

SHANE CAMPBELL GALLERY

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Outlaw Artist Alex Becerra is L.A.'s Pizza-box Picasso

By Peter Simek

There were no museums or galleries in Piru, California, the small town where artist Alex Becerra grew up. His aesthetic education came instead from perusing stacks of *Lowrider* and the Chicano erotic zine *Teen Angels*. When he discovered he could draw, he practiced by tattooing his peers.

“I’m really into cholo culture, but I’m not a cholo. I’m studio banging.”

“My junior year in high school, I fucked up everyone’s skin at my job,” Becerra says. “I didn’t realize how deep the needle should go.”

These elements—the erotic grist of adolescent fantasy, a homespun amateurism, the Chicano gang aesthetic—percolate through the bold, messy paintings that have earned the flamboyant, thick-bearded Becerra a reputation as an outlaw in Los Angeles’s art scene and one of the market’s most sought-after young guns. The 28-year-old studied at Otis College of Art and Design and now lives in his Inglewood studio, where he produces work critics have compared to that of Philip Guston, Martin Kippenberger, Mike Kelley and Pablo Picasso.

Becerra still finds inspiration in the bric-a-brac of the erotic underworld. Escort ads in *LA Xpress* serve as models for figurative portraits—female nudes contorted in absurdist, hypersexualized poses and charged with electric pinks and thick smears of paint. They’re abject and witty, self-consciously kitschy and vulgar.

“Who knows what the fuck runs through people’s minds when they see my work,” Becerra says. “People have thought I’m female because of how I handle the female form. A male wouldn’t be this crude.”

It’s that willingness to paint outside his comfort zone that makes Becerra’s wild fantasies feel raw, intimate and authentic. And when he’s not painting, making tacos for gallery hoppers from ingredients stuffed in his tool belt or sending stacks of drawings to his Chicago dealer in a greasy pizza box (“It’s the best way to naturally patina them”), Becerra will still tattoo anyone who’ll let him. Free of charge.

You didn’t visit a museum until after high school and had never taken a drawing class until you moved to L.A. for art school in 2009. How did you teach yourself to be an artist?

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At first it was purely out of necessity to copy something. From there, I acknowledged I could use [technical skills] to make certain things. I never had formal art classes. I got into graffiti really young. In the rural countryside, there was nothing to do. I basically practiced with graffiti and figured things out in terms of color composition and lines, until I realized, *I don't want to fucking do this anymore. It's lame, and I don't want to get caught and go to jail.*



What were some of your influences as a young artist?

I grew up in a small town in southern California. The town was all of 1200-1500 people, mostly Mexican-American immigrants, and the whole vibe was super agricultural. My dad was a truck driver; my mom worked for the city in Ventura. Life was very basic, but I never saw it as a place that held me back. It was a luxury to grow up in the countryside, not being introduced to a lot of shit and finding access to things outside of the community through *Low Rider*. Another magazine, *Teen Angel*, was super-influential as a kid, with female figures and pen-and-paper aesthetic. It was kind of nice figuring shit out in a town where you could do whatever the fuck you wanted.

What inspires you now?

My influences come from everywhere. Most of my inspiration doesn't come from looking at art. Instead, it's "How do I turn certain things into a discussion that can fall under art? How can this be part of a discussion that can be a painting?"

How does living in Los Angeles influence your work?

L.A. is a place that has so much art to offer and so many young good artists. At the same time, it is tough being an artist in Los Angeles right now. We have three to four prominent art schools pushing out X number of artists every year; it's a difficult place to create your own voice and make people pay attention to you. I try to keep it real. I try to do my thing. I think there are interesting things happening in painting in Los Angeles that will keep happening.

What are some of the challenges young artists face today?

Everyone you meet is an art advisor. There are people who come up to you as a young artist. They flash money in front of you and say, "I'll buy all of these." It is a tough position to be in. That's when character shows—how to keep fully aware. At the end of the day, what matters is the art. At the end of the day, good art will surface.

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Sin Prisa, 2016. Oil and acrylic on Linen 82.5 x 71 in.



For Nada, 2014. Oil and acrylic on Wood panel 73 x 66 in.



Just Like That Chula, 2016. Oil and acrylic on Linen 71 x 63 in.**



Crocs and Duvel, 2016. Oil and acrylic on Linen 82.5 x 142 in.

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