

Interview with Elmer Guevara

I first encountered Elmer Guevara's work during our time as graduate students at Hunter College. His 2022 thesis show presented a series of figurative paintings of family members and versions of his childhood self in South Central Los Angeles. My encounter with both the personal and familial history embedded in these works recalled my early memories of listening to my Korean grandparents' stories of their post-war immigration to L.A.'s South Bay. I recently reencountered Guevara's work, this time in his hometown of Los Angeles, at his 2023 solo exhibition *House Money* at Charlie James Gallery.

In the exhibition, Guevara explores the trauma he inherited from his parents, who lived through more than half of the Salvadoran Civil War before fleeing to the U.S. in the 1980s.¹ The artist's parents settled in South Central among a community of family and friends who also migrated from what he refers to as the "old country." Guevara's work communicates his complex heritage by allowing for gaps in his family's (often hesitant) recollections while also providing valuable context for future generations of Salvadorans to reflect and elaborate upon.

While researching for the exhibition, Guevara sourced first-hand accounts from his family's narratives and photo albums, as well as from Salvadoran memoirs, documentaries, and films.² During his work on the series, Guevara refined a gel-photo transfer technique, digitally warping images to fit the contours of his subjects' bodies before transposing them onto the surface of their painted

skin. *Dried Up on A Sunday* (all works 2023) depicts the artist's younger brother lounging in bed, recovering from a hangover. The bare skin of his arms, torso, and legs is populated with ghostly family photos and images of the Salvadoran Civil War and the 1992 L.A. Riots. The addition of the photographs transforms Guevara's figures into vessels, containers on which these histories can live fluidly.³ The transferred images also explore the subjectivity of memory, acknowledging the mutability of narratives across time and the lasting tangibility of intergenerational trauma.

Guevara appears as a young boy in *Young Grasshopper*. Dressed in a Nick Van Exel jersey—a nod to the artist's affinity for the Lakers—he clutches a shoebox and basketball. Gel-transferred images of a Nintendo Game Boy and Spider-Man trading cards appear inside the shoebox—nostalgia-inducing objects that defined an entire generation of digital natives⁴ who grew up in the post-internet age. In December, Guevara and I reconnected to discuss the specific cultural references in *House Money* and the direction of his ever-evolving visual language.

Sigourney Schultz: What initially drew you to painting?

Elmer Guevara: I did graffiti for most of my teenage life. I met a lot of people in the city through bus hopping—a lot of people who still do it now. As soon as I got a little older, I [met] some friends who were graffiti writers, but also painted. Seeing them painting was super eye-opening for me. I'd never seen anything like that, especially in my neighborhood. The artists who were doing art weren't doing it for a living; they were doing it because they enjoyed doing it. One of them is my good friend Mario Gutierrez. When I was coming up, we would hang out a lot in his apartment. His living room

pretty much became the studio. We would hang out there a lot, and he'd be painting all the time; it was pretty cool-looking. I remember I was like, "Man, I need to try this one day."

There was a time when I wanted to [become a] paramedic, or try something else, because I was the first person in my family to go to college. Maybe I put this on myself...but I felt like I had a duty to become the next breadwinner. It just seemed so far away to me—being a financially stable artist seemed like a very utopian concept. It seemed like a fairytale.

I eventually got a spot at Hunter [for grad school]... It was wild. I didn't take much with me. I took two bags and a few thousand bucks, and I was gone. That whole [experience] was intense. It was crazy to adapt, but I'm so thankful that I was brave enough to do it. [It] kind of reminds me of how my parents left their country to try to better their lives.

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SS: Once you developed your painting practice, how did you hone in on your subject matter?

EG: [Growing up, I lived in this] little hub that was pretty immigrant-based. [But] we were very influenced by stuff on TV. Outside of that little hub, a ton of other stuff was happening socially in Los Angeles [and] particularly in South Central. There was a big presence of gang culture in the '90s. So I grew up with that whole personal, Salvadoran heritage, but then the Angeleno one was more based on the social stuff that was happening there... Initially, that's where my base started.

SS: Your work also delves deep into your family's history of migration in the aftermath of the Salvadoran Civil War. I'm curious to hear more about what the process of uncovering these stories has been like for you.

EG: It's a challenge, but I consider it research. My father doesn't talk about it. I try to bring it up loosely, but I know

it's a huge [weight] on him. Even when [my family] talks about it briefly, they whisper. They're paranoid about it. It still triggers them.

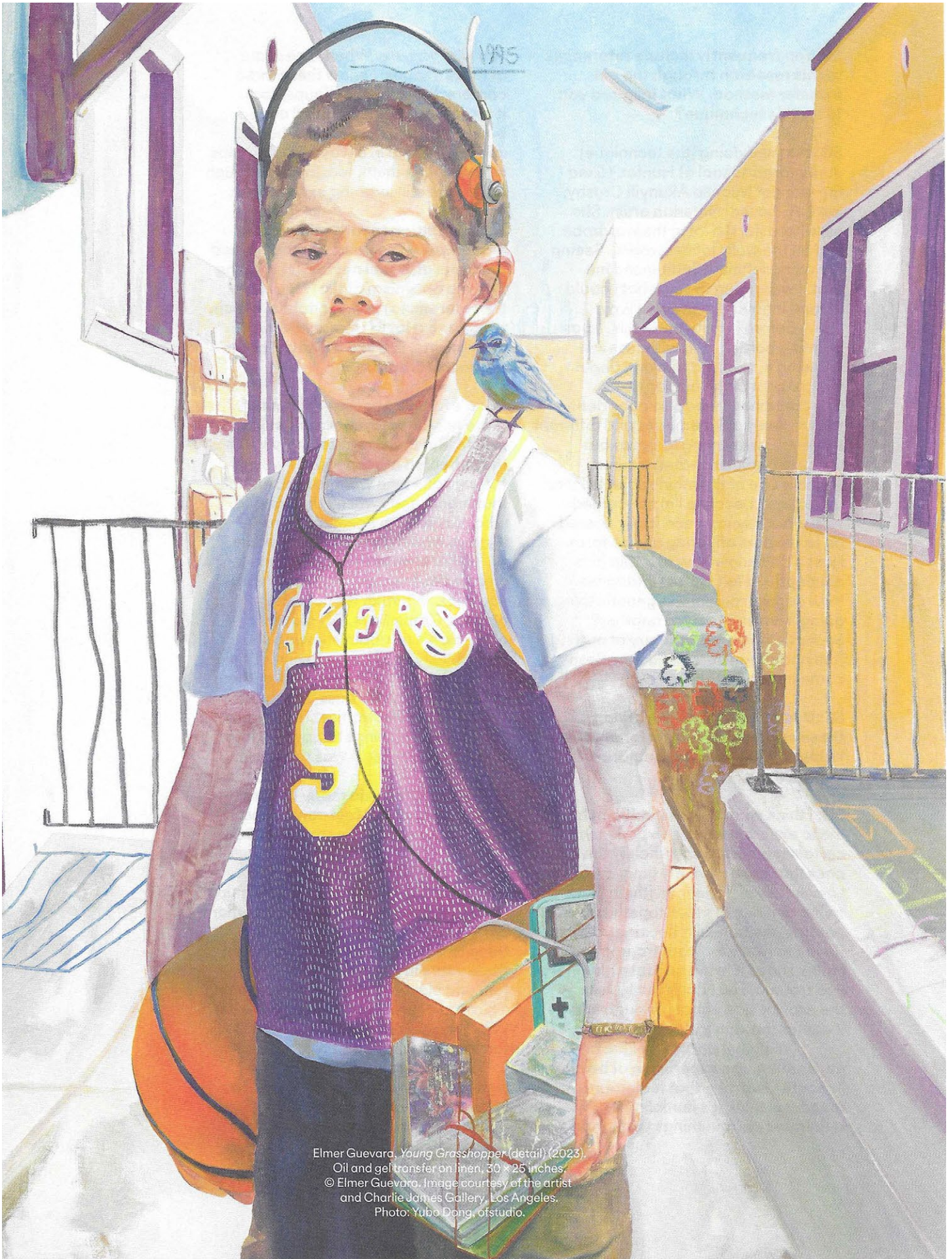
My mom is a lot more open to discuss[ing] it. But when I hear my mother's memoir, I keep in mind that memory becomes very distorted. She's telling me things that she remembers, but it's been so many years. I've done a couple of voice recordings with her. I do think it's important to keep [the] narrative in the family. Obviously, this is traumatic, but my mother is open. And a few of my aunts are, too. It mostly starts with me having conversations, kind of gossiping with them, and eventually, they dig in a little deep[er]. But I'm always aware of how memory gets distorted. I'm also aware they're probably not telling me the entire [story] because it's so traumatic. They want to make it PG for me.

SS: Beyond talking to your family, what other sources do you reference?

EG: A lot of the other research that I do comes from reading memoirs. There's a renaissance of literature that's been coming from Salvadorans, people who've started to write about their immigration journeys here [to the United States]. These books explicitly create a visual of certain things that were happening there. There's still processing going on.

I went back [to El Salvador] two years ago. A lot of the old country where my parents are from still looks how they left it. It hasn't changed much because [the process of rebuilding is] moving a lot slower than it is in the city.

It's been great just to learn. I didn't even know why my parents came to this country until I was a teenager. And then I realized, "Oh, they were actually fleeing a war. That's why they came here." But no one in school ever taught me this, so it took some of my own digging to figure [the history] out.



Elmer Guevara, *Young Grasshopper (detail)*, (2023).
Oil and gel transfer on linen, 30 x 25 inches.
© Elmer Guevara. Image courtesy of the artist
and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles.
Photo: Yubo Dong, ofstudio.

SS: You frequently include references to this research through the gel-transfer method. What inspired you to try this technique?

EG: I started doing [the technique] during grad school at Hunter. I liked the work of Njideka Akunyili Crosby, [an L.A.-based] Nigerian artist. She uses [transfers] a lot in the wardrobe and on the walls [of her works]. Seeing her work definitely influenced me a lot. I was trying to see what I could do and innovate in my own way.

Before I wrote my thesis, I was painting bottles, and without even knowing it, I started thinking about the concept of the human body as a container. I was also considering the way we hold memories and different traumas. I was trying to figure out a way to depict inherited trauma, which is one of the main subjects I tend to [explore] because I'm concerned with what's being genetically passed on to the next offspring and so forth. I just didn't know how to grasp [this concept]—it felt almost intangible. How can you depict this genetic thing going from one body to another? So that's where the imagery of putting [the photo transfers] inside the flesh came about.

SS: Do you think that reworking these images in the transfer process helps you process the memories behind them?

EG: I think what makes it difficult for me to experience or re-experience certain memories, specifically the older ones that are before my time, is that I never fully experienced [them]. I'm trying to piece or stitch together my parents' memories. It becomes difficult for me to really feel that trauma. I think I have it in me because it's inherited trauma, I just don't think I feel the explicit side effects, though maybe it comes through [as] anxieties.

[With the] portraits of me or my brother...the experience of being in South Central—that feels more tangible. I think it's humbling to remember certain things that made

you who you are. When I see some of these images, I know these three corners; I've seen that liquor store. It triggers memories. Not all are good, but it does help me process them and let them go in a way. It really helps me reflect on them, too. Even the tough ones were still learning experiences.

SS: In addition to reflecting on the hardships of the past, your childhood portraits also feel nostalgic, tapping into the optimism of the '90s. I love the references to McDonald's, which, to me and a lot of other children of immigrants, felt like a symbol of the American dream.

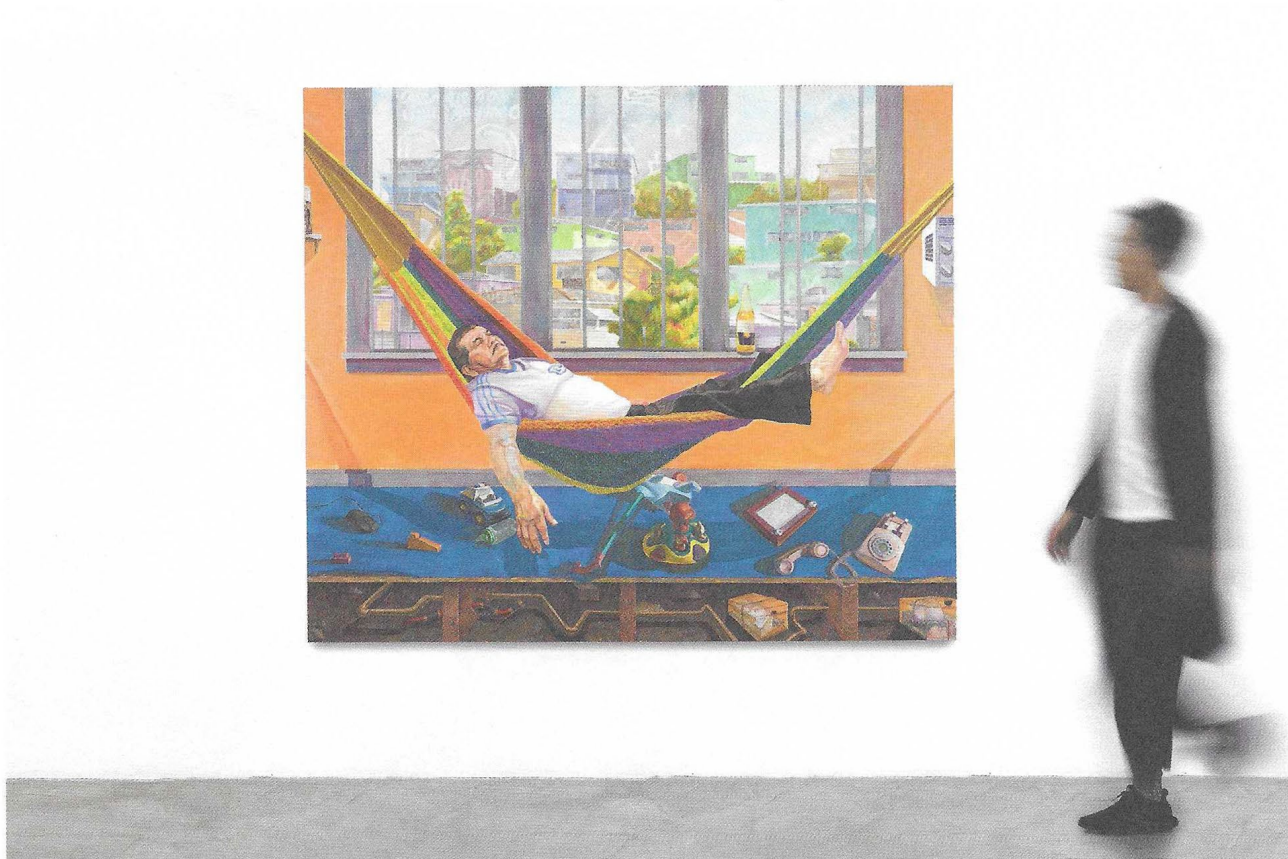
EG: It's funny because I do think of these nostalgic symbols as just [part of] my life. But then I realized how much they affected other people. I wasn't the only one who went to McDonald's that much, and I wasn't the only kid who played with Pokémon cards. It was a whole generation of people.

I'm always thinking of the electronics because they really take you back. Whether it's cassette players, Game Boys, CD players, or iPods, it's all about showing you how quickly things are moving. It's nice to try to pause the viewer and let them reflect on the times based on those symbols and electronics. There were a lot of special things happening [during that time] because it was so simple.

SS: You also include many Lakers references, which feel connected to this nostalgic moment in the '90s.

EG: [In] 2000, I was nine years old, and the Lakers won the championship. I was in elementary school, but I remember it so clearly. It was such a cool thing to go to the parade. They won it three years in a row when I was nine, ten, and eleven. Can you imagine being a kid and your city's winning year after year? How could you not be a Lakers fan in L.A. at that time?

I also gravitate towards the jerseys because they're prominent as streetwear. I love to throw in the throwbacks to remind people that these



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Top: Elmer Guevara, *Security is Under the Mattress* (installation view) (2023). Oil and gel transfer on linen, 72 x 84 inches. © Elmer Guevara. Image courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Yubo Dong, ofstudio.

Bottom: Elmer Guevara, *House Money* (installation view) (2023). © Elmer Guevara. Image courtesy of the artist and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles. Photo: Yubo Dong, ofstudio.



Elmer Guevara, *Dried Up on A Sunday* (detail) (2023).
Oil and gel transfer on linen, 72 x 60 inches.
© Elmer Guevara. Image courtesy of the artist
and Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles.
Photo: Yubo Dong, ofstudio.

dudes were good back then. We can't forget about 'em.

And then symbolically, too, I think about basketball and how it's been a tool for a lot of neighborhood kids to get out of neighborhoods. I think sports have been tools [for] people who are trying to better themselves. So symbolically, that's a very special thing.

SS: What do you hope viewers will take away from your specific perspective of the city as an Angeleno?

EG: L.A. is such a rich and dense place. There have been enough films—people understand the lowriders, certain clothing, palm trees, and helicopters. There are certain symbols that transcribe easily because of the media and how L.A. has been depicted. There's enough out there for people to understand [generalizations about L.A.]. My goal is to give people a more specific, rawer example that comes from someone who's walked the streets, as opposed to someone who just directs [a movie] or tries to portray [what it's like]. I'd like to give access to my specific pocket of the city.

Sigourney Schultz is an L.A.-based art writer. She holds an MA in Art History from Hunter College in New York City.

Elmer Guevara (b. 1990) was born and raised in Los Angeles. Guevara's upbringing took place in the South Central neighborhood after his parents fled a war-torn El Salvador in the 1980s. He often constructs narratives by sampling family photos from his youth, reframing compositions to form a dialogue about identity and concepts of intergenerational trauma. He received a BFA from Cal State University, Long Beach and an MFA from Hunter College in New York City.

1. A 1979 military coup marked the start of the 12-year conflict between the military dictatorship, backed by the U.S. government, and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a cooperative of guerilla groups. Although a peace deal was reached in 1992, the war has had lasting effects on the country and beyond. See "El Salvador Civil War," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, accessed January 10, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/El-Salvador/Civil-war>.

2. Guevara cites Carolyn Forché's *What You Have Heard Is True: A Memoir of Witness and Resistance* (2019), Susan Bibler Coutin's *Exiled Home: Salvadoran Transnational Youth in the Aftermath of Violence* (2016), and the films *In the Name of the People* (1985) and *Voces Inocentes* (2004), among others, as influential to his research.

3. The artist closely links this concept to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (1986).

4. Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, no. 5 (MCB University Press, October 2001).