

The Borderscapes, Plants and Desert After Daniel Gibson

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The current socio-political turmoil has been entirely coated with a new layer with the COVID 19 pandemic. All of a sudden, numerous social injustices related to the contemporary migrations, as people were unable to continue their desired goals and enable themselves a secure future, seemed to have been put on a side. Nevertheless, the borders, migrations, and notion of belonging are still coloring our reality and pose numerous questions primarily in terms of race and class.

Different artists explore these issues through their practice, one of them being Daniel Gibson. Through his outstanding charcoals, inks, and watercolors, this artist tends to speak of both personal and collective histories and landscape as a signifier of socio-political shifts and plants. Influenced by growing up in the border town of El Centro, five minutes north of Mexicali, Baja Mexico, Gibson mostly depicts abstracted human figures, elements of nature, objects, and dream-like narratives.

His current solo exhibition *Ocotillo Song*, which will be on display at Almine Rech Gallery in New York until 30 July 2021, features the artist's most recent paintings that extend his interest in the mentioned subjects. Fascinated by the *Ocotillo*, a shrub dominant in the southern and southwestern deserts of North America (term deriving from the Spanish diminutive of the Nahuatl word, *Ocotl*, meaning torch), Gibson poetically thematizes the elegies of transnational borders and often lost stories of sadness, home, and labor.

We had a chat with Daniel Gibson to find out more about this exhibition and more generally about his artistic practice.

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Exploring The Hardships of Migration

Widewalls: You grew up in the border town of El Centro, close to Mexicali, Baja Mexico. Could you tell us something about your memories growing up and the way they continue to inform your practice?

Daniel Gibson: Drawing the desert landscape still to this day anchors me. Growing up within a sheetrock factory (Plaster City) in the middle of the desert a few miles from the border had this feeling of isolation or desertion from the rest of the world. Seeing and hearing migrants crossing in the night, often using our water hose to rest and fill up before they continued their journey is forever burned in my memory.

Widewalls: Your latest exhibition *Ocotillo Song*, opening at Almine Rech, continues to explore themes of identity and migration. Could you tell us something about this new body of work, but also about the title of the show itself?

DG: I am paying my respects to migration and the struggles. This body of work talks about: my mother picking strawberries in the fields as a child in Salinas, CA with her family when they first came to this country, my paternal grandmother giving birth along a fishing vessel and shoreline in Sinaloa, desert flora and art historical nods. Ethan from Almine Rech came up with the name when we were driving together from Taos to Santa Fe. I thought it was perfect! I always feel the song in the works, and relate more as a songwriter when I paint. When Ethan paired those two words together it felt right just like wind blowing in the desert.

The Dreams, Inspiration and Plants

Widewalls: One could state you use landscape/nature as a tool for socio-political articulation. To achieve that you must observe closely, think, and produce. Would you say your painterly practice is conceptual or even performative to a certain extent?

DG: Yes, I would say that, and thanks for noticing! It is conceptual in the formation of imagery. The symbology of the imagery can be read and related to shared concepts. For example, I paint bright big Butterflies guiding migrants safely in desert landscapes.

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Widewalls: Tell us a bit more about dreaming and plants; what is the connection?

DG: The flowers and plants are figurative for sure. When I combine lived experiences and sights with family narratives a dream-like landscape does take shape. Meditation and dreaming become synonymous when I paint.

Widewalls: Are you inspired by any particular ideology, art movement, or scholarly thinking that eventually drives your creativity?

DG: I am a painter and I look to some classics for art historical relevance; German expressionism, the Mexican muralists and painters ranging from José Clemente Orozco to Maria Izquierdo, and of course the New York School and obviously Picasso.

Widewalls: Your work synthesizes the past as a way to further examine the present. Could you describe your working process?

DG: Everything begins with drawing. It's still the most immediate technology I have to document when I see ideas taking shape within. Time is certainly present when I work. Depictions of familial histories may intertwine with a bush of flowers I just saw on a run.

Widewalls: Have you considered exploring the notion of borderscapes and family histories through other media?

DG: I have worked around notions of borderscapes and family histories since forever. I started with an activist ethos early on, hanging banners atop freeway overpasses in San Ysidro and wheat pasting messaging around San Diego and the Imperial Valley. My output has evolved and currently I retain and use that early spark to paint with straightforward oil painting.

Widewalls: The pandemic is still not over, so it seems hard to speak about future plans. Perhaps you could share your dreams regarding the developments in your career?

DG: I really want to wake up every morning and paint, and take a nap and then paint again.