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Domestic Art: Nannies, Immigrants, and Labor

February 27, 2013 By [Carribeau Fragoza and Romeo Guzman](#) [1 Comment](#)



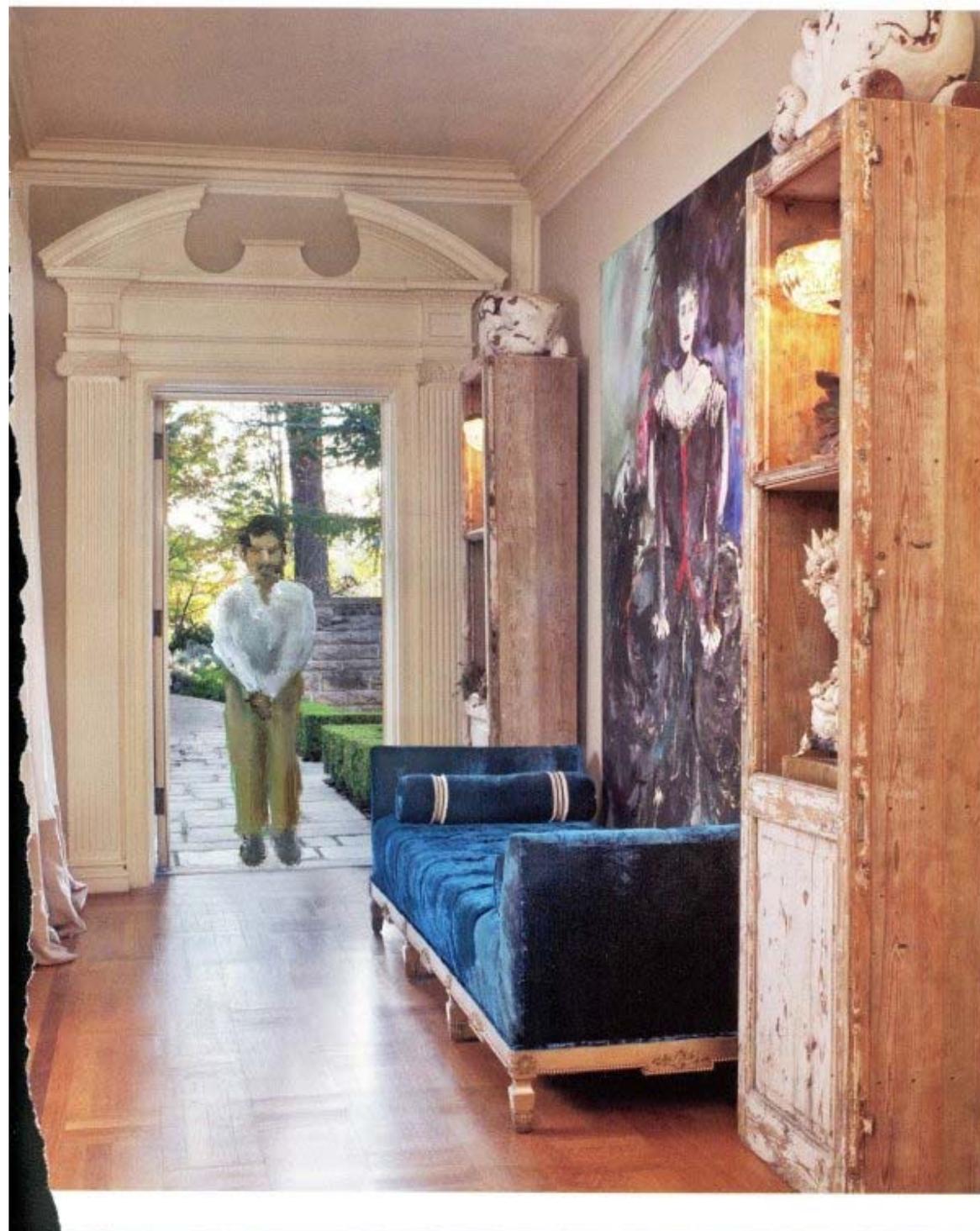
Courtesy of Ramiro Gomez Jr.

While most artists find their voice in the studio, Ramiro Gomez Jr. found his in the space between two very disparate and disconnected worlds. In 2009, he left the California Institute of the Arts and moved in with a wealthy family in West Hollywood to work as a live-in nanny and care for two infants. Although nervous about his huge new responsibilities, he was also grateful and relieved to finally have some stability and a chance to rethink his artistic path.

With one baby strapped to this chest and another baby slung on his hip, Ramiro found his way to the park, the un-official gathering and organizing space for maids and nannies. At first the other domestic workers didn't know what to make of him. Males, and especially second generation Latinos, are not common in this predominantly Latina migrant occupation. But once they warmed up to him and saw his need for guidance, they were quick to alert him that the generous family that he gratefully worked for was in fact taking advantage of his inexperience. "You are young, educated, a US citizen and speak English. You should be getting paid at least twice what you're getting now," one of them noted, says Ramiro.

Indeed, professor Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo found in her studies of U.S. domestic workers that live-in nannies in Los Angeles, compared to domestic workers that have their own residences, are not only paid the least, but are often among those who have spent the least amount of time in the United States. Moreover, because live-in nannies reside with their employer, their agreed upon daily hours often stretch into their "off time." It is not uncommon for children to enter and sleep in the live-in nannies' personal space, especially as they develop closer relationships with them, or for employers to "ask" nannies to work additional hours, often without compensation.

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Courtesy of Ramiro Gomez Jr.

Ramiro discovered that this was all very tricky and sensitive business because nannies, maids and other domestic workers do not count on the support of organized labor unions to negotiate labor terms and workers' rights. They're all on their own, each to face, however they can, using their own courage and cunning, the towering authority of the señor or señora of house. Or as Ramiro learned, if not on their own, the nannies could at least educate and encourage each other.

Ramiro, like other nannies he met, began developing his own strategies for dealing with employers. Although a newbie, his citizenship status and language skills proved to be particularly valuable. Eventually, Ramiro **Followd**

that he was not only in a unique position to learn about the experiences of nannies firsthand, he could take an active role in raising awareness around these domestic labor issues. Through listening, talking, and giving advice to other nannies Ramiro became a type of organizer.

As he learned to navigate his way and attempted to feel at home in a place that was essentially his workplace, he also struggled to find home in his voice as an artist.



Courtesy of Ramiro Gomez Jr.

His time at Calarts had been characterized by a degree of struggle and ambivalence. Calarts opened up alternative art making possibilities that he had never before considered, “I was a sponge and learned more from floating, walking around the campus and hanging out observing people and finding new materials to use on my own time.” Yet, after only a year and half, he left Calarts for “a myriad of reasons, mostly economical as well as personal.” Now, with his new job, Ramiro felt frustrated and overwhelmed with the pressures of a job that was supposed to create stability for him. He hardly had time or energy to paint or draw and when he did, he felt that

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his work was missing something important. For months he had experimented with magazine appropriations, altering magazines and catalogues for Urban Outfitters by inserting images of bratty cholas. He was intrigued, feeling that perhaps the defiant poses and fashion of these Latinas edged on something subversive. His white artist colleagues loved them... too much. Ramiro knew he needed to try something else, something that felt more honest and meaningful to his own dislocated experience as a Latino in art school and now as a U.S. born and educated Latino in West Hollywood.

And again, it was in the struggle and ultimately, catharsis that he finally found his way. The day it happened, Ramiro had locked himself in his room. At his desk, he flipped through a magazine and landed on a page depicting a pristine, immaculate kitchen. Who knew that a portrait of tranquility could ignite such rage? Immediately, he felt all of his frustrations of the day channel into the scene. Ramiro attacked the page. He soiled the counters and floors, spilled condiments and splattered mud, broke dishes and ruined the walls. He felt driven not only by the impulse to destroy something beautiful, but also to expose a deeply ingrained ugliness that had always existed in these fancy homes and their lifestyles. This is what he had been feeling all along and had finally found a way to express. His voice was the voice of the nanny, of all nannies and domestic workers who are silenced and erased out of the homes they dedicate their lives to maintain.

His job as a nanny no longer was an obstruction for his art, but rather a source of inspiration and motivation. Ramiro discovered that it was his job as an artist to make domestic workers –nannies, maids and gardeners- heard and seen. In an on-going series of magazine appropriations, Ramiro paints directly onto images of affluent homes, inserting domestic workers at work and rest. Ramiro interrupts the idyllic scenes and shifts the narrative of these locations to the experiences of the individuals whose livelihood is to clean up after and care for the people who live there.

Rather than organizing mass protests or painting poster with political messages, Ramiro's advocacy work operates at an intimate level with the viewer. Both Ramiro's public installations that he has received most attention for and his lesser known magazine appropriations make the viewer do a double take, forcing them to look more closely at what is real and not. At a glance, the cut outs nearly life-sized and accurate in their posture and gesture, fit right into the scenery. The posture of a gardener extending his arms to trim tall hedges, or of his sloping back pushing a heavy lawnmower across stretches of lush lawn. However, the cutouts are not quite life-sized and the details of the face and body are blurred. These discrepancies can be caught, usually in the corner of one's eye, in the last sweep of a passing glance. It's from the corner of your eye where Ramiro's work pulls you in to look more closely. To ask, who is that? Is that real?



Courtesy of Ramiro Gomez Jr.

While there is value in expressing masses of bodies to demonstrate power in numbers, Ramiro personalizes this mostly invisible workforce. Ramiro wants to hold you at “who is that?” His subjects are defined by their gesture and posture (and yes, skin color) more than the by details of the face, which usually define an individual. A cut out of a gardener can be accurately identified as the Gardener and the valet guy as the Valet Guy. However, Ramiro’s figures hint at more in the details that he deliberately leaves out or blurs. One gets the strong sense that

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the cutout gardener is a real man somewhere in the real world with a name and a story. You want to see his face.

“There’s a level of critical thinking that the audience has to commit to the work.” The magazine appropriations draw the viewer even closer by painting a maid at work, scrubbing and wiping away at all surfaces that are so beautifully and mercilessly lit by the bright Southern California sun. A woman sets her cleaning bucket aside to rest on a designer chair. Painted in bold strokes of acrylic nearly to the point of impressionism, the viewer doesn’t need the details of her face to understand her physical tiredness, perhaps pain, and more poignantly, the uneasy transgression of her brown body resting intimately on luxurious furniture. These are the kinds of details and subtleties that Ramiro is reaching for.



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Courtesy of Ramiro Gomez Jr.

“No Splash,” currently on display at UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center for Ramiro’s solo show *Luxury Interrupted*, helps us place his magazine appropriations within a larger tradition of representing California. By inserting labor and laborers in California’s modern, stylish, and wealthy backyards, Ramiro is directly engaging the iconic gay artist David Hockney. Hockney portrayed white Americans in pristine, blue pools, with California’s modern architecture serving as the backdrop—the quintessential “American Dream.” In unmasking Hockney’s “American Dream,” Ramiro makes immigrants and domestic laborers visible, honoring their daily contributions and vital role in American society. For an artist who found his voice in the liminal space between art school and domestic labor, it is fitting that he seeks to carve a space for racialized immigrants within the U.S. nation.

Ramiro’s own labor and movement between spaces seems to suggest the need for alternative art practices and institutions. While Ramiro has hosted workshops at UCSB and UCSD and has an exhibit at UCLA’s Chicano Studies Research Center, he continues to work as nanny. It is precisely this constant movement between the immigrant labor force, university, and the art world that gives Ramiro’s work its vibrancy and political importance.

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