

LUIS SAHAGUN
RIDING THE THREE-HEADED SERPENT



CJG CHARLIE JAMES GALLERY
CHINATOWN, LOS ANGELES

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Charlie James Gallery is pleased to present *Riding the Three-Headed Serpent*, an exhibition by Chicago-based artist Luis Alvaro Sahagun Nuño. *Riding the Three-Headed Serpent* presents new works that interrogate how contemporary portraiture allied with Mesoamerican indigenous healing practices can serve as limpias or soul retrievals. In creating this body of work Luis worked to heal his family's and community's acute spiritual distress rooted in three diseases inflicted by colonization, white supremacy, and systemic oppression: Susto (soul lost or weeping soul), Bilis (rage), and Envidia (envy of the power of the oppressor).

Luis' family pictures are rendered in charcoal and adhered to oriented strand board (OSB), a construction material made from leftover parts of knotty or crooked trees. The OSB is then layered with resin beads infused with chants, yerbas or plant medicine, sea shells, crystals, and miniature family photos. Each piece also contains small sculptures created through ritual connection with spirit guides, which allow Luis to journey into the spirit world to identify the specific animal medicine required for each sitter. The portraits or limpias become shamanic topographical maps guiding intuitive ceremonies for the release of harmful emotional energy.

Luis references and re-uses 17th century royal Spanish portraits to spotlight, celebrate, and put in positions of power stories of indigenous survival. As a means to embolden the sitter's beauty and produce grandeur, the works of art are finished with bonded together fragments of ornamental baroque-style frames.

Riding the Three-Headed Serpent explores how craft, spirituality, and labor interweave to celebrate the complexities of Latinidad/Latinx identity, immigration/migration, and decoloniality, connecting Luis' rich ancestral history, lived experience and creative practice to intervene in this racially charged moment.

Luis Sahagun was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico in 1982. He has exhibited at venues including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL; Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL; Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art, Roswell, NM; The National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago, IL; the International Exposition of Contemporary Art (expo) Chicago, IL; DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL; amongst many others. Additionally, his work has been covered in publications such as: ArtForum, ChicagoMag, NewCity Magazine, New American Paintings, and the Chicago Tribune. His practice has also been spotlighted on the radio, podcasts, and television networks such as MundoFOX, UNIVISION and WBEZ-NPR. Sahagun has held residencies at Roswell, NM, Oaxaca, MX, Chicago Artist Coalition, Mana Contemporary in Miami, and was an Artist in Residence for Critical Race Studies at Michigan State University. A 3Arts Awardee, he received his undergraduate degree from Southern Illinois University- Carbondale, an MFA at Northern Illinois University.

Artist Instagram: @luis_alvaro_sahagun

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Luis Álvaro Sahagun Nuño was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. He creates drawings, paintings, sculptures and performances that confront the palpable inescapability of race and transform art into an act of cultural and spiritual reclamation. Sahagun grew up undocumented and disconnected, and his practice is in part a response to this. As the grandson of a Curandera and himself a practitioner of Curanderismo, when he makes art he conjures indigenous spiritualities to embody the aesthetics of personal history, cultural resistance, and colonial disruption.

Sahagun spent ten years as a construction worker, pushing his body to its limits as he poured concrete and installed drywall. Now, he uses the skills of the construction worker to create objects in homage to the undocumented laboring class, a lineage his family is part of. His materials are silicone, lumber, drywall, concrete, and hardware. These atypical fine arts materials, when mixed with beads, sea shells, rope and maize, create artworks that celebrate the craft of brown labor while immortalizing Luis' stories and the stories of his communities.

Like DNA strings of mestizaje, Sahagun's practice confronts contradiction – indian/conqueror, violence/unity, ancient/contemporary, and artist/artisan.

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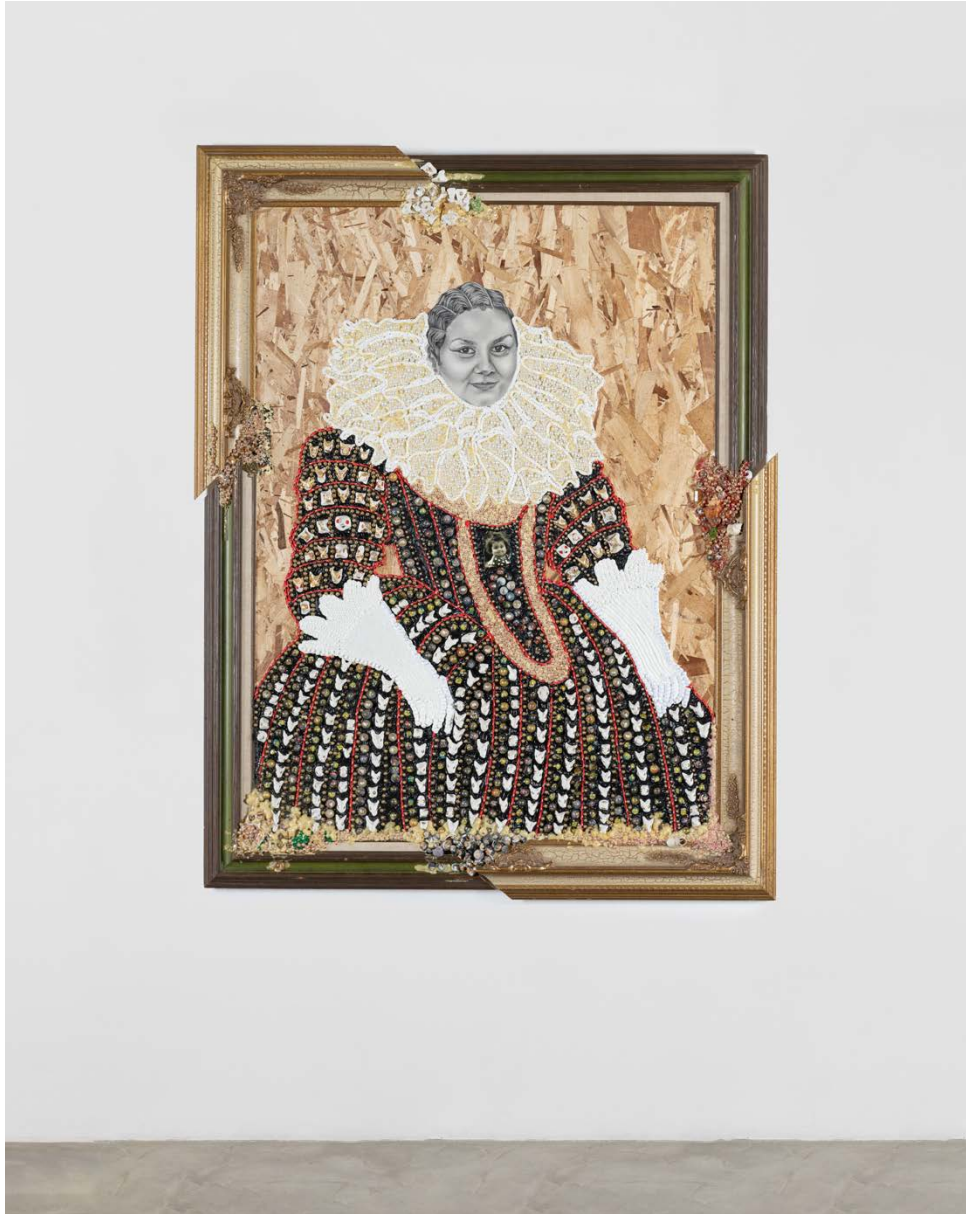


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Limpia no. 1 (Maria
"Mariquita" Rodriguez
Sahagun)
Charcoal, paper, amethyst,
obsidian crystals, resin,
beads, gorilla glue, rope,
joint compound, gold
leaf, family photos, found
objects, and caulk
56 x 46 x 4 inches
2022

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Limpia no. 1 (Maria "Mariquita"
Rodriguez Sahagun)
Artist Note:

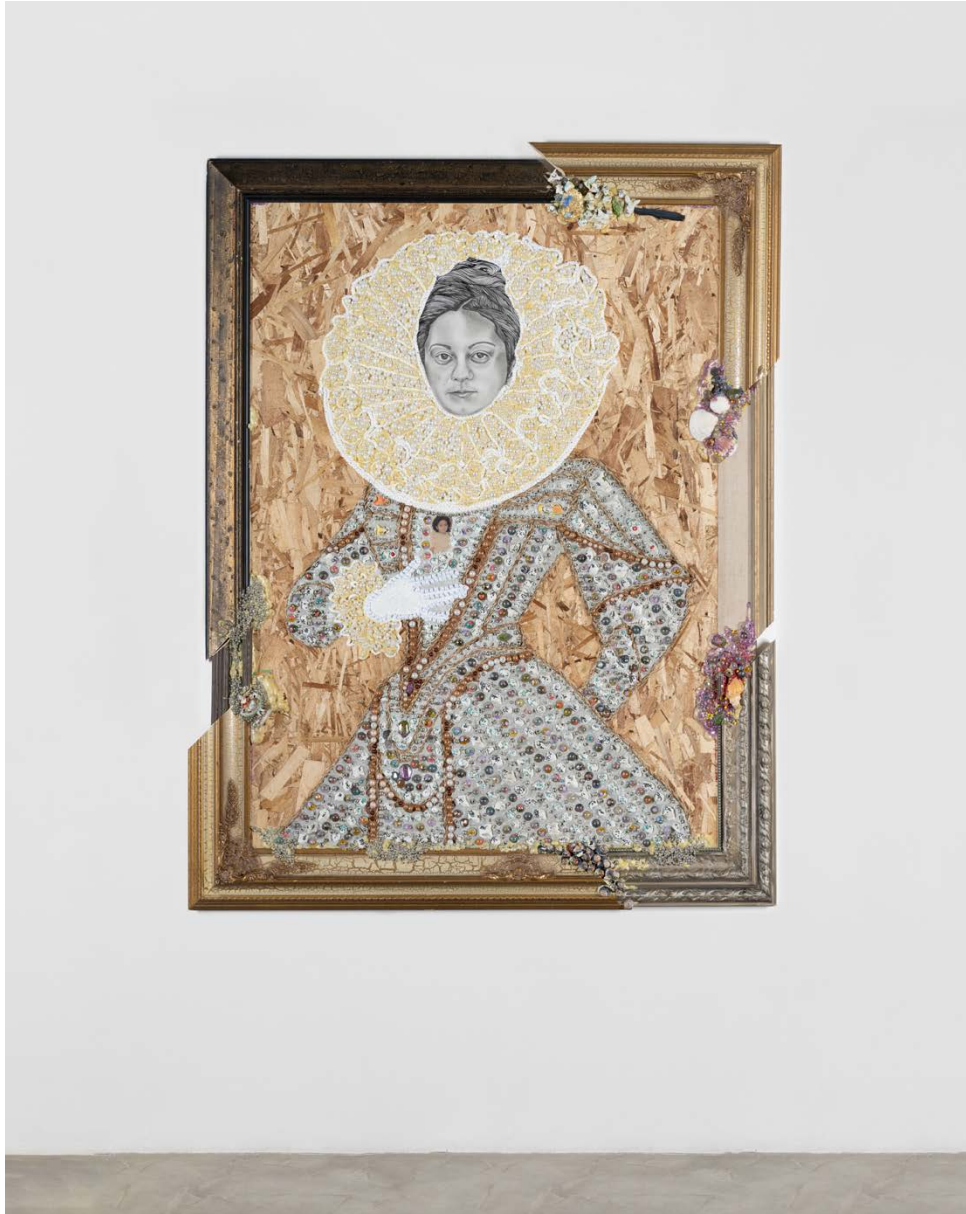
Maria "Mariquita" Rodriguez Sahagun is my sister and the middle child of our family. During this limpia we worked on mother-daughter bonds and clearing out energies that were not serving her. Near her solar plexus chakra, which is responsible for our ability to feel confident and in control of our lives, is a picture of her daughter Natalia. The image of her daughter is a reminder of her power and ability to break spells of motherhood traumas.

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Limpia no. 2 (Rosario
Elizabeth "Chayo" Sahagun)
Charcoal, paper, amethyst,
obsidian crystals, resin,
beads, gorilla glue, rope,
joint compound, gold
leaf, family photos, found
objects, and caulk
56 x 46 x 4 inches
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Limpia no. 2 (Rosario Elizabeth
"Chayo" Sahagun)

Artist Note:

Rosario Elizabeth "Chayo" Sahagun is my oldest sister. I was guided to select a composition which positioned her in a stance of power in order to instill boldness and grandeur. On her chest is an image of herself when she was a child. I then created representations of my Nagual and placed them as adornments on her garments for protection and to give her clarity about hard choices in her life.

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Limpia no. 3 (Jose Luis
"Don Chepe" Sahagun
Sotelo)

Charcoal, paper, amethyst,
obsidian crystals, resin,
beads, gorilla glue, rope,
joint compound, gold
leaf, family photos, found
objects, and caulk
77 x 66 x 5 inches
2022

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Limpia no. 3 (Jose Luis “Don Chepe” Sahagun Sotelo)
Artist Note:

While working on Don Chepe’s (my father) portrait, I received an overwhelming amount of Eagle medicine. The eagle symbolizes the spirit of the sun and paternal figure of war, *Huitzilopochtli*. Eagles are fearless, wise and clever and are commonly used as messengers for the creator. Eagles also teach us the importance of stepping back and watching from afar, and to have the strength to not seek permission for your freedom.

Don Chepe is my father. He was born and raised in Jamay, Jalisco, a small farming town an hour east of Guadalajara, Jalisco. The oldest of ten siblings, he spent his childhood working for my grandfather at the family owned cattle ranch. A charro at heart, with no education and unable to read and write, he traveled to Guadalajara, the “big city,” to find work to help support the family. He found his passion working as a driver for *los camiones urbanos*, a type of bus with nationwide commuter transportation services. After years of him working as a driver, in the late 1970s groups of armed men began to rob passengers at gunpoint. The attacks grew, drivers and passengers began to be executed, and buses were set on fire. On a day that he called in sick, his replacement was murdered in one of these attacks. Feeling that his livelihood was taken from him, he left Guadalajara and immigrated to Chicago, Illinois. Being undocumented for many years, he found work in the fields and then in steel factories, eventually earning a CDL license and eventually retiring after decades working as a truck driver. He has a strong and authentic love for the United States.

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Limpia no. 4 (Tatiana “La Taty” Gonzalez Nuño)
Charcoal, paper, amethyst,
obsidian crystals, resin,
beads, gorilla glue, rope,
joint compound, gold
leaf, family photos, found
objects, and caulk
57 x 57 x 4.5 inches
2022

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Limpia no. 4 (Tatiana "La Taty"
Gonzalez Nuño)
Artist Note:

Tatiana Gonzalez Nuño, La Taty, is my cousin from my mother's side of the family. Born and raised in Mazatlan, Sinaloa, she is a trained and gifted makeup artist with a rebellious soul. During her limpia, I received barn swallow and tiger medicine. Barn swallows, although small, are outspoken and forceful. For many indigenous cultures these birds are known to be mighty and wake people up from their sleep. The image of the tiger has the ability to embolden ambition as they are synonymous with drive, strength, and courage. Their black stripes are sharp slices of darkness and represent the ability to cut through the darkness of life to pursue healing and trust.

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Limpia no. 5 (Hector "El
Tito" Chang Nuño)
Charcoal, paper, amethyst,
obsidian, rosemary,
crystals, resin, beads,
gorilla glue, rope, joint
compound, gold leaf,
family photos, found
objects, and caulk
57 x 28 x 3.5 inches
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Limpia no. 5 (Hector “El Tito” Chang Nuño)

Artist Note:

Hector Chang Nuño, my cousin *El Tito*, is a Chinese-Mexican born and raised in Mazatlan, Sinaloa. The port of Mazatlan, located on the Pacific coast of Mexico, is a major route for transporting goods by sea. Tito’s great-grandfather was a Chinese trader that arrived in Mazatlan and fell in love with his great-grandmother. Tito has a strong drive to learn and connect with Chinese culture. His limpia used the medicine of Dogs of Foo, lion-like creatures containing mystic powers of protection. A lion’s roar causes trembling and symbolizes wisdom, fearlessness, and pride. On his chest lies an image of the first Chinese Orthodox priest, St. Mitrophan of China, patron of lost children, for protection and guidance .

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Limpia no. 6 (Hector "El
Hugo" Gonzalez Nuño)
Charcoal, paper, Amethyst,
obsidian, rosemary,
crystals, resin, beads,
gorilla glue, rope, joint
compound, gold leaf,
family photos, found
objects, and caulk
57.5 x 28 x 4 inches
2022

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Limpia no. 6 (Hector "El Hugo"
Gonzalez Nuño)
Artist Note:

Mexicanos al Grito de Guerra is tattooed across my cousin Hugo's chest. Possessing a restless and warrior heart, Hugo's medicine showed up as a horse and a shapeshifting dog in the form of a wolf. Horse medicine teaches us how to ride in new directions and awakens our freedom. Dogs are known for their playfulness and loyalty and in Meixca culture Xolotl is the dog-faced god of fire and lighting. Wolves are nocturnal and territorial creatures and their howl is a grito, a scream to notify the pack of danger. Wolf and horse provide wisdom for discerning who to give loyalty to and connecting us to true freedom.

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Limpia no. 7 (Luis Alvaro
"Huicho" Sahagun Nuño)
Charcoal, paper, Amethyst,
obsidian crystals, resin,
beads, gorilla glue,
rosemary, rope, joint
compound, gold leaf,
family photos, found
objects, and caulk
57.5 x 28 x 4 inches
2022

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Limpia no. 7 (Luis Alvaro "Huicho"
Sahagun Nuño)

Artist Note:

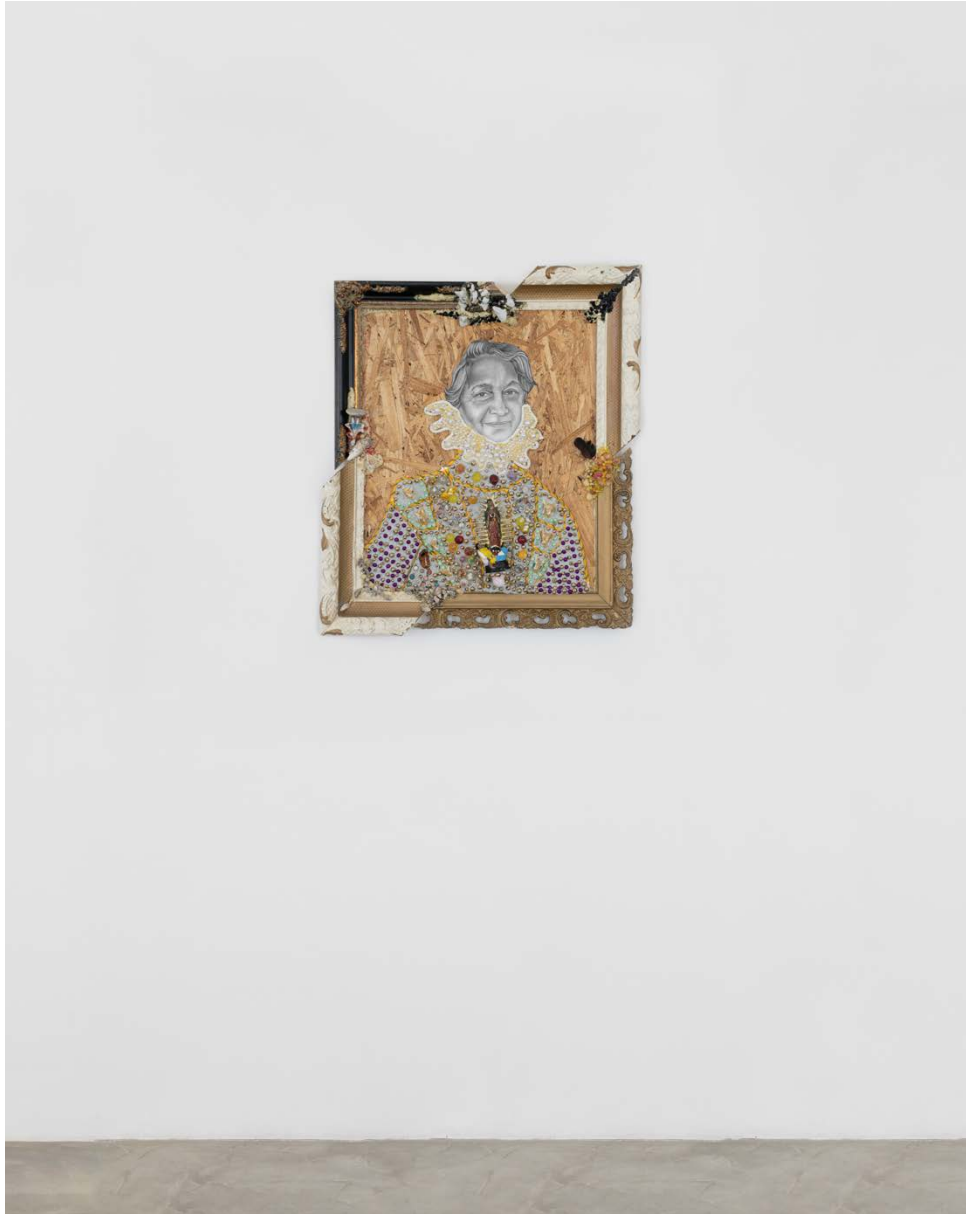
Often, I think about what it means to carry different communities inside our hearts, communities as lived experiences that shape our identities. Tapping into my Nagual, my teacher in the spirit realm, I embarked on a limpia specific to one component of my identity, Huicho. Huicho invokes a specific time in my life as this nickname was given to me during my undergraduate studies. Using this identity as a means of time travel, I worked to soothe wounds inflicted via racial micro and macro aggressions during my time at a predominantly white learning institution. Owl medicine presented itself during this work. It is a medicine for magic and courage and facilitated the pathway for resolution.

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Limpia no. 8 (Guadalupe
"La Lupe" Nuño Novoa)
Charcoal, paper, Amethyst,
obsidian crystals, resin,
beads, gorilla glue, rope,
joint compound, gold
leaf, family photos, found
objects, and caulk
28 x 24 x 3 inches
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Limpia no. 8 (Guadalupe "La Lupe"
Nuño Novoa)

Artist Note:

This portrait is of mi Tia Lupe, La Guadalupana. She has a strong devotion to La Virgen de Guadalupe and uses her as a symbol for hope and miracles. The limpia performed was for clearing away energy not belonging to her while setting personal heart-felt intentions as she embarks on a new chapter in her life.

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Limpia no. 9 (Abuelita
Guadalupe Nuño)
Charcoal, paper, Citrine,
Amethyst, obsidian
crystals, resin, beads,
gorilla glue, rope, joint
compound, gold leaf,
family photos, found
objects, and caulk
36 x 36 x 3 inches
2022

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Limpia no. 9 (Abuelita Guadalupe Nuño)
Artist Note:

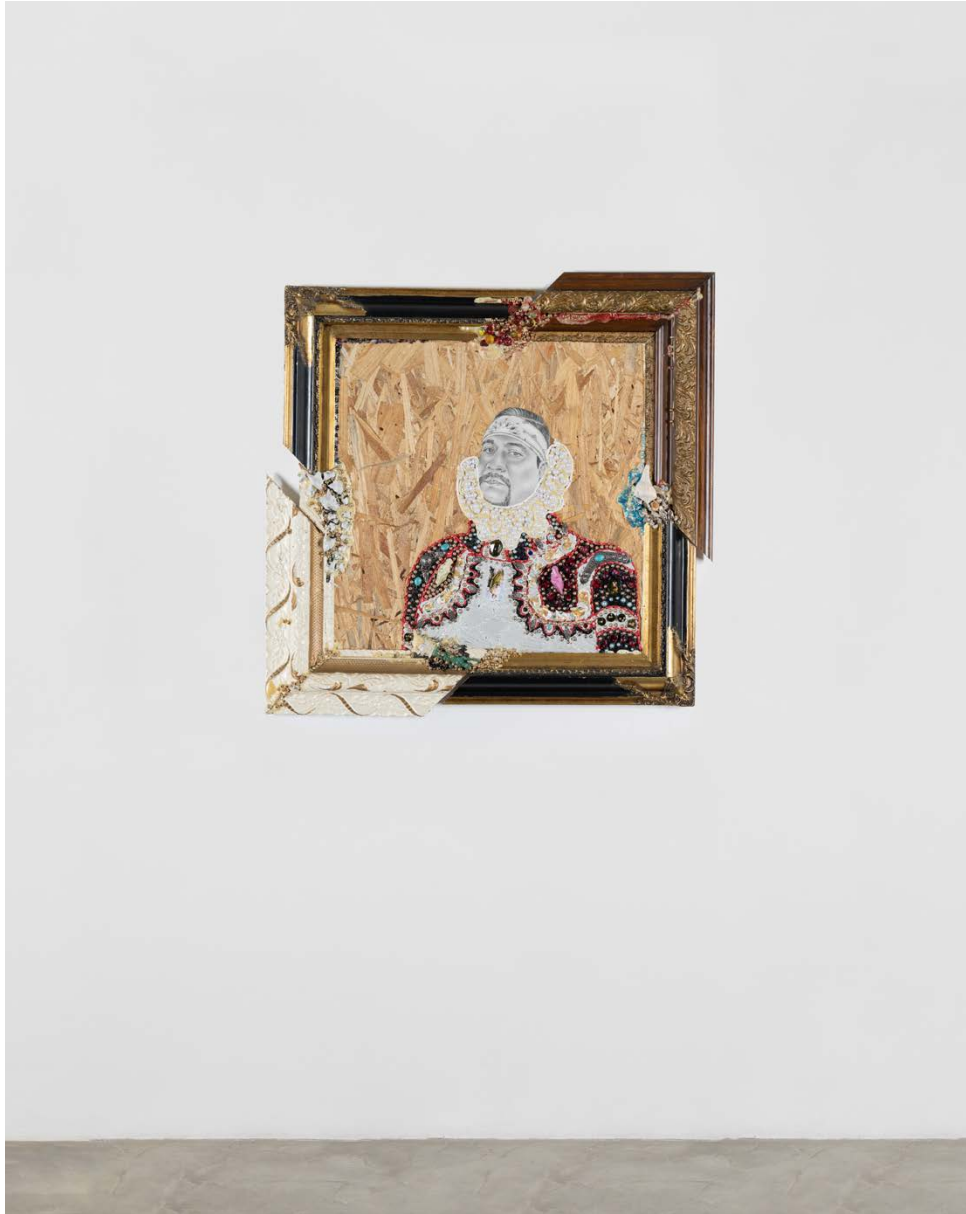
Having very few images of my grandmother Guadalupe, I decided to use a picture of her when she was in her twenties for this portrait. My grandmother had strong clairvoyant gifts and was often given the title of Curandera, though she refused the label. It is said that she cried for three consecutive days while inside the womb of my great-grandmother and as such developed a special connection with the spirit world. Among my family it is believed that through her I inherited those connections. While creating her portrait, I focused on honoring the sacred cardinal direction of the North, the place of the dead and our beloved ancestors. It is a place of the earth element and divination work.

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Limpia no. 10 (Arturo, "El Trompas" Ibarra Nuño)
Charcoal, paper, Amethyst, Citrine, obsidian crystals, resin, beads, gorilla glue, rope, joint compound, gold leaf, family photos, found objects, and caulk
34 x 34 x 4 inches
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Limpia no. 10 (Arturo, "El Trompas"
Ibarra Nuño)

Artist Note:

For my cousin Arturo's portrait, I called upon St. Judas, the patron of desperate and lost causes, inverting his saintly image on Arturo's chest. Unicorns flank the saint for their medicine in showing us the magic in the world and helping us view life through the lens of an innocent child. In the sacred direction of the West, a place of reflection, gratitude, and accomplishment, lies the statue of liberty, to some a false symbol of freedom. Here it is used as a tool for processing Arturo's experiences as an immigrant in this country.

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Limpia no. 11 (Katya Flores Sahagun)
Charcoal, paper, tigers eye, obsidian crystals, resin, beads, gorilla glue, rope, joint compound, gold leaf, family photos, found objects, and caulk
24 x 24 x 3 inches
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Limpia no. 11 (Katya Flores Sahagun)

Artist Note:

Katya Flores Sahagun is my cousin and the only family member represented in this series of limpieas from my paternal side of the family. The image of Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Native American saint, rests on her chest. This controversial symbol is open for interpretation as many celebrate her sainthood while others shun her religious conversion, reflecting the inner conflicts left by the residue of colonization.

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Soul Retrieval no. 3 (Luis Alvaro "Alvarito" Sahagún Nuño)

Charcoal, paper, tigers eye, obsidian crystals, resin, beads, gorilla glue, sea shells, rope, joint compound, gold leaf, family photos, found objects, and caulk
30 x 15 x 2 inches
2022

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Soul Retrieval no. 3 (Luis Alvaro
"Alvarito" Sahagún Nuño)

Artist Note:

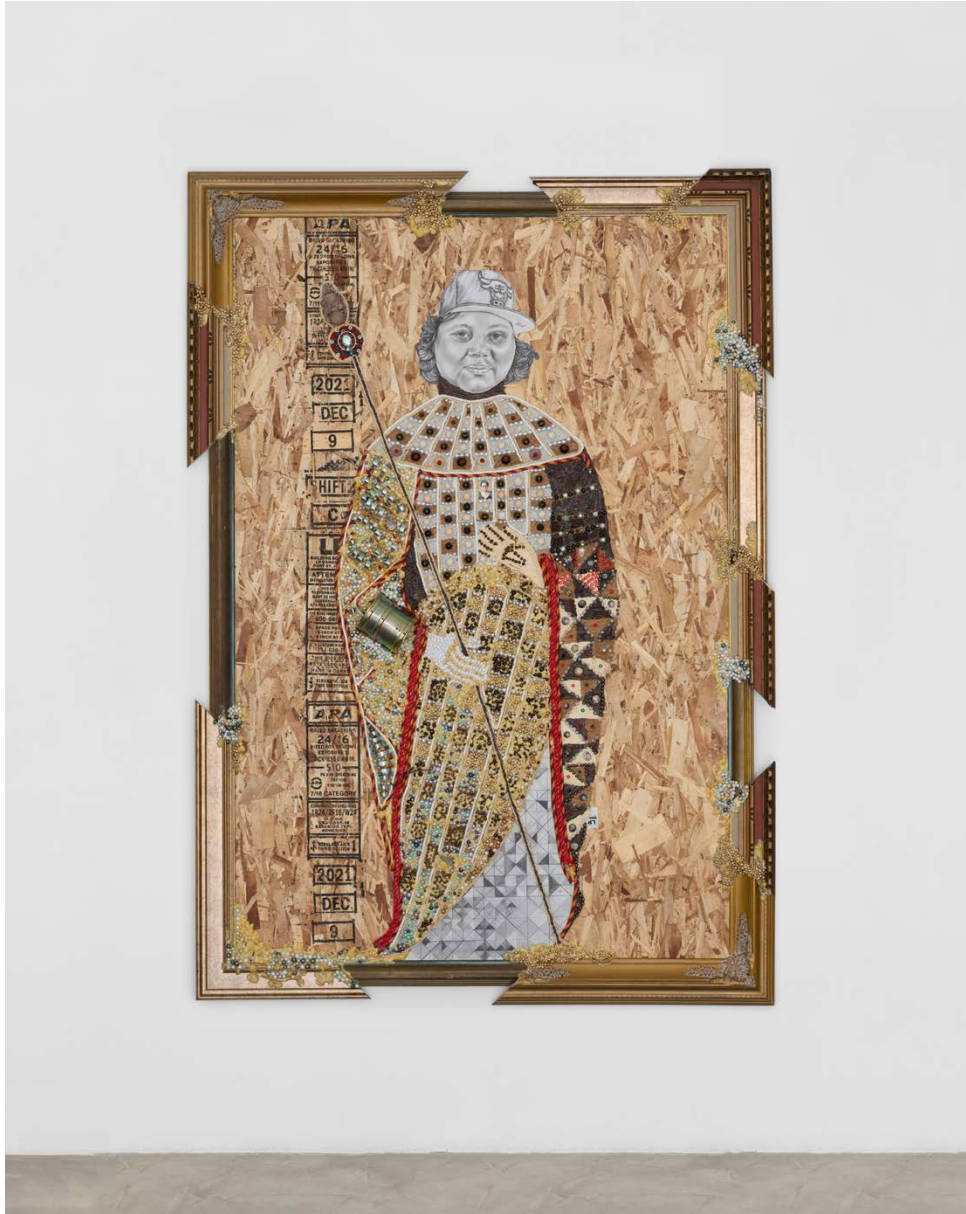
I created this self-portrait as a soul retrieval for deeply connecting with lost components of my wounded inner child, Alvarito. Alvarito lives inside me, a ten year old playful, adventurous, and innocent child who mentors me on living my present life with joy and laughter. I was born on the day of the warrior of Tezcatlipoca, the smoking mirror, jaguar deity, and god of ancestral memory. His image as a jaguar is represented on my hat, which is slightly tilted toward the sacred direction of the South, the place of child innocence, expansion, and raw fighting energy.

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Maria Bonita, Maria del
Alma
Charcoal, paper, Amethyst,
obsidian crystals, resin,
beads, gorilla glue, rope,
joint compound, gold
leaf, family photos, found
objects, and caulk
81 x 56 x 2.5 inches
2022

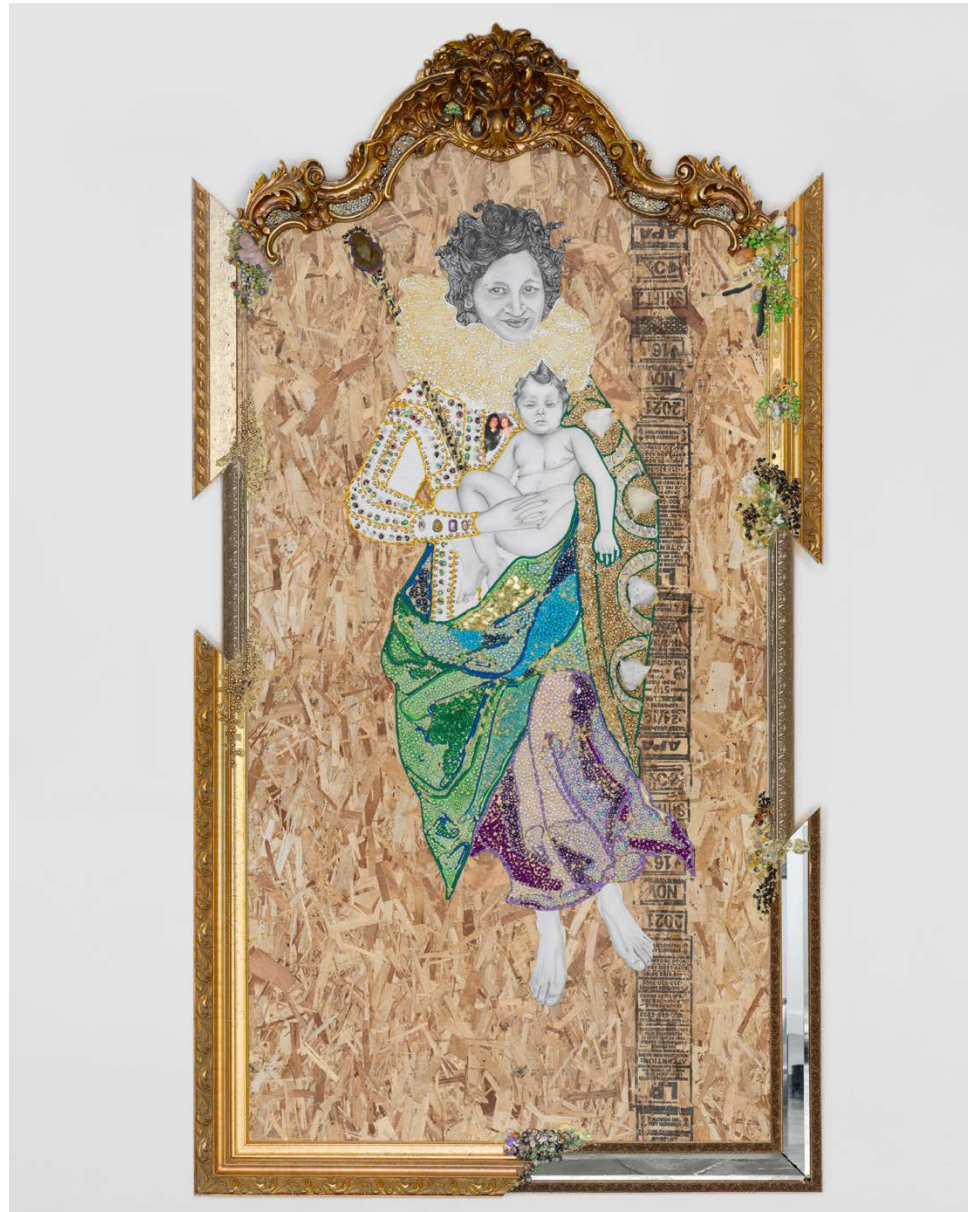
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Maria Bonita, Maria del Alma
Artist Note:

Maria Bonita, Maria del Alma gets its title from a song of the same name composed and sung by the beloved Mexican performer Agustin Lara. This portrait of my mother, Maria Antonia Sahagun Nuño, was created to connect with her in the spirit realm. By using an image of her from before I was born, I was able to connect with her not as a mother, but as a person, who at the time the picture was taken was full of hopes, dreams, and possibilities. The portrait cleared a path for my grief and allowed it to move through me, gifting me moments of peace and acceptance.

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Barrida no.2 (Gloria
Eloisa "Lothita" Nuño
Novoa & Maria "toñita"
Nuño)

Charcoal, paper, Amethyst,
obsidian crystals, resin,
beads, gorilla glue, rope,
joint compound, gold
leaf, family photos, found
objects, and caulk
90 x 56 x 4 inches
2022

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Barrida no.2 (Gloria Eloisa “Lothita”
Nuño Novoa & Maria “toñita” Nuño)
Artist Note:

A *barrida* in Curanderismo is an energetic sweeping, a way to purify and revitalize an individual for renewal. Sweeping rites also serve as offerings to the divine. For this piece, I wanted to sweep away unhealthy energies while creating a stronger bond between my grandmother Lochita and my mother Toñita. The portrait is that of my grandmother holding my mother when she was a baby, my version of Madonna and child.

While I was working on this portrait in the studio, I bent down to get rope and there laying next to it was a four foot serpent. It had entered my studio and found refuge by camouflaging itself among my rope. I believe it was an omen or visit by Coatlicue, mother of gods, depicted with a fanged serpent face and wearing a skirt similar to the one in this piece, which I was working on at the time.

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Education

Northern Illinois University, School of Art & Design, MFA, 2015, DeKalb, IL
Southern Illinois University, School of Art & Design, BFA Product Design, 2006, Carbondale, IL
Minors: Art History and Marketing

Honors + Fellowships

2022 Creative Capital Shortlist
3Arts Residency Fellowship
2020 3Arts Award, Awardee, Chicago, IL
2019 3Arts Award, Honorable Mention, Chicago, IL
2018 3Arts Award, Honorable Mention, Chicago, IL
2015 Artistic Excellence Fellowship, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL
Jack & Eleanor Olson Art Scholarship, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL
Jeffrey Lunsford Creativity Fellowship, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL

Residencies

2023 Lucas Artists Residency Program at Montalvo Arts Center, Saratoga, CA
2020 Ace Frontier Digital Residency, Buenos Aires, AR
2019 Artist-in-Residence Critical Race Studies, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI
2018 Mana Contemporary Residency, Miami, FL
2016 Chicago Artist Coalition, Bolt Artist-in-Residence, Chicago, IL
2015 Roswell Artist-in-Residence Program, Roswell, NM
2014 Arquetopia, Oaxaca, MX

Selected Solo Exhibitions

2022 Riding the Three-Headed Serpent, Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Haciendo Caras (Making Face), Latchkey Gallery, New York City, NY
2021 Lo Que Grita Mi Piel, Hope College, Holland, MI

Unearthing: Magic, Mimicry, and the Mundane, Union Art Gallery, East Lansing, MI
2020 Luis A. Sahagun: Both Eagle & Serpent, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
2018 You Can't Kill Spirit, Waubonsee Community College, Waubonsee, IL
2017 The Mountains Whispered and the Canyon Sang, Chicago Artist Coalition, Chicago, IL
Brotherhood | Leyendas de un Bracero, Kruger Gallery Chicago, Chicago, IL
An Old God Renewed, Riverside Arts Center, Riverside, IL
2016 Colorin Colorado, Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, NM
Between Dreams and Kings, Terrain Alternative Art Space, Oak Park, IL
2015 ESCOMBROS, Kruger Gallery Chicago, Chicago, IL
The Urban Box Project, Union Street Gallery, Chicago Heights, IL
2014 The Land Where It Never Snows, Dorothea Thiel Gallery, South Holland, IL
2013 Two Sides to a River Story, School of Audio Engineering Institute, Chicago, IL
2012 Urban Realism, Moraine Valley Community College, Palos Hills, IL

Selected Group Exhibitions

2022 Inaugural Exhibition, Patricia Sweetow Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Rostro, Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
Swedish American Museum, Chicago, IL
Arvika Konsthall, Sweden
2021 Future Fair Holiday Online Market, New York City, NY
2020 Latinexodus, Salisbury University, Salisbury, MD
2019 New Age, New Age: Strategies for Survival, DePaul Art Museum, Chicago, IL
I Am American, Freeport Art Museum, Freeport, IL
2018 Pain is Our North Star, Museum of Contemporary Arts, Chicago, IL
Day of the Dead: A Spiritual Legacy, National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago, IL
2017 Memoria Presente, National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago, IL

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Day of the Dead: Xoloitzcuintle Project, National Museum of Mexican Art, Chicago, IL
2016 Present Standard, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
2015 Skimption, Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, Chicago, IL
RAiR Artists, Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art, Roswell, NM
2014 Border Crossings, The International Exposition of Contemporary & Modern Art (EXPO), Chicago, IL

Artist Lectures + Workshops

2022 The Art of Civic Engagement, California State University-Monterey Bay
Mestizaje & Cultural Reclamation, Kansas City Art Institute, Kansas City, Missouri
Undocumented Students Speak Truth To Power, Northern Illinois University
2020 Lo Que Grita Mi Piel, Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum, East Lansing, MI
Voices on Campus, American Indian and Indigenous Studies, East Lansing, MI
Ancient Alchemy: Secrets of Emulsion, COVID TV, Chicago, IL
Totemic Ancestral doll workshop, Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL
2019 The Art of Cultural Resistance, Dream Action, Northern Illinois University
2018 Unity Through Shared Pain, Waubensee Community College, Waubensee, IL
2015 New Mythologies, Roswell Museum and Art Center, Roswell, NM
Gelatin Printmaking workshop at Chicago Cultural Center, Chicago, IL

Academic Appointments

2020-2022 Assistant Professor in Art and Community Engaged Practices, California State University, Monterey Bay, Seaside, CA
2019-2020 Artist-in Residence for Critical Race Studies (rank of Assistant Professor, fixed term), Michigan State University, Lansing, MI

2017-19 Lecturer, Contemporary Practice, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
2014-15 Instructor of Record, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL

Related Teaching Experience

2016-20 Teaching Artist, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, IL
2017-19 Teaching Artist, The Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Chicago IL

Selected Bibliography

2022 Los Angeles Times | Carolina A. Miranda
Spotlight: A Captivating Group Show at Charlie James Gallery
2021 VOZ-es | Vreca Butters
Magazine Interview: Un Mestizo Con Causa
Michigan State University | College of Arts & Letters
Spotlight: Exhibit by Critical Race Studies
Artist-in-Residence
2020 UNIVISION | Alex Hernandez
Televised interview: Luis Sahagun comprometido con la comunidad
Chicago Tribune | Best 2020 Art Shows in Chicago
Spotlighting: Luis A. Sahagun: Both Eagle and Serpent
Michigan Avenue Magazine | Melanie Medrano
3 Chicago Creatives Are On A Mission To Effect Diversity And Social Change
Modern Luxury | The Art of Change
Artist Spotlight: The Ones to Watch
Newcity Art | Rafael Francisco Salas
Review: Luis A. Sahagun: Both Eagle and Serpent

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- Newcity Art | Lori Waxman
Review: Luis A. Sahagun: Both Eagle and Serpent
- 2019 MCA-DNA Blog | Marcela Torres
Reflections on Violence and Empowerment
- Newcity Art | Noah Hanna
Twenty-Five Latino Artists Raise the Standard for Contemporary Art
- 2017 Chicago Tribune | Lori Waxman
Review: National Museum of Mexican Art celebrates its 30th with A Protest Party
- 2016 ArtForum | Daniel Quiles.
Review: Present Standard
- 2015 Chicago Magazine | Art Editor
The Top Ten Things to Do in Chicago This Week
- Newcity Art | Art Editor
Review: Luis Sahagun/Kruger Gallery Chicago
- Bad@Sports | Lise McKean
Interview: Luis Sahagun on Thinks to think
- MundoFOX | Gisela Orozco
Televised interview: Luis Sahagun on Arte de los Escombros
- TimeOut Chicago | Escombros
Review: Escombros Leyendas de un Bracero
- Chicago Magazine | Jason Foumberg
The 13 Best Art Exhibits in Chicago This Month

Art Collections

Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art, Roswell, New Mexico
Anthony Elms personal collection
Bob Faust personal collection
Patricia Sweetow Collection
Kates-Ferri Collection New York, NY
Amir Shariat, Vienna Austria