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JOHN RIVAS
LAS VOCES INSIDE OF ME

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JOHN RIVAS
LAS VOCES INSIDE OF ME

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Para Siempre (detail), 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 20 x 16 in



Para Siempre, 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 20 x 16 in

JOHN RIVAS: LAS VOCES INSIDE OF ME

by Alana Hernandez

Curatorial Fellow, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego

John Rivas's figurative mixed-media canvases often employ a dense, richly layered technique that underscores personal and familial history. Through collage, drawing, painting, and weaving, Rivas's tableaux-like canvases unfold through diaristic means. Often picturing his immediate and extended family members, Rivas invites us into his narratives, hoping we, too, can see ourselves and our families reflected back to us.

As a son to two Salvadorian immigrants, the New Jersey-born artist situates himself and his practice in between two cultures—neither here nor there. Rivas's canvases underscore the complicated relationship of this cultural hybridity. At the root of his work, Rivas seeks representation, centering his own Latinx experience and questioning how to best picture those that look like him. Rivas arrived at his search for representation during his studies, where through formal art education, noting the lack of diverse perspectives, he developed his methodology. Unable to see himself reflected in the canvases of the Renaissance Masters taught in school, Rivas sought alternative sources. He found commonalities around artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Henry Taylor, and Marisol Escobar (professionally known as Marisol), finding in them new ways of rendering the human form.

Rivas distinguishes himself from his influences by creating frenetic paintings that underscore notions of home, belonging, history, and memory with unique materiality. Utilizing disparate materials, discarded and reused canvases and fabrics, Rivas creates intimate portraits of his family members. Employing a myriad of components—found images, graphite, pastel, oil, acrylic—Rivas builds and layers his canvases, moving past a traditional two-dimensional surface. His materials not only identify his canvases from others but cement narratives of home. A sense of resourcefulness informs Rivas's mixed-media approach, ingrained by his family who worked as farmers, construction workers, and factory workers. Rivas cultivates this working-class vernacular through commonplace materials informed by his own Latinx experience.

Painting with an intentional flatness, Rivas presents a gestural simplicity that unveils surprising details upon further inspection. Beginning with family photo albums, Rivas often works directly with images, outlining his subject's likeness and features with graphite or chalk. He then collages and layers his canvas with contrasting textures, including stitching and weaving directly on the surface of his work. Rivas pays special attention to his subject's skin—applying a range of browns that

together indicate the diversity within Latinx communities. Gritty in texture, his quick, painterly strokes render incomplete figures and partial gestures. He often incorporates half-phrases of language, quickly scribbled in English or Spanish. The frenzied shift between English and Spanish, between complete and incomplete, underscores the artist's constant state of occupying the in-between.

For this exhibition, Rivas presents new paintings of family members or important figures to Salvadorian Americans. In one image, Rivas flatly renders his grandmother upon a monochromatic yellow background. Rivas's sitter looks out at the viewer with an unflinching gaze. Through quick, tight brushstrokes that seem to converge into each other, a gradient of browns makes up the left side of the woman's face. Employing found images from magazines, Rivas includes small corporal elements, from eyelashes to fingers. The figure holds onto a scythe, referencing the agricultural origins of his family. Around the edge of the canvas, Rivas has used kernels of corn as a framing device. The artist often affixes food directly onto his canvases, connecting his practice to the space of the kitchen table, where family histories are shared, retold, and disseminated. And humble staples like corn or beans, used to make various meals inexpensively, have fed families across the Americas for centuries. Conversations around the table continue to be the focal point for Rivas and his work, recognizing that these rich oral histories help the artist conceive and shape his practice.

Throughout the exhibition, Rivas positions himself as a documentarian of social history and memory, where each canvas or tableaux serves to chronicle family and community. One of Rivas's newest works underscores the often-painful experience of crossing into the United States. Rivas paints two figures, his partner and her mother, holding on to each other. The artist renders these characters in his signature collaged fashion but does so on top of a found landscape. On the left side of the canvas, the artist includes a chaotic piece of wire jutting off the canvas, perhaps an allusion to the border. Just above the two figures in the upper left corner, an intimidating helicopter drawn in graphite looms above.

Functioning as an installation, Rivas has covered the gallery floor with dirt and includes a *comal* (a smooth flat griddle) with tortillas to underscore the importance of food for family and community building. He also includes a *pozo* (well) with water, again a reference to how his family lived in El Salvador. Each of the canvases serves as a snapshot of history, familial, or otherwise—taken together, the installation functions as a site for memory and storytelling.



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IN CONVERSATION:

Omar Lopez-Chahoud and John Rivas

Omar Lopez - Chahoud, curator for Untitled, Art discusses John Rivas' artwork, process, and Rivas' journey to becoming an artist.

Omar Lopez: You have a very particular way of building an artwork, incorporating materials that are not necessarily familiar, collaging elements, re-purposing backings for the paintings. Can you tell me a little bit more about your process in building these sort of sculptures, yet you are a painter.

John Rivas: The foundation goes back to my undergrad. I started painting at a late age. I had to give up my soccer career, and started painting, started drawing. It was while applying to colleges that I was like, what do I do? I wasn't the best student so if I play soccer and God forbid something happened, what's going to be my backup? During that time, I was just doing a lot of drawings, so I was just like, you know what, I'm going to take this chance and maybe take the opportunity and maybe go to art school. I spoke to my parents about it and they were just like "Arte, que? What are you going to work, what job, blahblahblah". I got accepted to one school, most of the schools rejected me. Coming into that tuition I realized how expensive art supplies were. A lot of kids would come with canvases, different paints. I thought paint was just paint, but they had serious ones, oil, acrylic, gauche, they have pastels – there were so many different things that I couldn't afford. My father's a construction worker so I used a bunch of his wood, his metal, scraps, garbage, anything I could find in the street, on the floor, I used that to my advantage to make my work. It's that foundation of not having a lot and making the best out of what you have, I think that's where it comes from. Even now, I'm using beans. Beans are very important back in El Salvador. The poor live off this, the rich live off this, it's something very cultural back home. Now I'm using it. I kind of always see myself as the Obrero, the worker of the art world. I'm using these materials that people won't really consider fine art, but making it as beautiful as possible.

Previous: *El Camino*, 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 24 x 32 in

Right: *La Ruta 21*, 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 21 x 17 in





Left: *Los Dos Lados*, 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 33.5 x 31.5 in
Right: *Las Voces Inside of Me (Installation)*, 2020, LatchKey Gallery

Omar Lopez: And that's what makes the work so impactful and strong in terms of materiality and subject matter because the subject matter connects with the way you are building the surfaces. I believe your work is very much connected to your personal history. Can you tell me a little bit about how that comes into play?

John Rivas: I think about all the good and bad that happens in your life. It shapes you to become the person you are. A lot of people just want the good, but the bad gives you character. So any good or any bad experiences, any happy moments, any sad moments, I use that to my advantage. I use that to create this world. I use my work to really display the individual I am. For example, I've recently been painting a lot of happy moments in my family, but in the past I painted a lot of the tragic moments. All of these have shaped the person I am today. I always say it's a blessing and a curse because at the end of the day I had to go through that, I had to suffer a lot. But then again, I may be able to use that to my advantage to help people that maybe haven't been in the same situations and show them: Yo, I've been through this, you've been through this, but we can find something positive to do with it, you know? Even now, a lot of the younger guys that look up to me, they say: "Yo, I want to become an artist." I always tell them, "Yo, if I could do it, you could do it better." I never say, "if I could do it, you could do it, too." I always say "you could do it better." My work is a kind of diary to me. I don't paint for shows, I don't paint for galleries, I don't paint for institutions, I paint because my soul needs this to survive. I do it to keep myself sane. I do it 'cause I have to.



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Omar Lopez: You have your own way of composing and building. Working in a small format, which is very intimate, your work has these compositions that are very complex even though they are small, and everything is colliding in the right place. Now, you are shifting to larger works and I wanted to ask you how you're dealing with this transition from small to large. What challenges are you encountering or are you finding it liberating?

John Rivas: I started off small, just to make ends meet. We had studio time in school but it was just the easel and I would go home and could only work at my table, so I had to work in a small format and build off that. But now, I've been able to actually rent out my own studio and have a bigger space. Now my ideas can flourish. I feel that working bigger, it's a lot harder, but more liberating. There's a lot more freedom to be able to push paint, use different materials. So, it's this bigger format that has really taught me how to expand my process. But it's also taught me to really slow down. In the past, I'd create four paintings a month. Now I'm only able to create one. I'm taking my time with things, making sure every single gesture is the way it's supposed to be. Maybe I start a painting today, but then my body tells me you need to relax and worry about it tomorrow, 'cause tomorrow I'll have a different energy coming in.

Omar Lopez: One of the things that I also notice about your work is that you have a language. The characters you bring into the work, are they fictional, or are they all real people that you know, or a combination of both? How do you create these characters that come into the paintings?

John Rivas: Everyone I paint is either family, or really close friends. I haven't started doing strangers yet. These people, in a way, have impacted me, have shaped the person I am today. So, they're all real, but in a sense they're fictional 'cause at the end of the day I'm not a realistic painter, I paint off of energy, I paint off emotions. So, there's times where I get lost in different details, different materials, but then when I step back I can see their face and compare: Ok, actually it looks like them but, then again, it's not really them.



Omar Lopez: So, it's a portrait of somebody that you know but you're going into the psychology or into the emotions that person might trigger in you. Their emotions are there, it's very engaging. I see that you paint, but you also draw, and you create a drawing of the painting by hand in the work. I'm wondering, why is drawing so prevalent in the work? I think as everyone says drawing is the essence of painting, without drawing you can't paint. Painting is no more than some form of drawing. So, tell me a little bit about that.

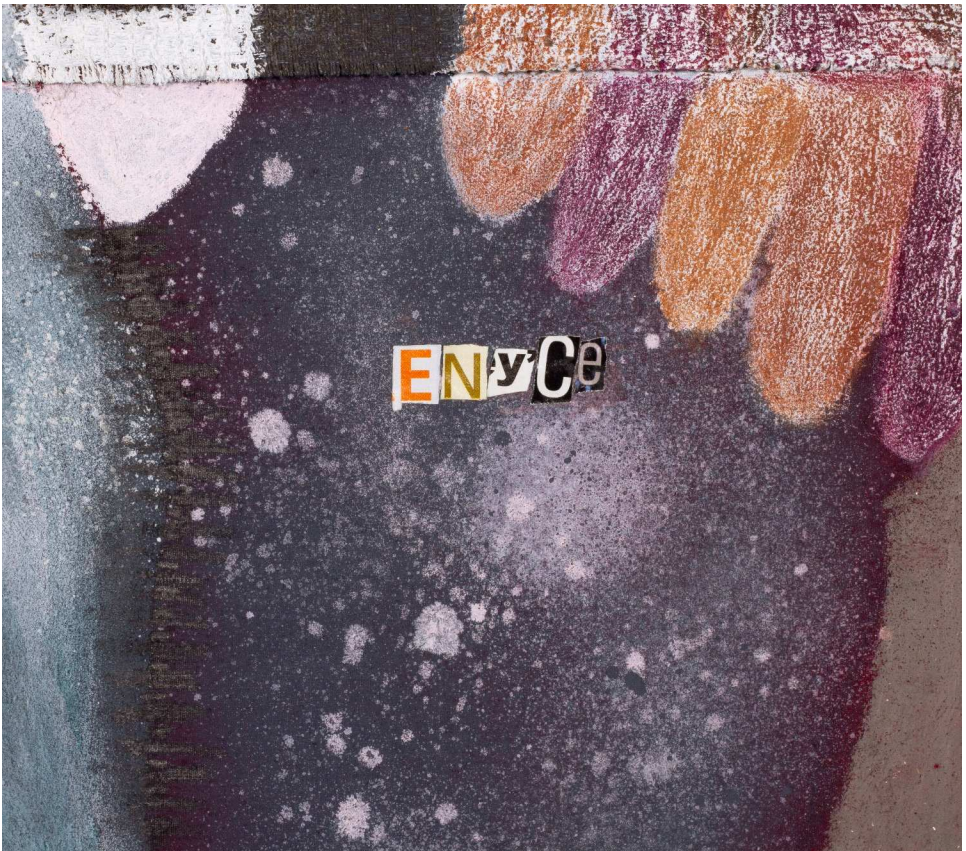
John Rivas: Every single painting starts with a drawing, let's say I'm working through an image. I have the image right in front of me, and I sketch it out. The drawing is the foundation, it's the structure in how I'm going to attack the painting. Then, that drawing allows me to just let go. So, I feel the drawing is a functional side of myself than when I do the paintings, which is very spiritual. I kind of work in an act of faith. I let everything go. I accept all the mistakes, I accept all the good, and if a problem comes through the painting I try to find different ways to solve them. After that, it's just let the painting go and *Primero Dios*, it happens. I just let it happen.

Omar Lopez: I know that you are from El Salvador. I'm also Latin American, and have done work in El Salvador, and I understand the special political contest of El Salvador. Has that affected your work and are you referencing a little bit of your Salvadorian history or heritage?

John Rivas: I've always been in tune with my roots, it's something that's very important in my work. Being in tune with my family and asking questions about their journey coming here: how was it living there, what's the difference in foods, different slang, what would they do over there, even political parties. I asked my grandfather who he was. He lived during the time of the civil war back in El Salvador. I asked him how was this, how was that... And then, even in school I was really getting deep into the Mayan culture and how does that affect our people? So, it's really going deeper and deeper and just trying to get lost in that, and just see how I create these new works.

Omar Lopez: I see you are embracing language or text in your work?

John Rivas: Yea, there's more Salvadorian slang. Even someone who speaks Spanish will see the work and be like, "what does this mean?" But someone from El Salvador will be like, "Ahhhh I get it." For example, I come from a family that, they're all workers. My Dad's a construction worker, my Mom works in the factory. I have a lot of family that work in the farms. These people kind of don't understand what art is. So, even now they say, "Oh you're a painter, so like, what do you do?" 'Cause when they think about art they think about realism. If it doesn't look real, it's not art. So now I'm trying to use language as a portal, so they can read that first and then be like, "Ahhh, ok. I get what that is," and then see the whole entire vision.







JOHN RIVAS
Las Voces Inside of Me

December 2 - December 18, 2020



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**Omar Lopez:** So in a way you feel that you are educating through your work by having people relate or connect through it to certain things that are pretty much part of your culture or your upbringing. And one of the things I see in your work is multiple layers. When people talk about conceptual, western approaches to conceptualism, I always argue that artists like you are perhaps more conceptually based because you're dealing with so many concepts and ideas and histories that make you not only someone who works with their hands and creates something visual, but also there's so many conversations in terms of culture that it becomes what art is supposed to do. Is that something you are very aware of when you go into the studio, that your art is going to speak to the public that's not just the "art public?" How is getting your MFA at Columbia affecting the way you are thinking about your work?

**John Rivas:** My parents always taught me to be humble and just be yourself so being at Columbia, it's a blessing. You know, I always say *Gracias a Dios*, I'm here 'cause at the end of the day I'm not making traditional work. Now, just to be in this institution, not just a regular institution, an ivy league setting, there's no way on earth I would have thought I would be in that setting. But, now I'm here 'cause of my work. So now, I treat my work with so much care, with so much respect. I've learned a lot, I take in all I can, but I never try to change or try to shift because someone says, "Ok, I don't understand it." When I first came to Columbia, I kind of felt like, you know, I was born in New Jersey, I'm from El Salvador now I'm here because I draw and paint, I'm here because of art. In a way, I was having this kind of crisis, asking myself, do I even belong here? My Dad still works construction, my Mom is still getting paid minimum wage in the factory, but I'm in this ivy league school 'cause I draw and paint. I treat it with so much humbleness and I'm here for a reason. I just have to try to be the bridge for future generations, to be the bridge for the next person coming after me, the next Salvadorian born in Newark, New Jersey whose parents are immigrants, to do better than I did.











**Omar Lopez:** Do you see yourself in the future as a mentor or doing some community-based work in terms of younger Salvadorians or Central Americans that are in NY or within the vicinity of New York or your own community?

**John Rivas:** I hope so. That's the most important thing to me. When I first wanted to do art even my parents, they were like, "No." I kind of feel like they came from a place where they wanted a better life. You go to school, you get a good degree, get a good job, and get paid well. You don't think about being an artist, being a musician, the way I'm living. My goal now is just to create the best work I can, and help the kids that are in the same position I was. They want to be artists but now they're kind of scared of what their parents think. They might be scared of what their community might think. I want to be that mentor that's just like, yo, if I could do it, you could do it way better. I want to be that hope where kids can say, yo, help me out. I want to teach kids if you have that heart, and you have that passion just go for it.





**Omar Lopez:** Being at Columbia is going to help you contextualize your work even more and understand the context of where you work sits. And I'm not talking about the art context, I think having that kind of dialogue at school as you get your MFA is going to open up a lot of new things in your work that is already happening, and I see it. You have a very special way of making art and I like the fact that you don't forget where you're coming from...

**John Rivas:** Never.

**Omar Lopez:** I would love at some point to be able to be in El Salvador with you and see what happens if we bring you into this kind of conversation. Is this something that you have thought about, as a professional artist and see how the experience makes a shift in the work?

**John Rivas:** Oh yea, for me, I've always said before I get success anywhere I want to be known back in El Salvador. Because yes, I do live in the United States, but home is over there. Customs, the way I grew up, traditions, they come from over there. Just being in that atmosphere, even just smelling the air, it would definitely impact the work a lot more. The biggest goal would be to have El Salvador in the Venice Biennale. It might take years but at the end of the day I think that's something, before I die, is to have El Salvador have their own Pavilion.

**Omar Lopez:** There's so many artists outside El Salvador but also in the country that are making really important work. I have worked within the central American countries and unfortunately many people don't know a lot about it, and it should be shown. And I think this idea that you have about a pavilion at the Venice Biennale - it's important and it's good that you're saying it because eventually you start talking about something many times, it becomes a reality.

**John Rivas:** Last time I went to El Salvador I was about 5 years old. But my goal is to go there as an artist, instead of seeing things through a photo or history, I definitely want to be there and see things face to face.

**Omar Lopez:** Where do you see yourself in let's say 10 years.

**John Rivas:** I mean 10 years, I still see myself being the same. Everyday thanking God for giving me this opportunity to wake up in the morning and make art. It's cool to think long term, but for me just go day by day and let it affect the future

**Omar Lopez:** That's the right approach to just go day by day. But we can all have dreams. A dream, when you think about it overtime it becomes a reality. You should be content and happy with what you're doing but never completely satisfied, because it pushes you and it challenges you and that's where growth comes in. Growth happens when you are constantly questioning and challenging yourself.

**John Rivas:** And then going back to the one word, well it's not one word, it's a phrase, but I feel like my work is *una bendicion para la gente*, you know or like *un acto de esperanza*.



Left: *El Unico*, 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 15.5 x 12 in

Right: Left: *El Unico* (detail), 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 15.5 x 12 in



*Las Voces Inside of Me* (Installation), 2020, LatchKey Gallery



# CURRICULUM VITAE

## EDUCATION

- 2021 Columbia University, MFA, New York, NY  
2019 School of Visual Arts, BFA Fine Arts, New York, NY

## EXHIBITIONS

- 2021 Forthcoming, UTA Artist Space, Beverly Hills, CA  
2020 *Las Voces Inside of Me*, LatchKey Gallery IRL, UNTITLED Miami, OVR  
*How 'Bout Them Apples*, Ross + Kramer, New York, NY  
Zona Maco FORO Section curated by Anna Goetz, Mexico City, MX  
2020 Group Show, Thierry Goldberg, New York, NY  
2019 *double trouble*, Todd Kramer Gallery, New York, NY  
*Meca International Art Fair*, LatchKey Gallery, San Juan, PR  
*Night & Day*, Group Show, Thierry Goldberg, New York, NY  
*CMY=K*, Band of Vices, Los Angeles, NY  
*Both at Once*, LatchKey Gallery, New York, NY  
2018 *The Nu Vanguarders of the Revolution*, Group Show, Queens  
Museum, Queens, NY  
*The Politics of Identity*, Group Show, SVA Chelsea Gallery, New  
York, NY  
*Re: Art show 2 years*, Group Show, Pfizer Building, Brooklyn, NY  
*Constellations*, Group show, SVA Chelsea Gallery, New York, NY  
*El Museo Del Barrio Dia De Las Memorias*, Showcase, El Museo  
Del Barrio, New York, NY  
*Meca International Art Fair*, LatchKey Gallery, San Juan, PR  
*CMA's Annual Art Auction*, Group show, Children's Museum, New  
York, NY  
*BFA Open Studios*, Group show, SVA BFA Fine Arts Building,  
New York, NY  
*Pinta Art Fair*, Miami, FL  
2017 *School of Visual Arts, Open Studios*, Group show, New York, NY  
*Pros+Kons*, Group Show, Underground Skateshop, Newark, NJ  
*The Funeral*, Group Show, More Points Gallery, Bronx, NY  
*Trans Degenerate*, Group Show. Milkweed Sugar Loaf Gallery,  
Chester, NY  
*Public Koncept Presents*, Group Show, Underground Skateshop,  
Newark, NJ  
*Chicpeajcturns3*, Group Show, Harborside Jersey City, Jersey  
City, NJ  
2016 *Untitled*, Solo Show, Watchung Art Center, Watchung, NJ  
*Local Artist Night*, Umami Burger Artist Showcase, Brooklyn, NY  
*Take part of me*, Group Show, Paul Vincent Gallery, Hoboken, NJ

Right: John Rivas

Next: *El Camino* (detail), 2020, Mixed media on canvas, 24 x 32 in



## BIOGRAPHY

John Rivas is a figurative painter whose narrative is guided by stories of his ancestors. As a first generation American, Rivas' artwork is enriched with tales of family members, several of whom he's met remotely or through photographs.

Rivas' paintings occupy space like sculpture by juxtaposing found objects sourced from childhood, on the canvas. His brush strokes, thick at times with impasto, are expressive marks that add to the visual collage. The complexity of his work is made up of the true color spectrum of Latinx faces. Loaded with personal symbolism and themes that celebrate the Latinx concept of family and community, his work examines the socioeconomic, racial and cultural boundaries of immigrant lives.

The artist attributes the frenetic, raw energy of his work to the long history of hard-working family members. The raw "roughness and edges (of my work) comes from my family of farmers, family of construction workers- I know what it is to be under the sun, working, sweating, I know how it feels. I am a dirty kid, but I can make beauty out of anything."

Rivas is currently attending Columbia University for his MFA.



