

THE EXPULSION, THE GARDEN, THE SEED

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Artist and Author

We expect the language of rage to be violent. Rage is the hot red and yellows of fireworks, the starburst shape of explosions. Scarlet as blood, crimson as an ambulance siren, blue as the lights on a police SUV. Rage is bottles thrown, tires slashed, faces inverted in horror. Rage is Edvard Munch, with his radiating sunset shriek.

But rage can be cool. It might be an accumulation of delicate black lines. A webbing of marks, laid down hour after hour, day after day; that is how Mexican-American artist Herman Aguirre depicts his community's tragedies. Tapestries of ink on paper describe fury, sorrow, frustration.

Herman Aguirre has been documenting his communities—Back of the Yards and Little Village—for many years now. He chronicles the violence that stalks neighborhoods on the South and Southwest Sides of Chicago, violence that is a direct result of the city's historic neglect of those neighborhoods. People struggle without basic services, without the crucial support needed for the children of low-income folks and immigrants to our city, where the schools are perpetually underfunded, overcrowded, and lacking in mentorship. In these neighborhoods—and all over Chicago—immigrant parents work more jobs than seem possible. They are hardest jobs we have: the care of the sick and elderly; the dangerous work of construction; the filthy hours on garbage trucks; the hours spent cleaning the houses of the affluent. Neighborhoods where public transportation has been neglected in favor of routes to the prosperous precincts of Chicago.

I've asked Aguirre whether his drawings are preparatory studies for his paintings. Not quite; he explained that through drawing, he discovers what he's thinking and feeling about the struggles his people are going through. Most of the narratives have come from family, neighbors, and friends. We're with him as he paces the streets around his own home.

Aguirre's patient mark-making delivers the blow in works such as *¡Es suficiente! (It's enough!)*, (page 64). The cross-hatching is so deliberate that at first there is only a swirl of tone and texture. Then your eyes focus, and there they are: a small boy crumpled on the ground, and a woman doubled over in grief. We are startled to discover them in the shadows; a slow-motion punch.

Maldad o debilidad? (Malice or Weakness), (page 58), is even more subtle. The elegant composition of winter trees and shadows doesn't release its secrets right away. Then you see the tiny child in the

crook of the trees. It's looking in our direction. Is the child regarding us? No; you suddenly realize that right in front of you is a child's shoe—tied onto a child's foot.

In *Mas alla de la razón (Beyond reason)*, (page 61), the body of a child seems to have been tossed from a car. Or perhaps rising from the ground itself, like an eradicable memory.

Aguirre's drawings are not tricks. Most are direct, fully lit scenes. He is simply extremely skilled in directing our attention. In the enigmatic *Los guardianes (The guardians)*, (page 55), the doorway of a crumbling house has been boarded up by rotting slabs of wood. The wood is more fungus than panel, a parasitic entity slowly swallowing the house. The holes in the panels are mouths howling to no one at all.

And yet, these scenes are rendered with remarkable translucence. The gorgeous *Los zapatos de mujer (Women's shoes)*, (page 55), is both claustrophobically dense and eerily pellucid.

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With the transition from paper to paint, Aguirre creates *El Jardin* anew.

The tactile quality of his marks becomes fully physical. The paintings are just as patiently rendered as the drawings that precede them. The doors, bricks, windows, trees are built of layers of paint strokes and paint skins.

This is adapted from a description of his process:

When I started [a] piece, I first put oil paint to dry on a piece of glass and let it oxidize completely. Once dry,... I began to build the surface and the shirt, by using various extenders and additives like chalk, marble dust, and saw dust allowing me shape and give everything texture. I [us] thickened paint, which allowed me to mold and carve the various forms. I also used... leftover chunks and recycled paint, to develop the various materials in the painting including the bricks, the concrete walls, and the black fence.

In the painting based on *Los zapatos de mujer*, the paint skins become rotting boards and the crumbling walls of an abandoned room. In Aguirre's hands, the surfaces retain the haunting light of the drawing. On second reflection, that room, it's not abandoned is it? Perhaps we're inside that room, waiting for someone to discover the victim's shoes.

These large-scale canvases propel Aguirre's Garden into physical space. In the drawn version of *iNi uno más! (Not one more!)*, (page 54), there are trompe-l'oeil "scraps" of several other works [*Cuando mueren... todos morimos un poco (When they die... we all die a little)*, (page 62), and *Perro olfateando (Dog sniffing)*], (page 54). In the massive painting of the same name, (page 18), there are actual torn prints, and a sculpted banner demanding *Not One More*. They are abstract textural elements in a color field—and at the same time, clear demands for change.

The painting of *Los guardianes (The guardians)*, (page 42), is particularly startling. The parasitic boards are suddenly a strange, corroded red; a weird, fleshy encroachment on a once-cheerful home. The pile of roses almost seems to be seeping from the base of the house. (For me, I could not help but think of Shirley Jackson's stories of haunted houses).

Whatever their import, the paintings in *El Jardin* can be understood as *ofrendas*.

A typical *ofrenda* is an elaborate and colorful altar in a Mexican home, usually created in the week before Los Dias de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). The altars carry offerings for a family's dead, such as favorite foods, cigars, and monies. In Aguirre's work, "offerings" take the form of flowers, of kinds often chosen for family altars: marigolds, roses, morning glories. Instead of being inside the home, here they lie on the ground, worn for wear, midway between alive and dead. The paintings' offerings are that the people will not be forgotten. They offer the hope that that their deaths lead to justice.

These are beyond tactile. The accumulated surfaces may rise off the canvas by as much as five full inches. The paintings reach out; they scrape our skin.

In works including *El reflejo (The reflection)*, (page 46), the architecture is rendered at a scale in relationship to the viewer. The paintings transcend anything as banal as stage sets. Still, there is a theatrical aspect to the approach.

In earlier work, there were... cadavers. In *Cicatriz*, his 2019 exhibition at Zolla/ Lieberman Gallery, Aguirre depicted the intertwined catastrophes of gang violence and the drug trade, ranging from crimes in his own neighborhood, to violence that affected family members in Mexico) Aguirre says, "a few areas that experienced rising levels of crime were Veracruz, Durango, and Iguala-Guerrero. Various bodies were found throughout the areas after years of searching, as well as intense violence in the streets." *¡Todos en línea! (All in line!)* shows a (very dimensional) row of dead or dying bodies lined up by a roadside fence. A virtual crime-scene recreation.



¡Todos en línea!
(All in line!)
oil on canvas
48 x 60 in.
2017



Niños sin tambor
(Children without a drum)
oil and acrylic skins on canvas
72 x 60 in.
2018



Sangre
(Blood)
oil on panel
36 x 48 in.
2018

The heads in *Sangre (Blood)* are gruesome decapitations.

One of the possibly most disturbing, *Niños sin tambor (Children without a drum)*, depicts a ditch full of trash that might also contain dismembered flesh.

There is always a danger in aestheticizing violence. Herman Aguirre avoids that trap through a combination of strategies. Concern for children runs through his work, yet children are never sentimentalized. There are no teardrops running down cheeks. No teddy bears.

Nor is there Hollywood sexualization of guns, drugs, knives, ninjas, or gang accoutrements.

But it really comes down to skill. Aguirre understands the nature of the material; he can make paint become anything from foliage to flesh. His colors are deep and rich and influenced by— but not beholden to—traditional Mexican palettes. One need only see the nacreous passages in *Las glorias (The morning glories)*, (page 38), and *El reflejo (The reflection)*, (page 46).

He uses perspective to remind us that catastrophes take place on ordinary days. In *Ellos valen más que tu arma! (They are worth more than your firearm!)*, (page 26), the foreground is dominated by a thickly textured lichen-green wall and the orange poster of a murdered child. Then a swerve into giddy deep space. In the slice of scenery off to the right is an overpass, an autumn day, a car heading on its rounds.

The 2019 show, *Cicatriz*, brought forth its victimized bodies. In *El Jardín*, the bodies are gone. What's left are deserted spaces: empty rooms, empty streets, angled corners, derelict facades, ruined walls. The only sign of a living presence is the shadow of a witness.

What's left is silence.

Silence has iterations. Silence can be the hush after the gunshot dies away. Silence can follow the slam of doors, windows pulled down, the twitch of a curtain pulled away.

Silence also has its moment.

Time and place flow through art, flow around art, and there is no seeing it or understanding it without the context of time. Time is always the lens of the given moment. Art twitches in response to the slightest shifts, and art that responds to political reality is the most sensitive of all. There are landmines, pitfall, tiger traps inherent in describing the fraught political moment. Such work always risks becoming agitprop. The best political art transcends this danger by becoming more than a slogan. Aguirre has said that his greatest influence is Francisco Goya's *Los Desastres de la Guerra (The Disasters of War)*. Along with that series, the painters Leon Golub, Käthe Kollwitz, and the German Expressionists guide his understanding of how to witness human atrocity.

When Aguirre first made the works for *El Jardin*, he was addressing the history of violence and loss of life in the Mexican American community in Chicago. The works were mostly done before September 2025. That is when Donald Trump launched "Operation Midway Blitz" and sent both ICE troops and the National Guard into Chicago. Troops claimed they were there to arrest undocumented immigrants who had committed crimes. The agents were focused on immigrants from Mexico and other Latinx countries. There is far too much to say about the horrendous actions of those troops for me to fit in this essay.

But the advent of those troops transformed the meaning of *El Jardin*.

The silence is now the sound of the absence of—everyone. As soon as ICE agents were seen roaming the streets of Pilsen, Little Village, South Shore, Westtown, Rogers Park, people fled. People hid. Children were kept out of school. Parents were unable to show up to work—to even look for work—unable to get groceries, go to doctor's appointments, or even walk their dogs.

As of this writing (mid-December 2025), ICE agents are now back in Chicago.

Look at *Los zapatos de mujer (Women's shoes)*, (page 55). See a terrified person peering out, hoping that soon it will be safe—that the troops will have gone. Consider *¡Ni uno más! (Not one more!)*, (page 18). The meaning of "one more" is now a plea not to take another member of the community.

The so-called "criminals" have been proved, over and over, to be nothing of the kind. The neighborhoods of Chicago are once again reeling from sudden loss, but this time, the perpetrator is our own government.

Step into *El Jardin*. Look through a window. Turn a corner. Lean in to read what's on the tree that is splitting itself in two. Long to pick up a densely sculpted flower. Look up at a rainbow undulating across the tufted sky. Stand at the forbidden door. You are the body that this garden is waiting for. You are

witness to the missing. Your body is implicated; your body is standing in for all the gone. Gone by death. Gone by ICE. Gone by cruelty, indifference, and the violences of desperation and of hate.

Here is rage.

While writing this essay, I researched the story of *Gan Eden*, the Hebrew name for the first garden. In some versions of the texts, after they are expelled, Adam and Eve find themselves on a rocky plain made of sand and thorns. They have to learn how to grow things themselves, to scratch out a life in an inhospitable land. Death now exists. Gan Eden disappears from the Earth and becomes a purely spiritual location; in other words, an unattainable memory.

Like this benighted couple, the refugees in Chicago must start over. They may have lost all they have, and be rebuilding from nothing. As text inside one of Aguirre's paintings say, they are the seeds.

Herman Aguirre himself, along with his wife and several neighbors took on the transformation of the specific land on which they stand. They took a row of dilapidated, trash-filled, neglected back yards and made them into incredibly lush gardens, full of sunflowers, morning glories, vegetable patches and native plants. To step around the back of his house and into that blaze of color is to experience euphoria. Hope, in all its material glory.

Here is love.

El Jardin is the inverse of Eden. It's Eden fallen, but here and there, the seeds push through. And there is prayer here, too, but the prayers are for our ears. The work of art is to witness. *El Jardin* is testament to a ruined world where hope exists, but must be borne forward.