



MICHAEL MARTINEZ

NOBODY TRULY LIVES ON EARTH

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ALBRIGHT
Freedman Gallery



a post-internet era, artists such as Martinez have found digital art to be the new relevant art form. Martinez did not specifically choose to work in this medium for its ability to mass distribute, but Neo-Chicano artists could defiantly adopt the platform for today's smartphone world for similar reasons that prints and murals were employed in the past.

Another adaptation of the contemporary Chicano or Chicana¹ art form is breaking away from machismo roots and making space for queer, nonbinary, and transgender people. A pixelated pride flag opens the video with sounds of static and synthesized game tones. A mix of Spanish and English text uses poetry and prophecy to state, "We came out of the ground! We flourished, like wild Maiz!" The message is superimposed over passing images of Mesoamerican art forms, including an ornate skull known as the *mosaic mask of Tezcattlipoca* and a basalt carved head from the Olmec culture, the oldest major civilization in Mexico. The elaborate use of the mosaic shell echoes Martinez's embellishments to a jadeite Olmec mask in a queer sensibility to include bright fuchsia colored lips, heavy blush, and bright glittered eyeshadow with a text caption that reads, "We have endured." This image gives reference to Chicanos looking back in history just as the Aztecs would have regarded the

Olmecs in reverence as the mother culture. Martinez's altered mask also suggests that a queer presence has always existed; Chicana have and will also persevere.

The new wave of Chicano artists contemplate the balance of honoring tradition and cultural heritage in the age of fantastic technological advancements, yet great social ills for people of color still remain. We are not that far from the days of needing the *Boycott Grapes* posters by artist's like Xavier Viramontes, and the famous *Sun Mad* raisins poster by Ester Hernández, supporting the United Farmworker's fight for better pay and safer working conditions. A minimal percentage of farms are organic today for example. Not to mention, the incrimination and mistreatment of undocumented people remain a humanitarian issue, as does the children and families being held in mass numbers in detention centers at the border. A rise of hate speech regarding immigrants and a vehement political focus has been on Mexico and its borders as of recent. Approaching the year 2020, a reawakening of the movement is necessary. Artists such as Martinez are leading the way in the digital age. Although their² work in *Nobody Truly Lives On Earth* primarily focuses on identity politics, the call to action remains evident.

In the video, the viewer enters a surrealist digital realm, another dimension, as a statue of Xochipilli



floats up through the scene. The carved base displays a symbol for transgender people that combines male, female, and genderqueer symbols with a center circle. Not without humor, the text states, “Me on my way to steal Yo Man,” as the artist points to the indigenous Camp sensibility with their exaggerated regalia and equates queer fashion with both the regal and resistance. Pixels flicker over the sculpture of Coatlicue while wild wind sounds blow as if to transport the viewer again through time, space, and scared realities. The following scenes take place with infrared red footage, panning over the pyramids and topography that appears from outer space or as if it is video surveillance of another planet. Martinez oscillates the viewer within the digital reality and the game sphere to mirror a teetering of a *third space* in which Chicanos find themselves located and that people of color can also find themselves in the gay community.

A profound moment of *Nobody Truly Lives On Earth* references the legend of Itsuaseawatl and Popocatepetl digitally melting into a new reality — symbolic for the transformation of a new generation of artists. The figurative motif of Itsuaseawatl and Popocatepetl have become somewhat of a clichéd image that can be found everywhere from murals

to menus in favorite Mexican restaurants. The tale of lovers is similar to that of Romeo and Juliet in that it ends in a tremendous and unnecessary tragedy. In this Aztec narrative, the gods ultimately turn the humans into the mountains that shadow over Mexico so that the torn lovers could finally be together. In Martinez’s digital rendition, the image flickers to a mirror image of Popocatepetl embracing Popocatepetl, turning the forbidden love story from a cisgender romance into a genderqueer expression.

Martinez is the warrior left standing to fight a demonic invasion of the earth in the year 20X6. In this computerized realm, using the program, *MariconSoft 95*, error messages appear stating “Que el corazón siempre debe sentir el peso del mundo;” *the heart must always feel the weight of the world*. And further, “Necesito respuestas digitales, for my dilemmas IRL...” *I need digital answers, for my dilemmas in real life*. Many young adults of the digital generation may be struggling with this as well. Some are on the web, creating other identities and living out other realities that are difficult to fulfill in real life — while others are fulfilling a false life in the real world to appease family and traditions, to only act out another life, the desired experience in a cyber existence.



Michael Martinez has a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in new media arts and interdisciplinary practices from the Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon. As a conceptual artist, they deconstruct false dichotomies surrounding desire, the expression of gender, and confront identity as a person of color with Mexican-American lineage. Currently

exhibiting in *Transamerica/n: Gender, Identity, Appearance Today* at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas and most recently exhibited in *Right Here, Right Now* at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Martinez has exhibited in institutions both nationally and abroad.

1. I have used *Chicano* for the primary term in this essay, but *Chicanx* can be employed as the non-gendered version of the term, like *Latinx* is used today. However, *Latinx* is accepted as a universal term in some circles of scholarship, but not all. Some prefer to reserve the term *Latinx* for non-binary identifying artists. *Xicanx* can also be used to make greater connections to the indigenous past and is perhaps most steeped in activism.

2. *they/them* are used as a gender-neutral pronoun preferences of the artist.

The Freedman Gallery at Albright College, named after former Albright trustee and alumna Doris Chanin Freedman, is located on the ground floor of the Center for the Arts. Since its inception, the gallery focuses primarily on contemporary, living, American artists and hosts approximately twelve exhibitions each year rotating in the Main Gallery, Project Space, and Foyer Gallery. Freedman Gallery is located at 13th & Bern Streets, Reading, Pennsylvania 19612. Gallery hours are Tuesday-Friday 9 a.m. -5 p.m. and Sunday 1-4 p.m.

The gallery is closed on Mondays, holidays, breaks and summer. (**See Albright.edu/calendar**).

Founded in 1856, Albright College educates creative, curious students to become adaptable, global citizens who discover and reach their full potential. The college's flexible interdisciplinary curriculum encourages students to combine majors and disciplines to create individualized academic programs. Close faculty mentorship, numerous experiential learning options, and a diverse, supportive and nurturing community of scholars and learners help students exceed their own expectations and graduate with a commitment to a lifetime of service and learning. Located in Reading, Pennsylvania, Albright enrolls more than 1,500 full-time undergraduates and 500 adult learners and graduate students.

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Text written by Alana J. Coates, Curator of Collections & Exhibitions, Freedman Gallery
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All images are from *Nobody Truly Lives On Earth*, 2019 digital animation, 17:20 minutes