

PART III

Arts

Vandalizing History: Nehemiah Cisneros's *Ghetto Mythologies*

Reviewed by Sunny Chen

"I hijack the compositions of antiquated Western European artworks of the 1600s and mutate 19th-century satirical illustrations from London. I look at the process as vandalizing art history through a psychedelic, biomechanical aesthetic. This process is revenge for the hours I spent bored out of my mind in my high school history classes."



Southern Comfort. 85" × 87", Acrylic on Canvas. 2021

The world of Nehemiah Cisneros' paintings is a vengeance of History. Reinscribing European Renaissance and Baroque compositions with graphic aesthetics of 90's skateboard graphics, LA graffiti, and 60's underground comics, Cisneros, a Los Angeles native, inscribes new eschatologies and epic narratives into the

Western art historical cannon. The universe of his new “history paintings” are massive six by sixteen feet visual encyclopedias of popular culture woven into a universe that seems to move of its own momentum in an epic, eternal battle between good and evil.

Cisneros’ work is an ongoing saga of what he calls *ghetto mythologies*. “It’s like *Boyz n the Hood* meets *Lord of the Rings*,” he told me. Cisneros describes his genre:

There aren’t too many Black artists that do illustrative paintings so I think that’s where I’m trying to figure out the conversation that I’m a part of. Does it have to be Afrofuturism if a Black person does pop surrealism?

It’s my duty as an artist to inform *you* what *it is*— I can’t let my artwork be defined by *them*. It’s my duty as an artist to tell *you* what it is— it’s not pop surrealism, it’s not Afrofuturism, it’s my *ghetto mythologies*.

Cisneros describes *ghetto mythologies* as a process of collecting, inspired by a childhood spent in his mother’s vintage store. His newer works “collect” memorabilia of his previous paintings and stages them alongside figures from Indian, Tibetan, and Greek mythology, as well as biomechanical extraterrestrials in the style of H.R. Giger, the visual designer behind the 1979 sci-fi horror film, *Alien*. Cisneros transposes this cast onto familiar streets in Los Angeles, especially around the Crenshaw district, where he grew up. In doing so, Cisneros interrogates the nexus between built infrastructure, memory, and ideology. “I’m trying to make a connection between my physical reality, and what’s in my mind,” Cisneros says simply, “This is the point of learning art history: to change it and make the connections your own.”

The more that artists can embrace the fact that they can make up their own terminology, the more fantastic and interesting it [their artwork] can become. You can learn about movements and whatever, but there’s no reason you can’t start one. That’s why I’m running with the term ‘ghetto mythologies.’

Cisneros’ visual vocabulary operates on three general levels: the historical, local, and personal. The simple forms of Cisneros’ work are drawn from the so-called “icons” of great painting that are hammered into the common, Western art historical imaginary.

The exaggerated muscularity of Cisneros' subjects echoes the idealized nude bodies in the work of Caravaggio and Rubens, titans of sixteenth century Baroque painting. As in Baroque traditions, Cisneros makes references to Greek mythology throughout his work, and uses them to enact new dramas. In *Violent by Design Museum* (2020), the naiad Daphne—midway in transforming into a laurel tree—is held back by two members the Russian punk band Pussy Riot as she attempts to flee the scene of a toppling Confederate monument. Centaurs wielding tree branches confront Klansman with machine guns. Nude figures revel unabashedly in a bong-fountain, a reference to the humorous “moral portraits” of the eighteenth-century satirist, William Hogarth, known as the pioneer of the political cartoon. In further acts of mimesis, Cisneros incorporates the image of his other works into the framed paintings that exist in the background of *Violent by Design Museum*. Cisneros' attention to the sensuous body, cast in the flat, clashing colors of *Simpsons* cartoons, parody the moralizing, religious narratives of the human body, exiled from Eden and born in sin.



Violent By Design Museum. Acrylic on Canvas, 108" × 60", 2020.

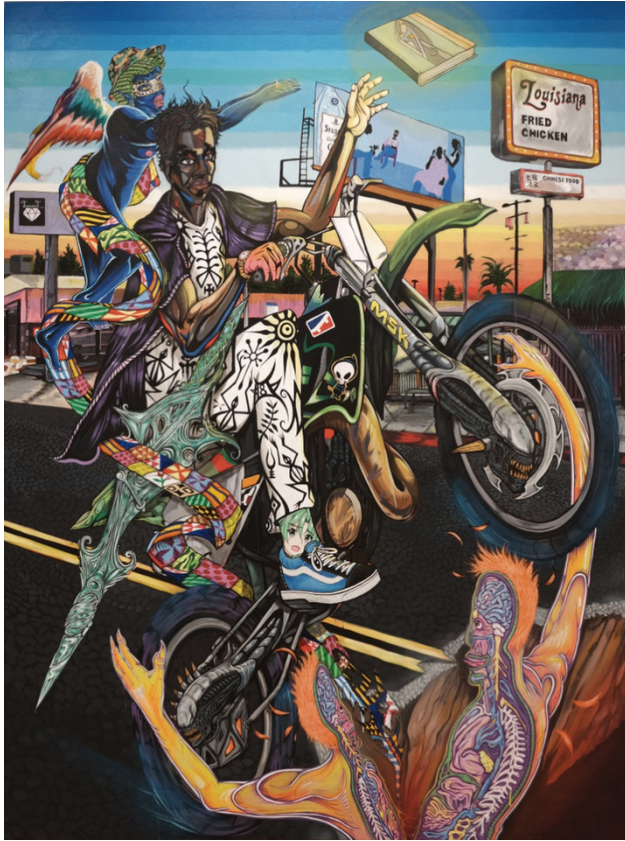
The biggest challenge for me is bringing “low-brow” aesthetics into a fine art conversation, and not compromising on that.

The compositions of Cisneros' paintings are also inspired by the theatricality of French Romantic paintings— and the “theater” of Los Angeles bus stops where Cisneros, a stubborn non-driver, observes the spontaneous performances played out by local Angelenos who convene and clash within the miniature “stage” of the bus stop shelter. For Cisneros, these local interactions are the site of timeless mythological drama. The performative religiosity of Western European painting finds its contemporaneous reverberation in Cisneros' work, through the cacophony of cartoons and commercial images that battle it out on Santa Monica Ave, where the street extends from the outstretched tongue of a monstrous, pollution-and-smoke-magnified Los Angeles sunset.



Another Day in Paradise. 108" × 64", Acrylic on Canvas, 2021.

Although Cisneros has since left his days as a graffiti writer behind, he continues to describe his work as vandalism. The “high-brow” historical references in his work are parodied by his use of aesthetics from the Los Angeles’ “low-brow” art movement and his reference to cartoon forms that, in this moment, are even more recognizable than the compositions of Gericault or Delacroix. In *Sincerely Yours* (2022), Jacques-Louis David’s *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* is merely a surface on which Cisneros’ inscribes a new hero, cat-walking a motocross bike through Crenshaw, decked out in anime socks and a suit adorned with Andikras.



Sincerely Yours. Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 72" × 96", 2022

Despite Cisneros' incredible archive of historical and popular iconography, his work is also a deeply personal catalogue of the many worlds he has stepped through in his life— as well as an effort to carve out space for a type of Black portraiture that exhibits the sort of masculinity he can identify with. "I come from Crenshaw and Martin Luther King, the main area referenced in rap lyrics about LA," Cisneros tells me, "Every single one of my friends who grew up there, we all grew up reading *Spawn* comics and watching anime. I never wanted to be a basketball player or a rapper or anything along those lines." Cisneros describes his childhood:

When thinking about my own culture and the type of people I gravitate towards, I think about people into comic books, toys, and cartoons. I didn't recently come into nerd culture, I was in it since I was born. Looking back through old photos of me at age six, I'm wearing Akira T-shirts, which was sick. Now anime has become so popular but when I was six, in the mid-90's, I remember the only way I could watch Dragon-Ball Z was on Spanish television without subtitles so I never knew what they were saying but I just knew I loved how it looked. Even back then, at age seven or eight I was going to comic conventions, getting autographs from my favorite comic book artists. That's what I originally wanted to be— that's what I eventually went to college for, not to be a comic book artist, but a concept artist for video games. That was 2006, at Art Center College of Art and Design.

To Cisneros, the culture of “Black geeks” is too strong and widespread for it to be accurately categorized as a “subculture.” “What I'm hinting at in my work is that young Black men aren't considered people who embrace things like that, they're never portrayed as geeks or nerds,” Cisneros says, “nerd culture has a mass audience, it's just represented as peripheral.”

The genesis of Cisneros' visual lexicon can be traced to the 1992 Rodney King uprising in which his mother's store, The Collector's Safari, located in Inglewood, California, burned down. Amongst other vintage items of Black Americana, the store archived and sold a range of Jim-Crow era racist memorabilia including figurines and advertising materials featuring caricatures like the Mammie, Sambo, and pickaninnies. All the objects that were salvaged after the fire were relocated into Cisneros' childhood bedroom, placed alongside his own collections of manga books and anime toys. As a young boy, he slept in anime pajamas, dreaming in the world of Dragon-Ball-Z while holding Golliwog rag dolls from the 1940's— toys popularized by an English cartoonist who wrote children's books that featured, in the author's words, “the blackest, coal-faced gnome.” “The dolls were like my ‘Mickey Mouse's,” Cisneros tells me, “I didn't originally realize these dolls were like, a bad thing. So they just naturally ended up in my work because they were all around me.” These dolls now sit above the fireplace in Cisneros' studio in West LA.

“I fancy myself a collector, which is a tradition passed on from my mother. I was obsessed with collecting Manga and Anime memorabilia as a kid, the same way my mother collected controversial antique black Americana.”



Ride of The Kali Yuga. Acrylic on Canvas, 72" × 60", 2022.

Cisneros' latest completed work, *Ride of the Kali Yuga* (2022), recalls Cisneros' memory of the Rodney King Uprising while drawing from his friends' experiences at the protests in LA after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. *Ride of the Kali Yuga* adopts the composition of Théodore Géricault's supposedly "abolitionist" painting, *Raft of the Medusa* (1818), which depicts the historical shipwreck on the coast of Mauritania, in which the few survivors sustained themselves through cannibalism. Cisneros' 72" x 60" work swaps the raft with an upturned police car, on which a figure waving a flag with Christopher Dorner's face towers over the scene which includes a pair of missionaries and someone carrying a kitten in a backpack fucking a multi-headed biomechanical figure. By writing the legacy of American slavery and Jim-Crow into the composition of European Masters, Cisneros' turns the moral gaze back onto eighteenth century Europe, whose high, humanist ideals found no issue with the Atlantic slave trade.

The scene of *Ride of the Kali Yuga* is set at the Hollywood Subway (officially known as the Belmont Tunnel), the site where the LA style of graffiti first flourished. The site has since been boarded-up and “re-developed,” and many beloved, historic murals have been painted over. The Hollywood Subway is not only an ode to LA’s graffiti history and Cisneros’ early art practice, but it also speaks to his interest in the geography of erasure. In a previous painting, *Summer of Seneca* (2021), Nehemiah explores the memory of Seneca Village, the nineteenth century settlement of Black landowners in New York City which was ultimately transformed into New York’s Central Park after the state claimed the area as eminent domain in 1857, destroying homes, churches, schools, and cemeteries in the process. The historical alliance between Black and Irish residents in this area is re-imagined in Cisneros’ painting, which offers an uneasy utopian image of interracial love and courtship— a surreal paradise that directly contrasts the apocalypse of *Another Day in Paradise*.



Summer of Seneca. 108" × 64", Acrylic on Canvas, 2021

The practice of collecting is one that takes and displaces historical objects, re-anchoring historical narratives along the lines of new signposts. Like museums, monuments, and art historical

pedagogy, the practice of collection rearranges and produces history for the present. Cisneros' *ghetto mythologies* both plays into this practice and unravels it, drawing out the perpetual elision between history and propaganda. His method of collecting works to vandalize history, to write over the Eurocentric art historical narrative with the illustrative scripts of underground and popular aesthetic cultures. Weaving together the dreams and fantasies that underpin everyday life, *ghetto mythologies* points towards a radical form of history that finds its grandest narrative in remembrance, family tradition and the visceral experience.



On The Swarm. Acrylic, Ink, Graphite, Gauche, and Spray paint on Canvas, 120" × 85", 2022.

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