

DISPLACED SHAUN ROBERTS & ARELY MORALES
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CURATED AND ESSAY BY **SUSIE KALIL**

There are artists who launch you into realms unimaginable. Others hold up a mirror that reflects back a person who is familiar, but unsure about oneself and a place in this world. I did not expect to find both to be true of two young painters, Shaun Roberts and Arely Morales, currently living and working outside the mainstream in the East Texas town of Nacogdoches. Their large-scale portraits and narratives gain drama from a perfect storm of relevance, meshing with a rash of representational and storytelling figuration that has aroused renewed interest.

They are part of a growing cadre of artists whose works reflect the pressing struggles and questions of our day, ranging from economic disparity to climate change to racial violence. What injustices have we as a culture come to accept as normal? What are the pitfalls of our complacency? Right now, America is in an emotionally and morally raw moment. Diversity everywhere is under attack; the culture wars are back.

Roberts and Morales churn fresh beauty out of such ugliness. *Displaced*, their sweeping exhibition at Kirk Hopper Fine Art, refers to both physical and moral barriers that put it right on society's front burner – the Mexican-American border, the treatment of migrants, the multifaceted issues of identity. Roberts and Morales go deep into the conflicted territory of class and privilege: they also ponder the traits that make us most human. Taken together, their paintings feel at once like a reverie and an urgent appeal. The portraits and narratives are crystalline and brutal, uplifting and bleak. Like other artists of the moment, Roberts and Morales reimagine the past, think about how the future might unfold and grapple with the present.

Displaced is many things – mythical or dreamlike dystopian dramas, warm celebrations of family and female power – none of which fully conveys its tenacious grip on our attention. What it is not is speedy and facile. Rather, the narratives move carefully, even gracefully, with bold protagonists so compelling that we take time to examine their texture and import. The elastic compositions push our imaginations in any number of directions, offering expressive allegories for a lineage of powerful Mexican women and mysterious characters whose strength, unleashed, could literally shake the earth.

◀ **Arely Morales**, *María*, 2017, oil on canvas, 66 x 60 in. Cover: **Shaun Roberts**, *Malediction*, 2018, oil on canvas, 84 x 106 in.



▲ **Shaun Roberts**, *Shepherd*, 2018, oil on canvas, 71 x 55 in.

that others might not see. Shaun Roberts finds parallels in Caravaggio, Ribera, Rembrandt, but also Lucian Freud and Odd Nerdrum. Arely Morales draws upon Velazquez and Vermeer, as well as Kehinde Wiley and Ramiro Gomez. Such historicism is not a matter of nostalgic adherence to timeworn concepts. Both artists aim to restore a traditional sense of the lived body, using it as a language to convey the full psychic reality of a figure. Accordingly, Roberts and Morales

Indeed, to be an immigrant is to have crossed a threshold, to see the world from two vantage points at once, to perceive it in shades of gray or as some figment of the imagination. Are we not bound to learn how to speak with each other? Roberts and Morales evoke the instability, and the unknowability, of our particular space. Entering KHFA is to be situated firmly in the jaws of a society that threatens to swallow everyone in different ways. The upshot, of course, is that we are all parts of a cosmic whole where borders mean very little.

To that end, Roberts and Morales combine a wealth of influences from their own lives, from contemporary experience, and from artistic sources to create new orders of reality that are provocative, emotive, slightly strange and visually engaging. Both have looked back through the history of art to see what might be of relevance. They borrow with impunity from Old Master paintings, conceiving of connections between sources

regard the creations of their forebears and contemporaries as aids to meaning, as a way of broadening their frames of reference. For them, art cannot be separated from life any more than it can be separated from the physical circumstances of its own creation. They see art as an active causative force, capable of changing the way others regard the world.

Arely Morales's portraits have a stunning clarity, a conviction that we are looking at real people as they exist – unidealized, meticulously observed and psychologically present, especially in their direct eye contact. Born near Guadalajara, Mexico, Morales immigrated as a teenager to Texas. Friends and family were painfully suspended between an old way of life and a new one in which they were perceived as invaders or, worse, had become invisible.



▲ **Arely Morales**, *Aurora*, 2019, oil on canvas, 96 x 64 in.



Her larger-than-life portraits convey the vulnerability of farm workers, day laborers and housekeepers through class-based exploitation, physical and emotional suffering and general degradation. Although Morales intends the series as a conduit for healing and hope, there is no dividing the personal from the political context; all are bound up together. Migrant women are the victims of sexual assaults that most often go unreported, uninvestigated and unprosecuted. Even as women around the world are speaking out against sexual abuse, undocumented women live in the shadows. By naming her subjects, however, Morales honors their stories and validates their identities.

In *Maria* (2017), a farm picker stands between a large basket of green apples and a tree bearing an abundance of fruit. Her head is completely wrapped in a blue scarf for protection and camouflage. The young woman stares directly at us and lifts a blood-soaked, bandaged hand to her chin. The woman in *Guadalupe* (2017) also glares intently, even as beads of sweat stream down her face and neck. Morales has posed the sitter against a backdrop of orange and yellow Huichol designs, her dress echoing the vibrant hues and patterns. Both portraits feature deep layers of luminous color and forthright brushwork.

◀ **Arely Morales**
Guadalupe
2017
Oil on canvas
66 x 60 in.

▲ **Arely Morales**
Rosa
2019
Oil on canvas
66 x 60 in.

In *Aurora* (2019), a housekeeper stands in a corner of a room and gazes wistfully out a window. Her left hand holds a spray bottle of Windex. Her arm is draped with dirty towels. The right hand grasps a large blue caddy filled with cleaning supplies, which rests on her hip. The reflected liquids shimmer like a cache of lambent jewels. The isolated figure acquires an enduring power, but it is the light that we most remember: a soft, almost chalky emanation from the blues and subtle grays that seems to bathe and lift her worn out clothes and athletic shoes with spiritual radiance.

The portrait, *Mi papá* (2019), captures the moment when Morales's father returns from his job at a local chicken hatchery. "He has worked a graveyard shift for years," Morales says. "As I get older and become more aware of my mortality, I can't help but feel sad for him to come back home so tired after sleepless nights. I am witness to how his body changed over the years because of lack of sleep. His eyes are always tired; his knees begin to hurt as he works standing up for sixteen hour shifts." Dressed in a blue Hard Rock t-shirt, tan knee-length shorts and blue tennis shoes, he carries a plastic bag in one hand and holds a red and white igloo cooler in the other. Despite the weary, fixed stare and slumped shoulders, he manages a kind smile. His monumental figure anchors the garage or work room, strewn with carefully rendered cables, plugs, tools, ladders and trash cans that seemingly swoop around behind the figure and into our space. For marginalized people, widening the understanding of identity is a path for freedom. Here, Morales mines distinct emotional terrain. The painting is clear and rational, with rich, harmonious colors and scintillating highlights. All elements are totally integrated into an orderly composition that bursts with life and the pleasure of its making. When Morales homes in, we feel as if we're looking straight into the person.



▲ **Arely Morales**, *Mi papá*, 2019, oil on canvas, 108 x 78 in.

Shaun Roberts turns to old-fashioned figurative painting as if it were the only appropriate vehicle for dealing adequately with the ultimate questions of human survival. In Roberts's world, the pre and post-apocalyptic are combined to depict scenes where the precariousness of continued existence is frankly addressed. Varying in impact, the narratives cumulatively summon worlds in which the civilized is constantly receding and to be a human is to live in a state of desperation.

These are paintings for dark, rudderless times, an immersion into fear and chaos. You don't just look at these spellbinding works; you live in them. Thriving on the juxtaposition of timeless and modern imagery, Roberts's new paintings evoke moments of crisis, humiliation, penance and possible redemption.

Roberts's previous series took place in the back roads of East Texas where he grew up among friends and family who were outlaws, con artists and criminals. These miscreants, however, became his cast of characters who inhabited humorous narratives of lawlessness, dishonesty, conniving and potential violence. Narrative thrust and composition, loosely based on Old Master paintings, were subject to moral purpose. Such works showed us how human boneheadedness, not fate alone, could precipitate woe.

The notion that old stories can yield new meanings by being retold underlies the recent work. His precise approach to myth varies from painting to painting. Each story is personal. But each has huge ramifications of immersive, heart-grabbing intensity in Roberts's larger scheme. Figures are transported in both time and space. As Roberts tells it, they are part of "some alternate plane, void or different time – maybe a prophecy of what is to come or what already has been. Humor no longer exists – they are shaken. They speak to the looming uncertainties we are starting to feel at this time. The feeling that we can see the threads coming from the spools and that it could all start to unwind, reverse, or tangle up at any moment."

The true struggle is in Roberts's attempt to make continuity out of displacement. There are hints of battles, storms and fires. In *Shepherd* (2018), the artist positions himself alongside a ram, thereby evoking the Greek story of Jason and the Golden Fleece. Here, however, he reinterprets the myth as a reminder of the inevitable onrush of death and ecological awakening. The setting is a vision of unremitting destruction - a planetary nightmare of fiery skies and burned-out rubble. In *Containment* (2019), a woman in red dress and cowboy boots is hog-tied by two figures wearing hazmat suits and brandishing torches. In the extreme foreground is a cat, who looks quizzically at the viewer, and a wild boar with enormous tusks. Stripped of specifics of time and place, Roberts's painting daringly reconfigures Caravaggio's *The Flagellation of Christ* as an updated allegorical representation of Circe, the witchy temptress who gave Ulysses's men a potion that transformed them into swine.



◀ **Shaun Roberts**
Containment
2019
Oil on canvas
115 x 84 in.



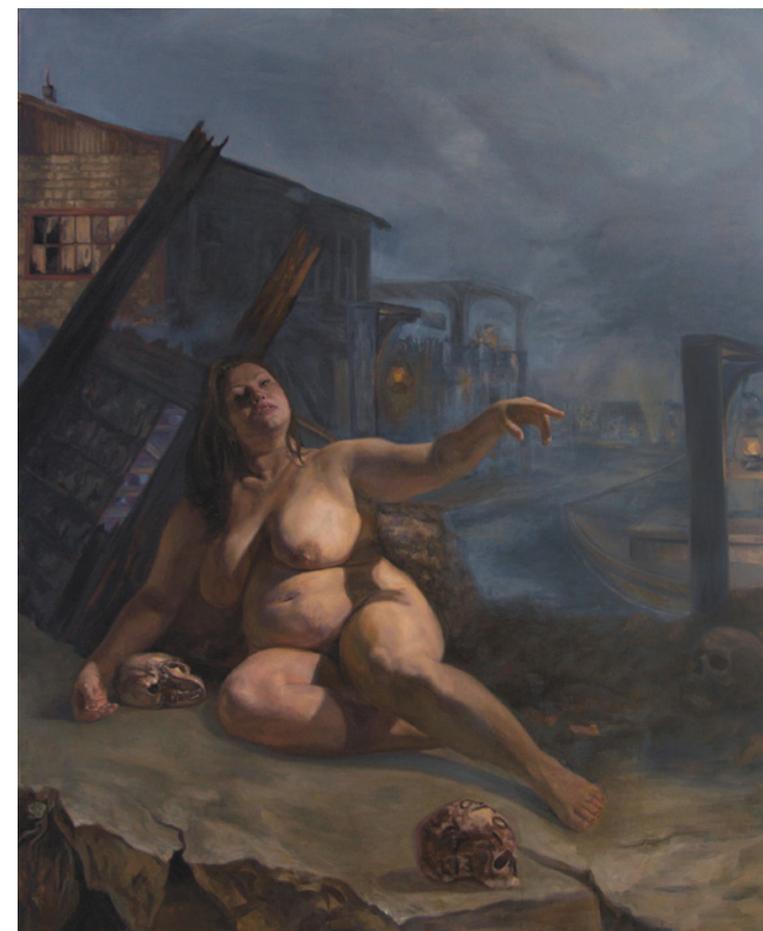
On the basis of formal, spiritual and technical affinities, Roberts has selected works from various cultures to serve as a tradition of his own. For *Malediction* (2018), based on Jusepe de Ribera's gruesome painting that depicts the fate of the rapist Tityus from ancient Greek mythology, he envisions himself as the twisting protagonist whose entrails are continuously devoured by a vulture. Here, Roberts parses the striking imagery, theatrical presentation, expressive resonance and intellectual complexity of Ribera to construct his own version of hell. His body contorts into a painful, vertiginous position, as if flinging himself at the viewer. The bizarre scenario includes a toppled picnic table and rusted-out truck in the background. Roberts seems to imply that no borders can divide the human soul between its best and worst impulses.

Throughout, Roberts uses a limited palette of four colors – red, yellow, black and white – to achieve harmony within the intense dramas. All of the works grow slowly out of a process of scraping and

▲ **Shaun Roberts**
Final Remittance
2019
Oil on canvas
71 x 62 in.

▲ **Shaun Roberts**
The Exile
2019
Oil on canvas
71 x 62 in.

repainting. The strata of small strokes of oil smoothly applied give the paintings a vast, indeterminate space and a luminism influenced by Titian and Rembrandt that makes the faces materially present. The solitude conveyed by Roberts's figures is a symbol of humankind's survival against all odds – but one that is not absolutely guaranteed. Significantly, two enigmatic portraits depicting old age reaffirm life's extremities. In our beginning there is nothing. And in the end, there is nothing once again. Such is the way of all flesh. The old woman in *The Exile* (2019) is situated in a gray dystopian landscape punctuated by smoldering fires. A black shroud covers her tousled gray hair. She wears a sleeveless black dress that reveals bare arms of lumpy flesh. The left hand is cupped at the chest, as if to tell us about loss and sorrow, perhaps our future; the right hand lays flat against her abdomen. The woman wears an ornate silver necklace, an emblem of abundance from another era. In *Final Remittance* (2019), an old man sits in front of a window with a view beyond to some dank realm. His face is a welter of sagging, fleshy pockets and furrowed lines. He wears a tattered brown sweater and holds a coin between the thumb and index finger of his right hand, an allegory for the gamble of life.



▲ **Shaun Roberts**, *The Ninth Hour*, 2019, oil on canvas, 95 x 78 in.

Engaging the paintings of *Displaced* is like watching our fate snap back at us like a boomerang. Roberts and Morales dig to the core of fraught ambivalence. By underscoring the simultaneity of time and experience in our divisive world, they capture the perils of today's news, while at the same time painting unsettling portraits of what may lie down the road. Both sense that beneath every act of degradation or violence there pulses a vein of grace, a redemptive potential yearning to be tapped.



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