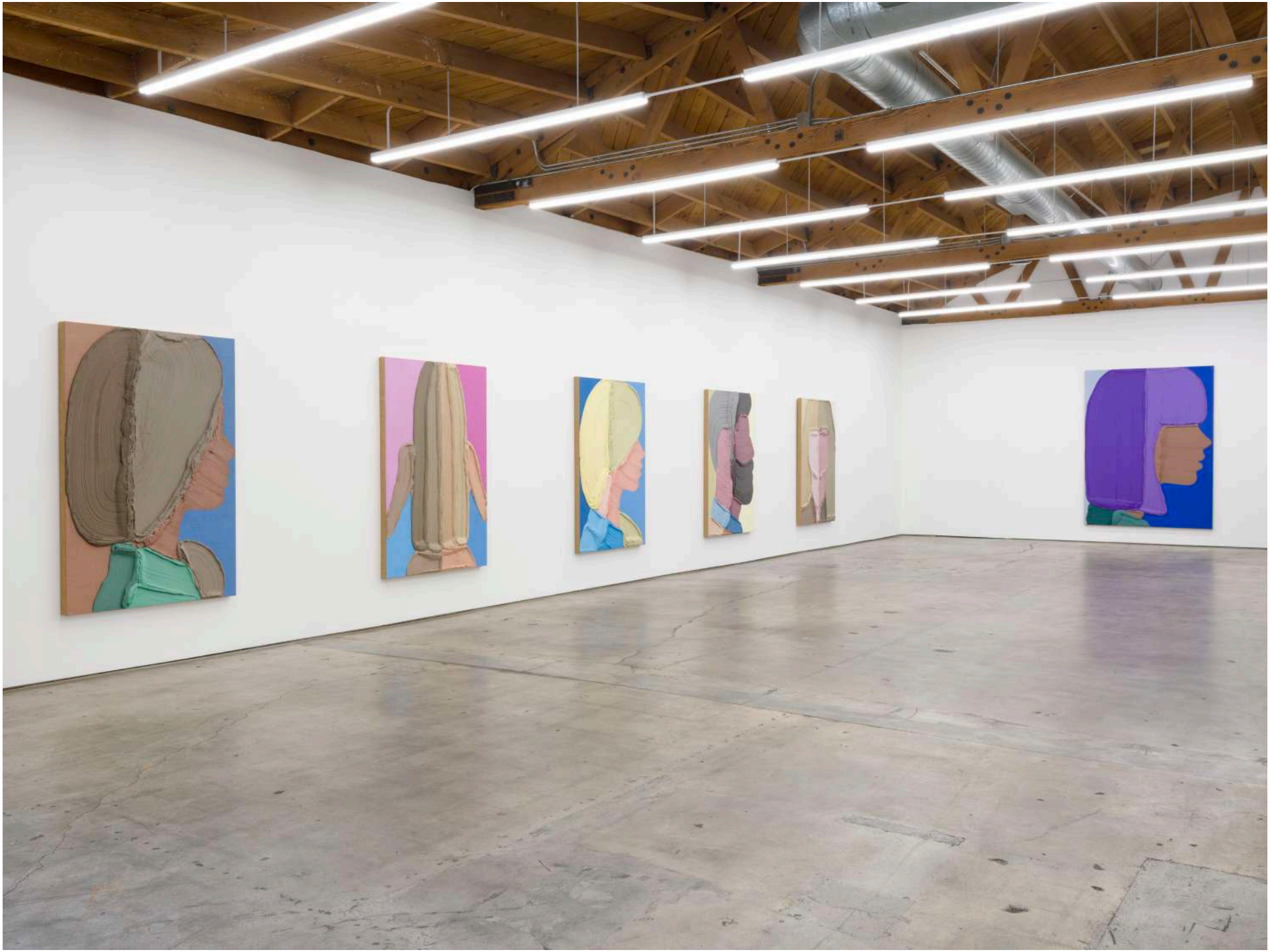
Lerma is well known for his economical portraits, comprising only a few strokes of paint to create nevertheless rich evocations of his genre and medium. Portraiture typically seeks to represent immaterial qualities unique to the sitter, conjuring a fuller view of their character through the still image. But Lerma is more engaged with the discrete elements of the medium—in the physicality of paint—than in evoking a particular subject's psychology. Typically represented in profile or from behind, his subjects lack particularly distinguishing facial expressions. Instead, they are materially sumptuous, undulating with heavy impasto that casts subtle shadows that vary as lighting conditions do.

In previous bodies of work in this style, Lerma's portraits were of historical figures like politicians and painters alongside people from his own life. In A Trazos, however, many of the portraits are composites of multiple subjects or include fictitious features.

The portraits in A Trazos also evince a uniquely disorienting experience with scale. Viewing a painting by Lerma in its entirety can often feel like viewing a smaller section of another painting through a microscope. He opts for the more visible weave of burlap over linen or canvas, and his thick acrylic mixture exaggerates textural irregularities that are often hidden in more conventional paintings. Overall, his sensuous facture evokes an intensely haptic experience in the viewer that subverts the aims of typical portraiture.

Lerma's large-scale works on polypropylene sheets are featureless portraits as well – representing subjects' contours from semi-obscured angles – but are executed with various repeating patterns rather than voluminous swaths of impastoed paint. In effect, viewers can toggle between focusing on individual patterns that roll across the surface like a landscape and focusing on the overall composition of the portrait.

José Lerma (b. 1971) is currently an Associate Professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he has taught since 2009. He has exhibited broadly, with notable recent solo shows at Almine Rech, London UK; Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL; Galerie Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, BE; and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY; and at museums such as the Museum of Contemporary Art, Detroit, MI; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL. His works are represented in numerous collections, including The Saatchi Collection, London; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Whitney Museum of American Art.



FICHUEROS

2023
ALMINE RECH
PARIS, FR

In fewer than a dozen brushstrokes per burlap canvas, José Lerma paints topographies. Blocks of subtle color buttressed by thick globs of acrylic bear a figurative likeness, together forming what appears to be a woman with a short bob or dark hair wrapped around an elongated neck. Having previously referred to himself as a landscape painter, Lerma renders his portraits, or what he terms "people-shaped abstractions," with a distinct gesture, creating works of both the recognizable (the human figure) and the unfamiliar (the artificial and anonymous).

This paradoxical tension is where the title of his latest exhibition originates. *Fichureos* is Puerto Rican slang derived from the English "to feature" and mixes with Spanish to form a colloquialism. Often used by reggaeton musicians, the word translates to an ostentatious displaying of oneself, or showing off with pretense and ornamentation. Featuring shares a Latin root with facture—the act of creating something—and means addressing a certain body part, emotion, or energy, all of which are aesthetic choices that further tether the word to the art-making process. For Lerma, fichureo is an irresistible way to think about the links between his physical and philosophical inputs.

Comprising a series of large-scale impasto portraits, the exhibition is a progression of the artist's recent works, drawing from the same initial experience. "I had an epiphany looking at Gérôme's 'Reception of the Grand Condé at Versailles' at the Musee d'Orsay where secondary diminutive characters depicted in the balconies were painted with just a few quick brushstrokes," Lerma says. What were ancillary figures become central for the artist, as he spotlights the subjects otherwise relegated to the periphery and subsequently creates another dichotomy: backgrounding vs. featuring.

Formally, the portraits in *Fichureo* also hold this contradiction. The colors are inviting and calming, while the material dramatically asserts its presence. We see the severe, sweeping marks of paint met with the softness of the palette, while the bright, theatrical light source illuminates the backs of several characters, keeping any potential identification in the face shrouded in darkness. Lerma, too, draws on the impulse of fichureo, that of showing off one's prized or perceived attributes, by rendering portraits that capture that same sense of inauthenticity. The subjects are not real people but rather composites or figments, all painted without context and reminiscent

All images courtesy of Almine Rech

of plastic mannequins.
Bisected to an excessive degree, each figure embodies a split, two distinctive modes meeting at a central line. Lerma is interested in the push and pull that emerges from opposition, although he gravitates ultimately toward co-existence. Part of his desire is simply to play with form and material and exaggerate the extent to which he can explore false appearances and deception, particularly through works defined by their physical composition. Returning to the contrast between figure and abstraction, Fichureos comprises what the artist calls “paint portraits,” or depictions of the paint itself, once again upending the notion of what portraiture can be. “There’s always a thing that isn’t,” Lerma says. And with that, he brings us closer to clarity.

QUIETO, QUIETUD, QUIETUDES

2022 - 2023
ALMINE RECH
SHANGHAI, CN

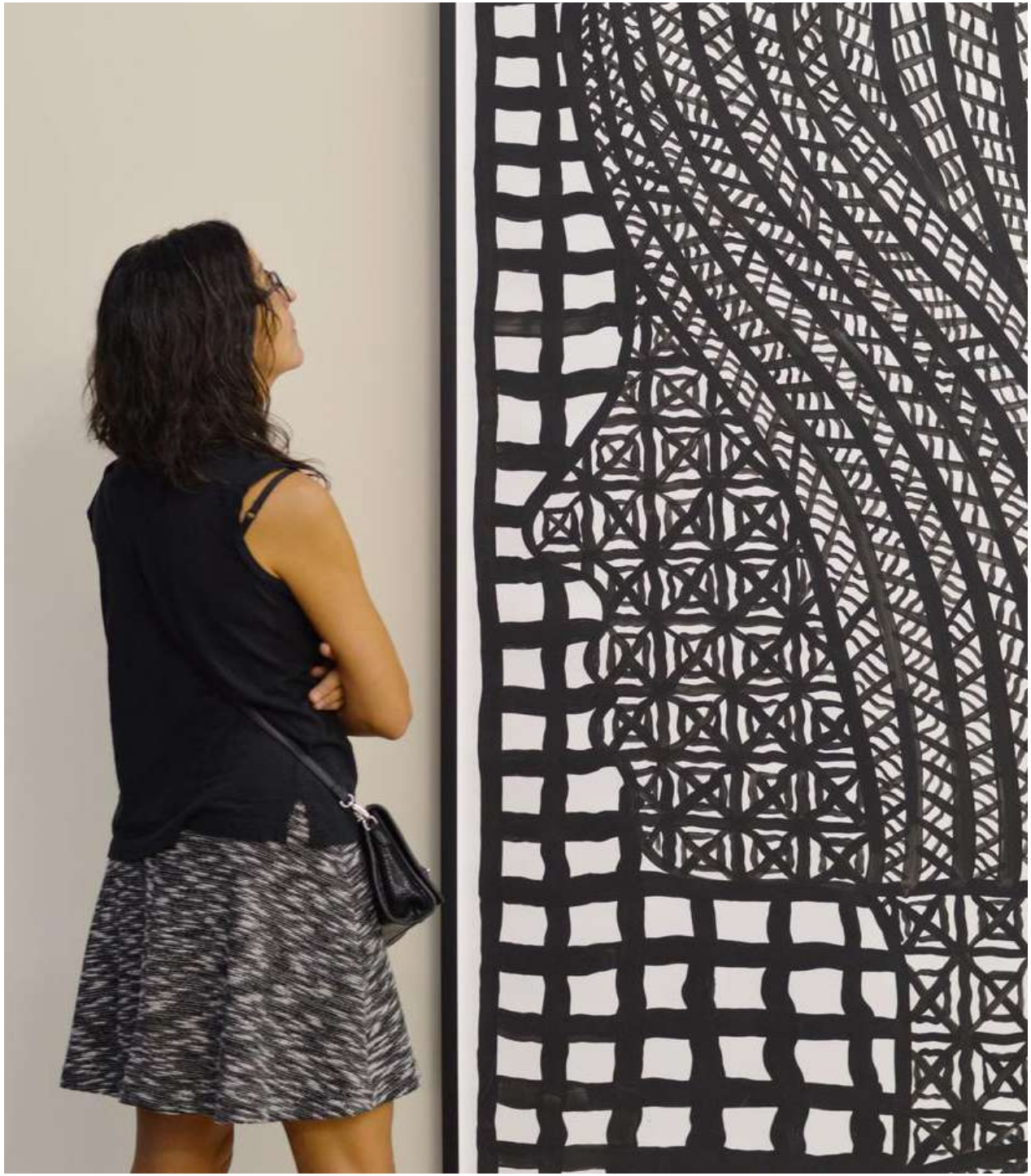
Portraiture—and who has historically been represented in the genre—is an abiding concern of Lerma's. Both his early site-responsive installations and recent studio-based paintings probe the power dynamics of portraits through the ages. For example, his 2010 series of fine-line airbrush paintings of 17th- and 18th-century bankers and royals resemble giant ballpoint pen doodles, thereby deflating the importance conferred by their official portraits. His floor-spanning depictions of these same personages on rugs further upends their dominance by having viewers look down at and walk on their faces. In the more recent Repaintings series, Lerma—who was born in Spain and raised in Puerto Rico—copies rare examples of Hispanic subjects in European and American paintings at the Art Institute of Chicago. Similarly, his series Background People, painted enlargements of marginal figures from Western paintings, reverse typical hierarchies of representation.

Lerma's current portrait paintings frustrate the desire to recognize a particular person—through distinctive facial features and/or character traits—in a depiction referred to as a "portrait." Each work is titled after the first name of the sitter, a mode of address that suggests some level of familiarity and even intimacy between artist and subject. Indeed, many of the titular individuals are Lerma's neighbors and friends in San Juan and Chicago, where he splits his time. Though based on specific people, the portraits are simplified to the point that likeness becomes indeterminate. Varying hairstyles distinguish one person from the next, but their blank visages allow the viewer to project imagined identities onto each. As resemblance recedes, paint itself comes to the forefront. Of course, the very abundance of paint, projecting outward from the canvas, further establishes its position of prominence. In place of metaphorical, psychological depth in the faces portrayed, we find literal depth in the thickness of paint. For Lerma, the portrait is the vehicle for the paint as much as the other way around.

The sculptural quality of the paint contrasts with the flatness of the images, which echo Pop art in their cartoonish simplification. Lerma's particular paint recipe not only has a high viscosity but also a rubbery, matte finish. Unlike oil paint, which is well-suited to rendering the translucency of human flesh, Lerma's thickened acrylic recalls toys, dolls or plasticine. The schematic faces and artificial materiality further thwart the development of character psychology. Contrary to the traditional aim to breathe life into painted figures, Lerma imposes an uncanny stillness and quiet on his by congealing them in the sludge of paint.

In the larger works, ranging from six to eight feet tall, Lerma uses a commercial broom to create gigantic brushstrokes. The effect is of a small study that has been enlarged. Shifting scale is another way to dismantle hierarchies and bestow importance on the marginalized. Blown up, seemingly casual sketches of local acquaintances assume the magnitude of aristocratic portraits. The ambiguous scale also destabilizes the viewer's sense of their own size, allowing them to imagine they are indeed looking at a tiny sketch but through the eyes of a child.

All images courtesy of Almine Rech



PARECIDOS

2022
DIABLO ROSSO
PANAMA CITY, PA

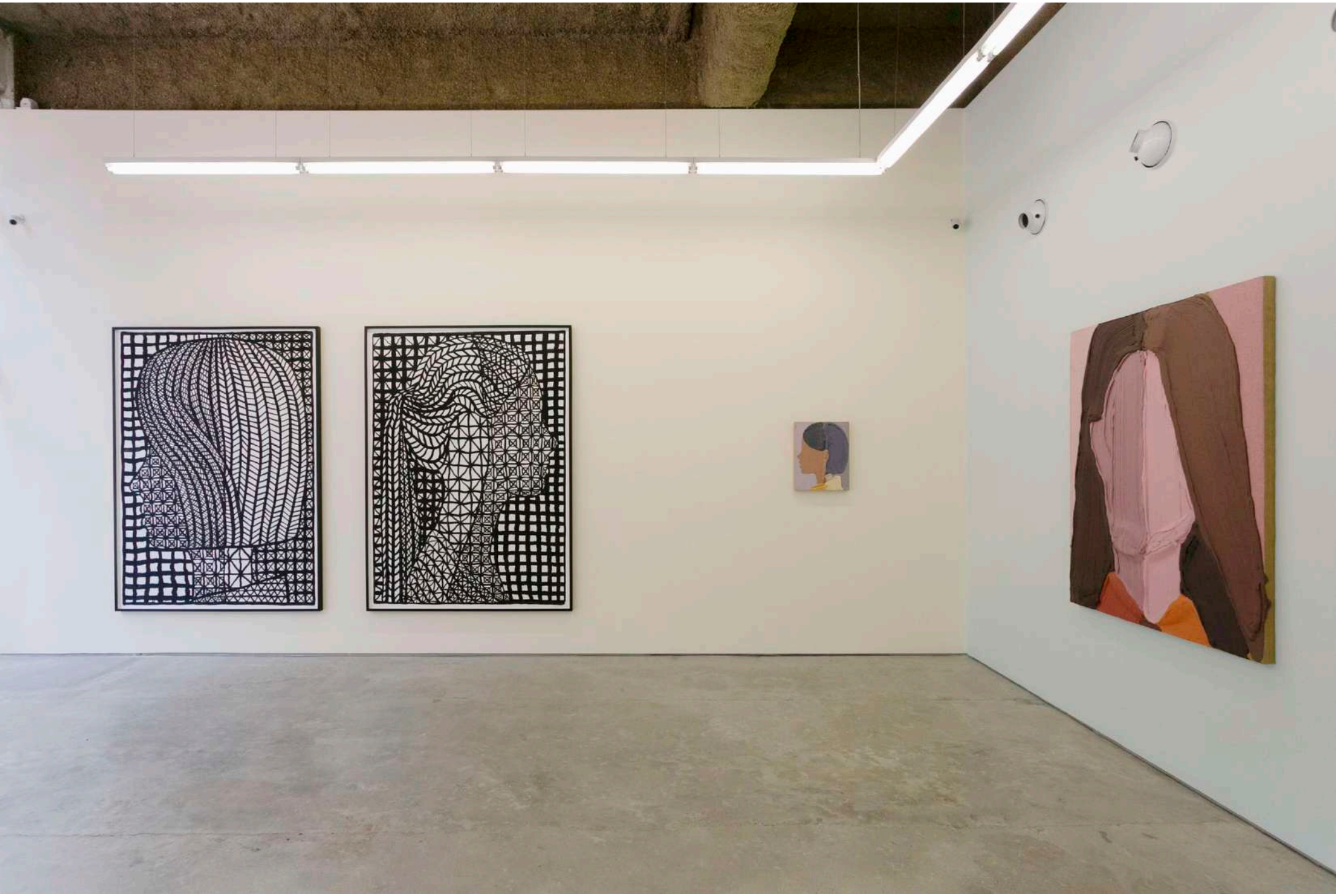
With wide strokes of paint, José Lerma traces the features of everyday characters in a single pass, creating thick and abstract portraits. The works exhibited in Parecidos have evolved from his previous works, where he revealed the general outline of figures, without further distinctive detail.

The route shaped by the bristles of the brushes and the use of complementary tones, personifies his subjects through a laborious process, where the material, mixed by the artist himself, is heavy and difficult to handle, but the result maintains an aesthetic accessible, tactile and playful.

With a background in social sciences, history, and law, much of Lerma's work has revolved around translating his interests and research into immersive and sometimes absurd installations. The latter remains in the excessive materiality of his portraits, as well as in the size of his drawings. The works in this exhibition have been created in a less academic environment than their previous works, which has allowed them to free themselves from historical dependence and face the future with a new and optimistic gaze.

All images courtesy of Diablo Rosso
Photography by Raphael Salazar

José Lerma
PARECIDOS



UT QUEANT LAXIS

2021
NINO MIER GALLERY
LOS ANGELES, CA, US

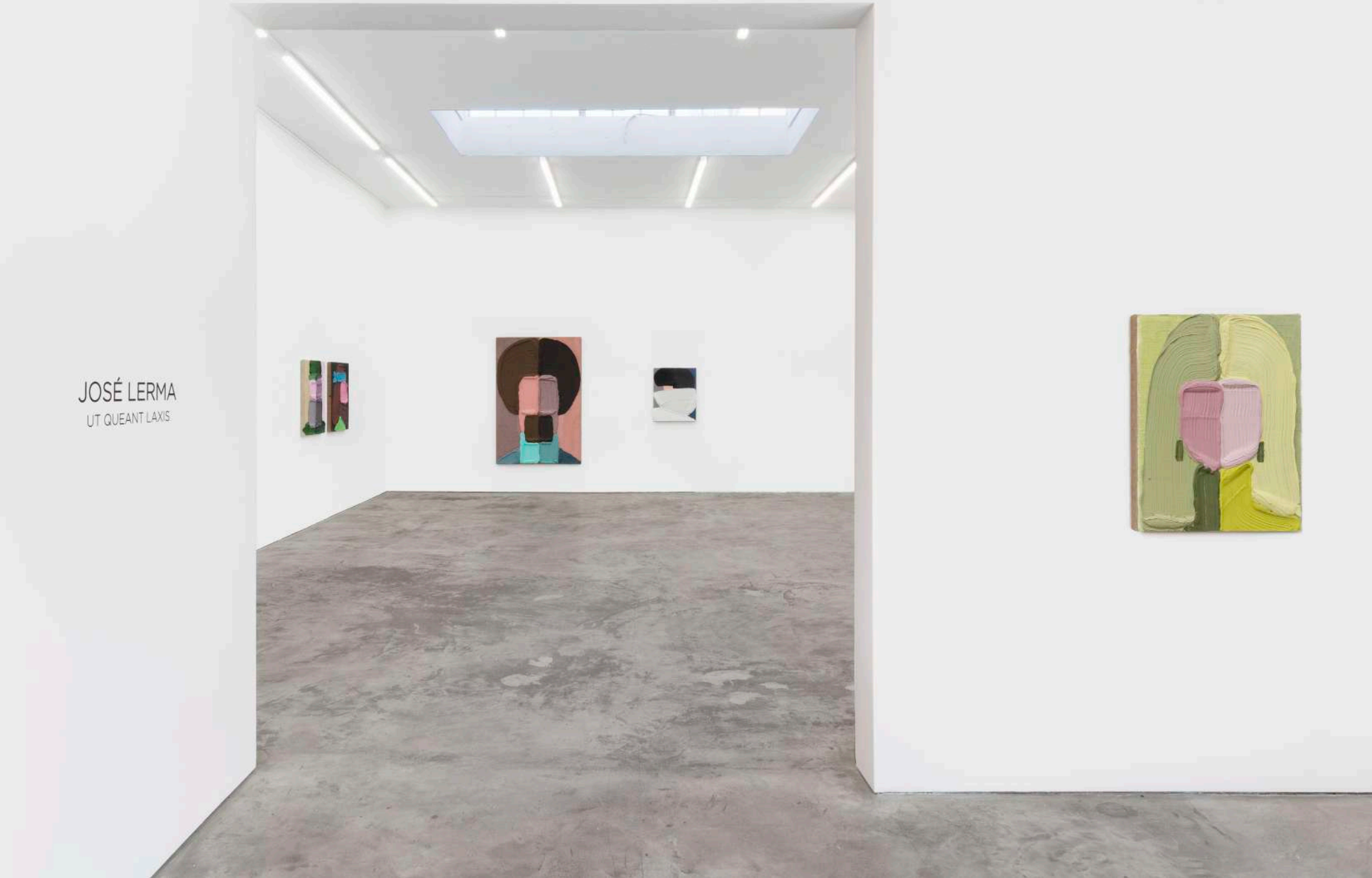
Ut Queant Laxis, the medieval Gregorian chant to St. John that lends this show its title, ascends a musical hexachord using words that we now employ for a major scale: Ut, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La. This hymn helped define and formalize the relationship between words and intervals in contemporary musical vernacular, thus laying the groundwork for how we understand the basic structure of music. Lerma's suite of 2021 paintings offers a similar pursuit of the fundamental elements of figural painting. These canvases are composed of monochromatic, textured backgrounds upon which thick, striated layers of fleshy, color-blocked acrylic paint stretch and coagulate harmoniously. Each color section appears as though it were applied in one or two strokes and remains sharply delineated from the others. Tere (2021), for instance, represents a long-haired figure in five color blocks, while Full Ana (2021) does so in eight. Typically, when artists use such a method of reduction, they do so to signify visual obstruction, as when a person is represented as far in the background of a painted scene, covered by a haze, or in motion. Lerma's current work, however, centers such normally peripheral figures, and thus also the formal technique used to represent them.

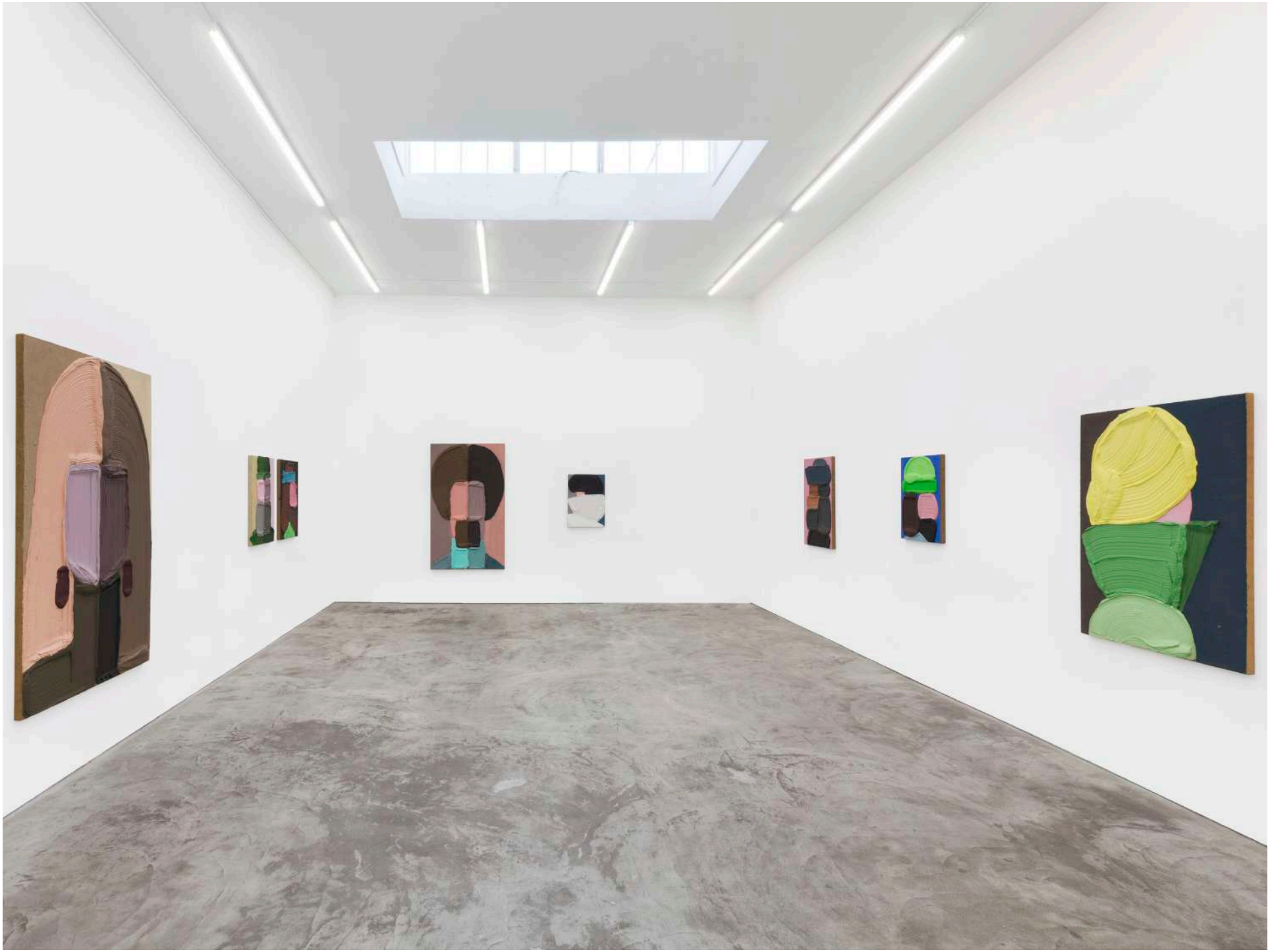
The distillation of form to the basic elements of texture, color, and line open Lerma's portraits to a fascinating investigation of medium, and specifically of how painting can disorient a viewer's sense of scale. The figures in Ut Queant Laxis, stripped of a broader context or situation, become more landscape than individual, an effect that deepens the longer one looks at them. We understand the yellow mass of paint in Clara (2021) to be a woman's hair in a bun, but it is also a series of parallel, curved lines, whose peaks lift prominently off the canvas like mountain ridges. In moments like this one, the viewer is made to feel shrunken before an intricate geography. Take a step back and reorient to regard the figure in full, and one confronts what seems to be a small, impressionistic section of a larger painting blown out of proportion. Lerma's choice to paint on burlap emphasizes this play with scale, as we see the texture and detail of the painted surface with unusual clarity. What might first seem like an aesthetic of the elemental, then, here becomes an aesthetic of scalar complexity.

The pleasures of Lerma's recent portraits are also their scarcities: of gesture and of compositional density, but also of interiority. For a genre so frequently focused on emotionality and the expressive potentials of the face, Lerma's portraits are resolutely psychologically abstruse. He frames his figures either straight-on or in profile, as though they were sitting for passport photos or mugshots. The standardized format of such photographs, a straight face centered on a blank wall, forefronts the sitter's identity as a state subject by denying him or her any immediate sense of individualized expression. But Lerma's concern in this body of work is not with citizenship, it is with medium. Perhaps there is something goofy about the swirling pinks that make up the face of Señorito (2021), or maybe there is something surreptitious about Impersonator (2021). But such aesthetic responses are brought on by the viewer's own psychology and relationship to form, as neither paintings represent the subjectivity of an individual, only shapes that summon us.

JOSÉ LERMA

UT QUEANT LAXIS





SELECTED PRESS

SELECTED PRESS

COLOSSAL
MARCH 2025
BY GRACE EBERT

ARTNEWS
APRIL 2022
BY SARAH BELMONT

COLOSSAL
FEBRUARY 2022
BY FIRST LAST

JUXTAPOZ
SEPTEMBER 2021
BY SASHA BOGOJEV

LUXE
MARCH 2021
BY MIKKI BRIMMER

ARTFORUM
JANUARY 2011
BY MATTHEW ISRAEL

COLOSSAL

MARCH 2025

Title of Sparse Brushstrokes Give Rise to Thick Impasto in Jose Lerma's Minimal Portraits

By Grace Ebert

"Leidy" (2025), acrylic on burlap, 48 x 36 inches. All images courtesy of Jose Lerma and Nino Mier Gallery, shared with permission

When Jose Lerma encountered "Reception of the Grand Condé by Louis XIV" by Jean-Léon Gérôme at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris, he found himself drawn to the figures tucked far behind the crowd. Known for his meticulous realism, Gérôme rendered these small characters with minimal brushstrokes, a decision that has influenced Lerma's work for more than a decade.

Exaggerating the sparse quality of the figures, Lerma (previously) paints portraits in wide swaths of acrylic applied with brooms and industrial tools. The new works retain the contrasts of earlier pieces as well-defined strokes sweep across the burlap to form heavy, impasto ridges.

"Yamila" (2025), acrylic on burlap, 72 x 48 inches

At Nino Mier Gallery in Brussels, Lerma's new solo exhibition *Bayamonesque* presents the culmination of his current style. The title references his upbringing in Bayamón, Puerto Rico, and how we think about resemblance. Painting both real subjects and manufactured characters, the portraits reference those who might otherwise be relegated to the background, stripping down their likeness to only what's necessary.

Vacillating between figurative and abstract, the compositions are what Lerma refers to as "the summary of a portrait…The abstract painter in me is, above all, drawn to certain people for specific features that can be broken down to their bare minimum as paintable elements: an expressive cowl, a striking nose, a distinctive shape of lips."

Bayamonesque is on view from March 14 to April 17 in Brussels. Find more from Lerma on Instagram.

"Celimar" (2025), acrylic on burlap, 32 x 24 inches

Ximus nectibu scillatur adi andiaestion consequid unduciam veria cuptas as as am, optat.
Lias volupta temporro blabo.

ARTnews

APRIL 2022

The 9 Best Booths at Expo Chicago: From Dazzling Peacocks to New 'Vogue' Covers Honoring Black and Indigenous Women Activists

By Sarah Belmont

José Lerma, *Margot 2*, 2022.. Photo : Sarah Belmont for ARTnews

José Lerma at Nino Mier Gallery

This booth is hard to miss. It's filled with particularly thick portraits by José Lerma. The Spanish-born artist, who has been teaching since 2009 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and now splits his time between the Windy City and Puerto Rico, uses a hand-mixed acrylic paint which, ever since the pandemic, has become his signature impasto. While everyone's social and public lives were on hold, Lerma also decided to limit his strokes and gestures, to take out of his compositions as much context as possible. His models are not to be recognized. As a matter of fact the longer you stare at them, the more they become abstracted. Some may even be perceived as landscapes. Those colorful works contrast with a couple of black and white acrylic portraits on paper, the density of which does not lie in texture but in a refined network of lines.

COLOSSAL

FEBRUARY 2022

Minimal Strokes Applied with a Broom Form Jose Lerma's Tactile Portraits

By Grace Ebert

All images © Jose Lerma, shared with permission

To create his thick, abstract portraits, Chicago-based artist Jose Lerma trades his brush for hefty, commercial brooms that follow the lines of preliminary sketches. "The process of these paintings is laborious. I make my own paint and fabricate my supports. The material is heavy and unwieldy," he tells Colossal. "It is done in one shot because it dries very fast, so there is a minimal margin for mistakes."

Lerma's impasto works shown here have evolved from his original series of Paint Portraits, which revealed the general outline of a figure without any distinctive details. Wide swaths trace the length of the subject's hair or neck, leaving ridges around the perimeter and a solid gob of pigment at the end of each stroke. His forward-facing portraits tend to split the figure in half by using complementary shades of the same color to mirror each side of a face.

With a background in social sciences, history, and law, much of Lerma's earlier pieces revolved around translating research into absurd, childlike installations and more immersive projects. "In recent works, maybe due to returning to my home in Puerto Rico and a much more relaxed non-academic setting, I have eliminated my reliance on history and research and now concentrate on just making portraits," he shares. "It's an approachable, tactile, and disarming aesthetic, but the absurdity remains perhaps in the excessive materiality."

Now, Lerma "works in reverse" and begins with a specific image that he reduces to the most minimal markings.

“It’s a large work painted in the manner of a small work, and I think that has the psychological effect of making the viewer feel small, more like a child,” he says.

Living and working between Puerto Rico and Chicago, where he teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Lerma currently has paintings on view in a number of shows: he’s at Yusto/Giner in Málaga through March 24 and part of the traveling LatinXAmerican exhibition. In April, he’ll be showing with Nino Mier Gallery at Expo Chicago and in May at Galeria Diablo Rosso in Panama. Until then, see more of his works on Instagram.

JUXTAPOZ

SEPTEMBER 2021

Ut Queant Laxis: A Conversation with Jose Lerma

By Sasha Bogojev

Images courtesy of Nino Mier Gallery and the artist

Nino Mier gallery in LA is currently running the final week of Jose Lerma's debut solo show Ut Queant Laxis. Borrowing the title from the Latin hymn in honor of John the Baptist, the suite of works comprising this extraordinary presentation introduces new takes on the portraiture form developed by the Seville-born artist.

As fans of figuration we've been enjoying watching Lerma using the archetypal depiction of a person to experiment with the most fundamental elements of painting and employing paint's materiality beyond its original design. It's this particular quality of his process that inspired the title of a show, repurposing the name of a monophonic chant often used for teaching singing because of its way of using successive notes of the scale. Puerto Rico-based artist saw it fitting to entitle his debut and introduce his practice with the same name, matching the stoic atmosphere of his work with the timeless vibe of Latin language.

The idiom "less is more" certainly applies to Lerma's work, but only when talking about the formative elements of the painting. The form, the color palette, the composition, the paint application and manipulation, everything is reduced to its most basic structure. The shape of a face and/or the body is depicted as a slob of paint, the composition is simplified to a few elements, the color palette includes almost equal amounts of tones, and the painting technique is reduced to equal amounts of precisely calculated gestures. Yet, as if to compensate for the purposeful simplicity of the process, the artist is using an abundance of the paint pushing the image far beyond, or above, the flatness of the surface. Additionally, through persistent use of burlap's woven texture as the support, the artist emphasizes the organic feel of the work while keeping the elements within the rudimentary sphere. Both painting and shaping his sitters, Lerma's combination of voluminous lumps of paint laid on thick

threaded-surface creates a scale illusion as all the elements suggest small-scale work while reality claims otherwise.

With such understanding of his work and impressed by the scale in which these pieces are actually constructed, we were happy to be able to chat with Lerma and learn a bit more about his practice, his tools and materials, his background, influences, and references he is using in his work.

Sasha Bogojev: How or why did your subjects get reduced to slabs of paint?
Jose Lerma: I enjoy the contradiction of having an excess of materials and an economy of brush marks. It is challenging to create a moving portrait with only seven or ten strokes. For that reason, there is a lot of preparatory work that has to go into these paintings.

What does the process or preparation look like?
I start with a sketch where I work out all the colors and compositional elements in advance. A lot of details are edited out at this stage. What emerges from this rigorous process has to look straightforward like a small oil study might feel, with its surface build-up and unevenness, but larger than life. Part of the desire behind these works is to bring the intimacy of a study and present it on a public scale.

That goal is certainly achieved in my opinion. And what sorts of tools and materials do you use to achieve that?
I mix the paint in buckets and apply it with commercial brooms and modified brushes. It is thick, heavy, and begins to form a skin in less than thirty minutes. Once I start to paint, it has to be done fast and in one shot. It's not an endlessly malleable substance like oil or versatile like acrylics. You have to plan and make every brushstroke count because while the quantity of material is excessive, the style demands that it looks effortless.

Image courtesy of Nino Mier Gallery

How difficult was it to develop your practice to be able to paint in such a manner?
As a student, out of financial necessity, I began adding various commercial thickeners to paint. I used medium, gels, marble dust, and hardware store materials. These also gave the paint a rubbery matte finish similar to play-doh, which most viewers find disarming. I still use the same formulas, but now I use high-quality pigments. I have been using this mixture for two decades with no significant issues, and even when it has limitations, it has a very distinctive finish which gives my work its feel. At times, the paint is so sculptural that it decides the subjects and style, telling what to paint and how to paint it.

Do you see your practice as painting or sculpting?
I mostly think like a painter. It is the basis of my work. Even working within an expanded language like installation or sculpture, I tend to compose pictorially. I started as a painter who didn't believe in painting, so I did a lot of Post studio work and painting. I don't feel that way anymore.

Was there a certain source of inspiration behind this particular body of work and what are some of your major influences?
This recent series was influenced by a visit I made to a museum more than ten years ago. I was looking at a very busy Jean Léon Gérôme painting and noticed the sketch-like handling of the tiny insignificant background people. I thought that abbreviated style would make exciting large paintings. So I began to paint larger-scaled works in the manner of small pieces. I also enjoyed the social implications of painting in the style of peripheral characters and thought that this idea had legs.

My painting influences are Martin Kippenberger, Sean Landers, Jonathan Lasker, Julian Schnabel, Bram Bogart, Giorgio Morandi, David Reed, Laura Owens, Alice Neel, Robert Colescott, Diego Velasquez, Piero Della Francesca, and many others. Two of my teachers, TL Solien and Michelle Grabner were also immensely influential on my practice.

What type of reference images are you working from or how do you choose your subjects?
I used paintings from the European Wing of the Art Institute of Chicago for many years as a reference. Before that, I used images of relatively unknown historical figures, mainly when traveling and working on site. Recently, I moved back to Puerto Rico with my wife. I decided then to paint random people from the neighborhood or just from my head. It has been very liberating to move away from historical references. Now the images just come to me, and I can live with that.

luxe
INTERIORS+DESIGN

MARCH 2021

The Chicago Artist Taking A Whimsical Look At Art History

By Mikki Brimmer

Image by Luxe Interiors + Design

"The idea is that you could be a child and enjoy my works," says Lerma, "but also as an adult for completely different reasons."

José Lerma has a sense of humor. His paintings and drawings—be they renditions of historical figures or interpretations of The Last Supper—embody a cartoonish, tongue-in-cheek aesthetic, in spite of the pious originals that inspire them. "Often the content of what interests me is either very dry, or maybe sad or tragic," he says. "So I try to give it a very happy, approachable, friendly aesthetic. The idea is that you could be a child and enjoy my works, but also as an adult for completely different reasons."

Much of that whimsy comes from candy-like colors of the thick, bubblegum-esque paint he uses. Though it's one of his signatures, the technique—which mixes pigments with construction materials and store-bought binders—was born out of necessity. "I started doing it when I was a student because it was cost-effective," he admits. "But it also has the added benefit of being more connected to real life and to materials that exist all around us."

Applying the paint in broad strokes using brooms and wallpaper brushes, Lerma meddles with perspective. "The idea is to enlarge the gesture as much as possible so that the work is not just big, but a small work made big, so that you feel smaller by extension and it puts you in a childlike state of mind."

While his approach is lighthearted, the work is a broader examination of Latin representation in the art world. Lerma has created a series of what he calls “re-paintings” of Hispanic subjects in the European and American wings of the Art Institute of Chicago. “My goal was to speak of the lack of proportional representation for the Latin experience and sensibility in the American museum,” he explains.

Lerma’s new work-in-progress addresses the same concept. Creating doodles of the Art Institute’s European paintings on cocktail napkins, he photographs the napkins and will eventually digitally collage them into a much larger piece. “I have done all the European paintings in the west wing,” he says. “My goal is to finish all European paintings from the Renaissance to the impressionists.” Lerma will stack the pieces next to each other, following the curatorial logic of the museum. “The overall feeling of condensing and collapsing the images’ space is claustrophobic and optically charged,” he says. “It’s a caricature of a museum experience.”

ARTFORUM

JANUARY 2011

José Lerma

By Matthew Israel

View of “I am sorry I am Perry,” 2010. From left: Samuel Bernard, 2010; De la Nada Muerte a la Nada Vida (From the nothing death to the nothing life), 2010.

Relegated to this gallery’s smaller rear room, José Lerma’s latest exhibition, “I am sorry I am Perry,” would have benefited from the larger main space. His show is brimming with ideas, which deserve the additional real estate.

The show’s title is sourced from a Spanish joke that reflects on the limits of language. Lerma conceived of the included paintings as portraits of bankers produced by a bureaucrat using office tools that might be at hand, such as Bic pens and pink highlighters. Keyboards playing ambient music act as supports for some of the paintings—the result is something like Chris Ofili’s dung balls replaced with Korgs. (The music resembles the kind characteristically used on the sound tracks of art documentaries, which might well be a wry joke on the artist’s part.)

The inspiration for many of these works seems to be Philip Guston’s late figuration; the pieces play off this source material without feeling pretentious. In looking at John Law, 2010 (possibly based on Alexis Simon Belle’s depiction of the Scottish economist, which hangs in London’s National Portrait Gallery), viewers could lose themselves tracing the intricate faux-Bic swirls (created with a doctored airbrush) of the figure’s wig; these whorls threaten to take over the whole painting. One is then entirely sideswiped by the seeming reverse of this formal approach: wide pressings of paint in wasabi greens, light grays, and slightly creamy whites. A hanging reflective curtain feels disconnected from the other works until one notices how it continually changes the light in the room, splits the viewer’s shadow into three, and extends the experimentation further.

CURRICULUM VITAE

JOSÉ LERMA

b. 1971, Seville, ES
Lives and works in Puerto Rico

EDUCATION

2002 MFA, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, US
1998 School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL, US
1995 MA, University of Wisconsin School of Law, Madison, WI, US
1994 BA, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, US

SOLO AND TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

2025 Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY, US *(forthcoming)*
Domestic in a Foreign Sense, Museum of Contemporary Art, Madison, WI, US *(forthcoming)*
Bayamonesque, Nino Mier Gallery, Brussels, BE
diez-gracias, DiabloRosso, Panama City, Panama, PA

2024 *Relator con Amargura*, Museu de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan, PR

2023 *Fichureos,* Almine Rech, Paris, FR
A Trazos, Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
Guerras Tibias, Almine Rech, London, UK

2022 *Quieto, Quietud, Quietudes*, Almine Rech, Shanghai, CN

2021 *Ut Queant Laxis,* Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US

2020 *The Figure in Solitude,* Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL, US

2019 *José Lerma*, Galería Leyendecker, Islas Canarias, ES

2018 *José Lerma – Io e Io*, Diablo Rosso, Panama City, PA

2017 *Nunquam Prandium Liberum*, Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL, US
The Last Upper, Brand New Gallery, Milan, IT

2016 *La Venida Cansa Sin Ti*, Kemper Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, US
Huevolution, Halsey McKay Gallery, East Hampton, NY, US
Josh Reames and José Lerma, Luis de Jesus, Los Angeles, CA, US

2014 *La Bella Crisis*, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Detroit, MI, US
Gloriosa Superba, Kavi Gupta Washington Blvd, Chicago, IL, US
Guaynabichean Odyssey, David Castillo Gallery, Miami, FL, US
The Unitedstatian, Van Horn Gallery, Düsseldorf, DE
Los Turistas, Diablo Rosso, Panama, PA
European Mixed Masters, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY, US
Robusto Parasite, Roberto Paradise, San Juan, PR
José Lerma and Josh Smith, Oliver Francis Gallery, Dallas, TX, US

2013 *José Lerma*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL, US

2012 *The Credentialist*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Raleigh, NC, US
José Lerma and Eddie Martinez, Halsey McKay Gallery, East Hampton, NY, US
Jibaro Jizz, Roberto Paradise Gallery, San Juan, PR

2011 *The Lightweight*, Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL, US

2010 *I am Sorry I am Perry*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY, US
Spanish Revival, Galeria Marta Cervera, Madrid, ES

2009 *El Pendejo*, Galerie Loock, Berlin, DE
José Lerma, Green Gallery, Milwaukee, WI, US

2007 *José Lerma: Paintings*, Arario Gallery, Seoul, KR
José Lerma: New Prints, Marty Walker Gallery, Dallas, TX, US

2006 *The Golden Sea*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY, US

2005 *José Lerma*, Xavier Hufkens Gallery, Brussels, BE
José Lerma, Galeria Il Capricorno, Venice, IT

2004 *Folklore of Our Times*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY, US
American Violence: José Lerma and Peter Saul, Glandier & Byrne, Paris, FR

2003 *Two Beats Off*, Southfirst Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
As if Accepting Defeat, Galería Comercial, Santurce, PR
Please, Don't Distort What We Had: José Lerma and Scott Roberts, 7/3 Split Gallery, Chicago, IL, US
José Lerma and Anne Schaacte, 1R Gallery, Chicago, IL, US

2002 *Lives of the Obscure*, Southfirst Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2025 *X Factor: Latinx Artists and the Reconquest of the Everyday*, curated by Christian Viveros-Fauné, USF Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, FL, US

2024 *Visages*, Almine Rech, New York, NY, US

2023 *Entre horizontes: Art and Activism Between Chicago and Puerto Rico,* Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Chicago, IL, US
Beach, curated by Danny Moynihan, Nino Mier Gallery, New York, NY, US

2022 *Hooking Up: Meet the Collection*, Cleve Carney Museum of Art, Chicago, IL, US
Seeking Knowledge, Patricia & Phillip Frost Art Museum, Miami, Florida, US

2021 *SURFACES,* Nino Mier Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
LatinXAmerican, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL, US

2020 *The Figure in Solitude*, online exhibition, Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL, US

2019 *With a Capital P: Selections by Six Painters*, Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, IL, US
Your Favorite Artist's Favorite Artist II, Joshua Liner Gallery, New York, NY, US

2017 *Keep The Lights On*, Diablo Rosso, Panama City, PA
Likeness, Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, CA, US
In Paper We Trust, The Dot Project, London, UK
American Genre: Contemporary Painting, Maine College of Art, Portland, ME, US
Fake News, River, Los Angeles, CA, US

2016 *Imagine*, Brand New Gallery, Milan, IT
The Aging Coconut, Roberto Paradise, San Juan, PR
Terricolas, Art Lab, Santruce, PR
McArthur Binion: José Lerma, Angel Otero, Clare Rojas, Jessica Stockholder, and Tony Tasset, Kavi Gupta, Chicago, IL, US
Objects In The Rearview Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear, Diablo Rosso Gallery, Panama City, PA

2015 *Condensed Matter Community*, Synchrotron Radiation Center, Stoughton, WI, US
Winter Solstice / Little Sun, James Barron Art, Kent, CT, US

2014 *Eric's Trip*, Lisa Cooley Gallery, New York, NY, US
Pangaea, Saatchi Gallery, London, UK
Renuncias y Adopciones, Instituto de Cultura Puertorriquena, San Juan, PR
Dallas Biennial, curated by Cynthia Daignault and Mark Loiacono, Dallas, TX, US
Head, Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL, US
More Than a Likeness, McClain Gallery, Houston, TX, US

2013 *Paper*, Saatchi Gallery, London, UK
The System of Objects, Deste Foundation, Athens, GR
19516 Kilometers from Milwaukee, Misako & Rosen, Tokyo, JP
On Painting, Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, Gran Palma, Canarias, ES
Cabinet of Threads, Galerie Van Horn, Düsseldorf, DE
Tandem Press: 25 Years, Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, US
Impresiones, Relieves y Resonacias, University of Puerto Rico, Cayey, PR
Swamp, Edgar Alan Poe Park Center, Bronx, NY, US
O te Peinas o te Haces Rolos, La Productora, Santurce, PR
Pushing It; Innovative Approaches in Printmaking, Dean Jensen Gallery, Milwaukee, WI, US

2012 *Roberto Paradise*, Josh Lilley Gallery, London, UK
Pasiones Contemporaneas, Museo de Arte de Ponce, Ponce, PR
The Way In, Popular Center, San Juan, PR
Someone Else's Dream, Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, IL, US
Idealizing the Imaginary, Oakland University Art Museum, Rochester, MI, US
Chiquitolina, curated by Jorge Roman, La Quince, San Juan, PR
Tandem Press: 25 Years, Chazen Musuem of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, US
Michelle Grabner: The Inova Survey, Inova, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI, US
Where My Cones At?, , Double Break, San Diego, CA, US
Raw Ille, curated by Liz Markus, Fine Arts Amagansett, Amagansett, NY, US
Material Breach, Art Amalgamated, New York, NY, US

2011 *Unfinished Paintings*, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, CA, US
Go Figure, curated by Eddie Martinez, Dodge Gallery, New York, NY, US
Green Gallery at 47 Canal, 47 Canal, New York, NY, US

Irritable Abstraction, Julius Caesar, Chicago, IL, US
Handler, curated by John Riepenhoff, Western Exhibitions, Chicago, IL, US
Painting…Expanded, curated by Marisol Nieves, Espacio 1414 Santurce, PR
Dirt Don't Hurt, curated by Bill Saylor, Jolie Laide, Philadelphia, PA, US
Espacio Entre Medio, Chemi's Room, San Juan, PR
1ra Bienal Tropical, curated by Pablo Leon De la Barra, Loiza, PR
To Tell the Truth, Monya Rowe Gallery, New York, NY, US
De Bayamon a La 15, Cart Wash, Santurce, PR

2010 *Lush Life*, Lehman Maupin Gallery, New York, NY, US
Don't Piss on my Leg and Tell me it's Raining, Apex Art, New York, NY, US
Museos Portatiles, Parking 01 Can Xalant, Contemporary Center, Barcelona, ES
One for all, curated by Jessica Halonen, Trinity University, San Antonio, TX, US
From NY with Love, curated by Glorimarta Linares, Don't Projects, Paris, FR
The Mobile Uploads, curated by Amanda Schmitt, Sloane, New York, NY, US
Go Figure, The Hogar Collection, Brooklyn, NY, US
The Power of Selection III, Western Exhibitions, Chicago IL, US
One Degree, Middlesex College, Edison, NJ, US

2009 *Submerging Artists*, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne, Germany, DE
Wallgasm, curated by John Riepenhoff, Angstrom Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
From New York with Love, Candela Gallery, San Juan, PR
Rattled by the Rush, Andrew Rafacz Gallery, Chicago, IL, US
Objet Petit A, with Crisitina Tufino, Spoke, Chicago, IL, US
Good News, Porter Butts Gallery University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, US
Cadaver Corpse, curated by Tessa Perutz, Space 1028, Chicago, IL, US

2008 *Learning by Doing*, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston, TX, US
Works from the Permanent Collection, Milwaukee Art Museum, WI, US
En Sus Marcas, Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, PR
NY Motion 1.0, Instituto Cervantes, New York, NY, US
Alogon, curated by Gaylen Gerber, Alogon Gallery, Chicago, IL, US
Ice Cream Show, Loyal Gallery, Stockholm, SE
Selected Works, Southfirst Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
It's Not What You Know, It's Who You Know, with Neutral Capital Collection, Samson Projects, Boston, MA, US

2007 *The S Files*, curated by Elvis Fuentes, Museo del Barrio, New York, NY, US
STUFF, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Collection of Burt Aron, Detroit, MI, US
Colección Valencia Arte Contemporaneo, Institute Valencia d'art Modern, ES
Cerca Series, with Neutral Capital Collection, Lui Velazquez Gallery, Tijuana, MX
Someday Never Comes, Ziehersmith Gallery, New York, NY, US
New Labor, with Neutral Capital Collection, Leroi Neiman Gallery, Columbia University, New York, NY, US
Cerca Series, with Neutral Capital Collection, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, San Diego, CA, US
Second Annual Dining Room Show, sponsored by Andrea Rosen Gallery, Amaganssett, NY, US
Passport to the Arts, sponsored by The New Yorker, The Xchange, New York, NY, US

2006 *Farewell to Icon*, Anna Helwing Gallery, Los Angeles, CA, US
Panic Room, curated by Jeffrey Deitch & Kathy Grayson, DESTE Foundation, Athens, GR
Constant Disturbance, Centro Cultural Español, Miami, FL, US
Exposición de Apertura, Espacio 1414, Santurce, PR
Fresh, Renaissance Society, Chicago, IL, US

The Lovers, in collaboration with Jesus Bubu Negron, Canada Gallery, New York, NY, US
2x2, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX, US

2005 *Curvaceous*, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY, US
Alice Neel Project, Robert Miller Gallery, New York, NY, US
Monster Painting, Mclain Gallery, Houston, TX, US
CORE, Glassell School of Arts, Houston, TX, US

2004 *Sadie Hawkins Dance*, Southfirst Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
Summer Drawings Some Are Not, curated by Lisa Cooley,
Mixture Contemporary Art, Houston, TX, US
CORE, Glassell School of Arts, Houston, TX, US

2003 *Dinosaurs*, Los Medanos College, Oakland, CA, US
Ensayo, Galeria Comercial, San Juan, PR
Lives of the Obscure, Southfirst Gallery, Brooklyn, NY, US
No Pasa Un Dia..., EX-Teresa Arte Actual, Mexico City, MX

2002 *PR02 [En Ruta],* M&M Proyectos, San Juan, PR

2001 *Teeter-Totter*, HUB Gallery, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, US
Catapult, Whatcom Museum of Art, Bellingham, WA, US
Artists of the New Millennium, Rockford Museum of Art, Rockford, IL, US

1999 *Triennial*, Madison Museum of Contemporary Art, WI, US
Secrets about Goo, Commonwealth Gallery, Madison, WI, US

SELECTED HONORS & AWARDS

2013 International Association of Art Critics, Best Gallery Show of 2012, Puerto Rico

2004 Eliza Randall Prize, Houston, TX, US

2003 Skowhegan Fellowship, Maine, US

1999 AOF Fellowship, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, US

1998 Samson Fellowship, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI, US

SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY
Saatchi Collection, London, UK
Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX
Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, WI
Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, WI
Contemporary Art Foundation, Tokyo, Japan
Arario Collection, Seoul, South Korea
Aby Rosen, New York, NY
Phillip Isles, New York, NY
Dakkis Joannou, Athens, Greece
Fidelity Investments, New York, NY
Colección VAC, Valencia, Spain

A. De la Cruz Collection, Puerto Rico
Phillara Collection, Düsseldorf, Germany
Colección Berezdivin, Santurce, Puerto Rico
Colección Cesar y Mima Reyes, San Juan, Puerto Rico
Berezdivin Collection, San Juan, Puerto Rico

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