

Surface Tension

by *Nadiah Rivera Fellah*, 2021

A Mexican American artist born and raised in Chicago, Herman Aguirre (b. 1992) is known for his paintings that take on subject matter ranging from memorials to lives lost due to gang violence, to intimate still lifes of collected, personal objects. His newest body of work, *Agua y Aceite*, includes canvases of various sizes, many irregularly shaped, as well as preparatory ink drawings. To create his impasto, canvas surfaces, the artist “works intuitively” with paint skins and oil and acrylic accumulations to build up the three-dimensionality, resulting in work that straddles the line between painting and sculpture.

For *Agua y Aceite*, a central question that Aguirre has put to himself is, how can I make still lifes *feel* like portraits? As one scans the completed works in his studio, the most remarkable aspect is how each image protrudes from the canvas, beckoning viewers into their expressionist surfaces. The tightly cropped scenes might remain in the realm of near abstraction, were it not for familiar textures and shapes. The roughness of a brick wall, like in *Turquesa | 4703*, the bark on tree trunks, as in *Coagulos | 4828*, and the outline of worn shoes in *Pellejo | 1448* whose laces hang below the picture frame, all contribute to an impression of visceral intensity. Aguirre says, “In creating this work, I used my paint to work through the trauma of my past, and that is embedded in the heavy materials and my process.”¹ The result is a body of work influenced by the artist’s personal life and ties to his community, and therefore deeply biographical in nature.

One way that Aguirre gives his still life paintings the intimacy of portraiture is through repetition and return. On daily walks, he returns to the same places throughout the Back of the Yards neighborhood, an area in the South of Chicago with a high crime rate due to gang violence. Each return visit is a reminder of the violence that has affected his community, through informal memorials that family members of victims have left behind. Ribbons on a fire hydrant, or *coronas* on a lamp post. *{Aluminio | 4758 - figure call}* In each instance, Aguirre begins with an ink drawing of a particular scene, a moment, or a memory, and then he returns to that imagery to transform it into a painting. It often takes Aguirre several weeks to configure the surface of a single painting. The resulting scenes are impactful, in that a minimal amount of visual information places viewers within a specific urban locale, such as by a fence behind houses in *Herida | 4828*. His painstaking process honors the magnitude of lives tragically lost, while also respecting their individuality and connection to a particular site.

The largest painting in the series, *Poliéster 1448:1450*, is the most arresting. A rusted drainpipe protrudes from an expanse of lavender-hued, exterior siding alongside the edge of a window, punctuated by a memento of wrapped branches and red daisies. The entire scene is overlaid with shadows cast from a nearby tree, placing the imagery outdoors in fading, evening light, and infusing the scene with a foreboding quality. Life-size in scale, the canvas transports viewers to the outside of a home, and the space between object and referent collapses. Aguirre describes the work as commemorating the death of a 12-year-old boy who was killed in the neighborhood in 2003 when he

¹ Conversation with the artist, August 4, 2021.

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was mistaken for a rival gang member. The time of day evoked in the painting matches the moment the event took place. By centralizing the memorial and the overall feeling of loss and unease, Aguirre succeeds in creating a portrait of the young boy via this still life. The scene is imbued with psychological weight, conjuring for viewers the discomfort Aguirre himself has often felt walking the streets of his home city, a place where everyday life is marked by either overt violence, the threat of violence, or the memory of it. In this way, the surfaces of his paintings carry the tension and trauma of violence and loss while simultaneously honoring the individuals taken too soon.