

For artists Frank Romero and Karla Diaz, vibrant color is both provocateur and liberator
By William Moreno | September 23, 2025



Frank Romero, "Saucers Seen Over Hollywood," 2025, acrylic on canvas.

Veteran artist Frank Romero and GenX Karla Diaz have mounted exuberant, color-drenched spectacles with concurrent exhibitions at downtown Los Angeles' Luis de Jesus Gallery – and their intentions and resultant imagery couldn't be more disparate. Each is titled separately - Romero's "California Dreaming," taking cues from a classic, upbeat Mama's and Papa's song and Diaz's "Mal de Ojo" or evil eye, proffering an ancient talisman known alternately as a curse or protector.

In 1997 Frank Romero was interviewed by the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in his Los Angeles studio and noted, "I grew up in a polyglot culture."

Among the foremost pioneers of the Chicano Art Movement, the East Los Angeles native was a founding member of the Los Four art collective, which in 1974, mounted a groundbreaking exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art – the first of its kind. Among his most famous works is "Death of Rubén Salazar, 1986" – a pivotal homage to the Los Angeles Times reporter killed by a police department tear-gas projectile during community protests.

As he noted in an interview, "That stuff is hard for me to do, it hurts, it's frightening" (Los Angeles Times, July 28, 2002.) Yet while his ongoing love affair with Los Angeles is immutable, the push and pull of his works are testaments to an often-contentious relationship. He's as much a product of Boyle Heights as he is of a vast metro Los Angeles, Hollywood and their cultural environs.

Romero is a colorist of the first order, belying the often-consequential nature of the subject matter - the palettes, utilizing flat perspectives, fairly leap off the canvases – provoking the viewers' attention. In many

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ways he echoes the early 20th century French movement Fauvism, which was concerned with an unbridled use of color and attention to composition, individuality, and social justice.



Karla Diaz, Mal de Ojo (Evil Eye), 2021, Watercolor and ink on paper
18 x 24 in (45.7 x 61 cm) 23.625 x 29.375 in (60 x 74.6 cm) Framed

Most of the forty plus works in the exhibition were completed in 2025 and continue his tradition utilizing explosive hues, classic icons and lyrical sentiments. There's a fair selection of still life studies, sculptures and installations employing neon - a fitting testament to L.A. culture.

With "Saucers Seen Over Hollywood, 2025," the artist has compactly included major cultural symbols of any consequence – The Brown Derby, The Chinese Theater, Cinerama Dome, the Capitol building - all tied together with the ever-ubiquitous freeway as a kind of languorous gift wrap. Historically, freeways have been divisive at best, and destructive at worst – demolishing intact communities. But these cement monsters aren't his only concern. "Flying Saucers over Tukumcari, 2025" depicts a bucolic scene – a car towing a trailer with UFOs hovering in the background – it's a recurring trope that seems less threatening than risible.

Karla Diaz's Selfie Series portraits are a shift in tone, smaller in scale and intimate in scope. The last few years for the artist have not been easy, with unexpected, random tragedy and debilitating insomnia stalking her life. The works were an attempt to maneuver and grasp what can't easily be understood.

With "American Me, 2025" an acrylic and ink on paperwork, she over-washed the image of herself attempting to eat the American flag in a brilliant fuchsia as a commentary on freedom, equality and justice. "Passport ID, 2025" is a somewhat atypical composition with a muted background – the passport image launched into the foreground and gold paint splattered as an abstracted remnant of an official passport stamp.

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Karla Diaz, "American Me," 2025, Selfie Series, Acrylic and ink on paper
18 x 24 in (45.7 x 61 cm) 22.75 x 28.5 in (57.8 x 72.4 cm) Framed

Said Diaz in an interview: "the personal is political." The works are one way of framing her identity and its myriad nuances, with color resurrected from memory and deployed as an arbiter of emotions. "Tortilla Face, 2023" captures the push and pull of identity – albeit in a lighthearted way. Diaz wants the viewer to be drawn into introspection – and while the larger social context may be a distraction – her portraits compel one to focus.

Romero and Diaz make for an intriguing combination, and closer consideration reveals critical distinctions in both imagery and narratives. It's a provocative pairing, compelling the viewer to move from the visually sublime to the powerfully intimate, and ultimately, it's a journey well-worth taking.