

How immigrants are redefining 'American' in Southern California

Los Angeles artist brings immigrant labor into focus

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Mae Ryan/KPCC

Ramiro Gomez paints in a spare bedroom that he uses as a studio in his West Hollywood apartment.

Inside his West Hollywood apartment, artist Ramiro Gomez paints freestyle on a large scrap of cardboard.

"I do like the fact that I'm not planning it out," Gomez, 27, said. "I'm just literally going with it."

A life-sized image quickly emerges of a brown-skinned man with a mustache and shadows for eyes.

This figure of a domestic worker is one of many Gomez has painted over the last several years — pool cleaners, nannies, the people who make many an affluent L.A. household hum.

"We look at them as just a worker but beyond that they have so much more to offer," Gomez said. "They're much more than a gardener. They have friends, families and loved ones."

He added: "I'm trying to ask you look into them a little more."

Gomez knows the subject. His parents are blue-collar Mexican immigrants who came to the U.S. as teenagers. Mother Maria Elena is a school custodian, and his father, Ramiro Gomez, Sr., drives a truck for Costco.

A talented soccer player growing up in San Bernardino, Gomez thought he was headed for a career as a professional athlete. But given his affliction with the bleeding disorder hemophilia, he struggled with constant injuries and long recoveries.

He tried his hand at art school — he had always been talented — but it wasn't the right fit, and he dropped out. In the same year, his beloved grandmother died. The confident, composed young man began to feel untethered.

"I wasn't getting anything out of my life at that point," Gomez said. "I was just so lost."

His partner, a film editor, told him about a family in the Hollywood Hills that needed a live-in nanny for their baby twins. Gomez, who's always liked children and used to coach youth soccer, agreed to take the job. Little did he know it would change him as an artist.

Luxury, interrupted

While the children napped, Gomez wanted to practice his art. But, he said, "it wasn't even my home. I didn't feel comfortable bringing in canvases."

So he began tearing out pages from old home décor magazines lying around the house. And he dabbed impressionistic images of faceless domestic workers into scenes of luxurious living rooms and kitchens.

Looking for feedback, he uploaded photos of his work to Facebook.

"I did it originally to get acknowledgement because I felt that these were my only thoughts, and that I was the only person feeling this," Gomez said.

People instantly connected with these images. Encouraged, he created a blog, **Happy Hills** (<http://ramirogomezjr.blogspot.com/>), in 2011.

As online buzz began, immigration activists took notice, and academics brought up his paintings in lectures.

George Lipsitz, a Black Studies professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has been following Gomez's work since 2011, when the young man introduced himself at a lecture Lipsitz gave on the Mexican-American experience.

"Art comes from unexpected places, and here's this 27-year-old from San Bernardino who was not invited by anybody to be an artist," Lipsitz said. "He invited himself."

Lipsitz was taken by Gomez's sincerity and love for the people he was painting.

"Ramiro's images force us to acknowledge the hard work that's been done, to realize who does this work," Lipsitz said.

Chon Noriega, director of the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, said Gomez's art is quieter than the poster art made by pro-immigration reform artists, featuring bold graphics and written messages.

But "the works themselves were in their own way quite stunning," said Noriega.

Aside from the magazine art, Gomez has "interrupted" David Hockney paintings of '60s Southern California. For example, Gomez painted his own version of Hockney's "A Bigger Splash" and inserted a pool cleaner and housekeeper into the background.

While Gomez is certainly not the first artist to comment on migrant labor and racial segmentation of the workforce, his images are some of the most powerful Noriega has seen.

"He's resonated as much with the arts world as with rights activists who are struggling to bring visibility to these issues," Noriega said.

Cardboard stand-ins

Visibility only increased when Gomez began putting life-sized cardboard figures in upscale neighborhoods around Los Angeles.

He's done more than 50 installations, including ones outside the White House and in the Arizona desert.

Recently, he decided to display a cutout depicting himself and the twins he used to take care of, and came to adore.

He drove to a park in West Hollywood, where he used to bring the twins. The city had commissioned him to paint a mural in the corner of the park. But even though it was a familiar destination, he felt antsy.

"To be honest, there still is a nervousness, still the opportunity to put up a piece which may or may not be positive," Gomez said.

There was that time he placed a cutout of a man selling maps to the homes of Hollywood stars — next to a man actually selling the maps. The man told Gomez to take the piece away. He didn't want any attention from the authorities because of his illegal status.

"It's a tricky position to be in when I want to bring attention to people who sometimes don't want the attention in the first place," Gomez said.

At the park, Gomez hammered the cutout into the ground. His friend Vera Machado, a nanny from Brazil, came by with the two sisters she cares for. She looked at Gomez's work and told him in Spanish that it was "muy bonita."

For Gomez, it was fine that she didn't read much more into his piece.

"Who am I to judge her and want to bring out some hidden politics in there because what I'm doing is I'm prodding her for something that may not be there, and it might be my personal thing," Gomez said.

More than a pretty picture

But at his first solo show at the Charlie James Gallery in Chinatown, people saw past a pretty picture.

"I think this makes some people feel really uncomfortable," said Marguerite Coster, a health research manager from Silver Lake. She said she's befriended her pool cleaner and landscaper and tries to pay them good wages.

Even so, she was struck by the images of the faceless workers in Gomez's paintings.

"Those really resonate for me, because you realize what it's like to be a non-person," Coster said.

Immigration activist Zacil Pech was as interested in the art patrons as she was the artwork. Pech thought of her mother – a housekeeper, who has been living in the U.S. without legal status - as she looked around the room at gallery-goers.

"Most of them are white people, and it's kind of like, 'Interesting, I hope you're able to realize the reality of our lives and your lives and how they differ.'" Pech said.

As for Gomez, it's a good night. Museums are interested, and a few collectors make purchases on the spot. But Gomez can't help but notice the irony: Wealthy people buying his art.

"And at the same time, underpaying their staff. Even that should somehow seep in because they can't look at my work and not think about themselves and their implication," Gomez said.

Gomez also thinks about the workers who might come across his art, hanging in a house. He said he hopes they realize that they're the ones who are valuable.



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