

FORT GANSEVOORT

GARAGE

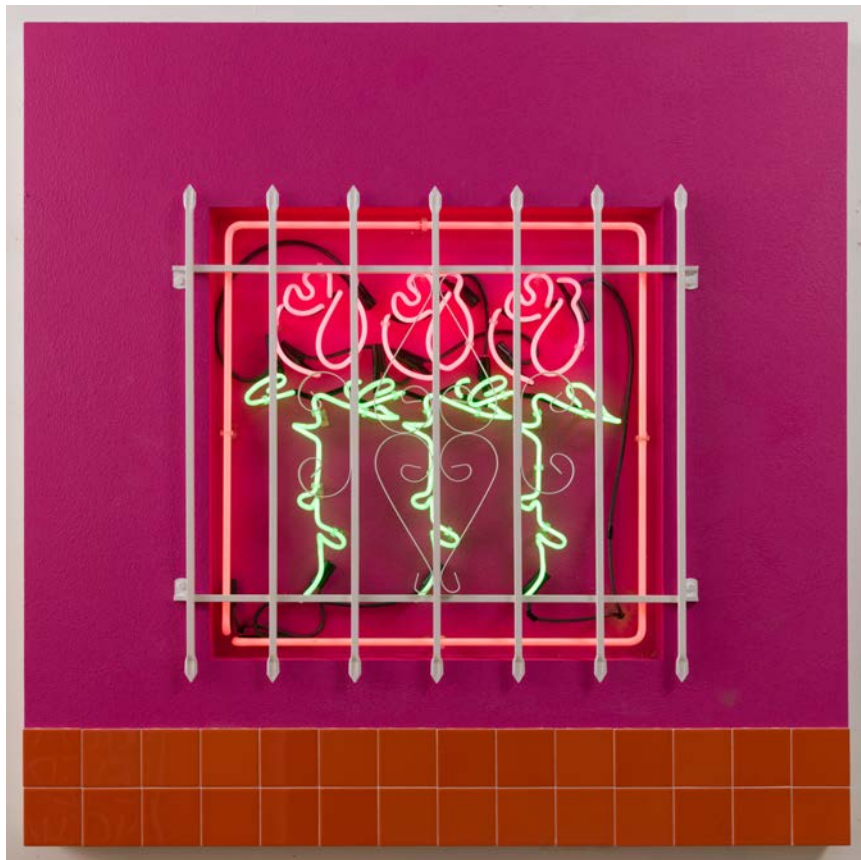
Patrick Martinez's Cake Art Is Good Enough to Eat

Beware, though—the trompe-l'oeil "cakes" aren't actually edible.

by Max Lakin

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Earlier this month, the artists Patrick Martinez and Lee Quiñones met for a discussion at the gallery Fort Gansevoort, where “That Which We Do Not See,” Martinez’s first solo show in New York, is currently on view. Martinez, an Angeleno, wore a Dodgers hat, while Quiñones, an elder statesman of New York graffiti, wore a Mets version — a peaceable summit of bicoastal soft power — as they talked about their experiences writing graffiti twenty years and 3,000 miles apart.



Patrick Martinez Baby Let Me Take You Home (Day), 2018 Stucco, ceramic tile, latex house paint, neon, and window security bars on panel 60 x 60 x 3 in. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

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The pairing was a potent semaphore of New York City's graffiti diaspora, something “That Which We Do Not See,” which takes its title from an MLK quote — “what we see is a shadow cast by that which we do not see” — seems to internalize, both in its attempt to yank icons of social justice into the sunlight, and the style in which it does so, which hews close to graffiti’s moral center. The three bodies of new work here — cake paintings, storefront landscape sculptures, and neon text pieces — create a tight dialogue between LA's underserved communities and street life, and ideas about what, and who, is represented in a gallery setting.



Patrick Martinez

United Farm Workers Cake, 2018 Heavy body acrylic, acrylic, airbrush, and ceramic cake roses on panel with gold mirror plex 20 x 26 x 4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

The cake paintings pluck from graffiti’s continuum, from their color palette — bombastic and unnatural ceruleans and yellows — to the uncanny light source that gives every piece an electric buzz. The ones that feature photorealistic portraits, formed to look like supermarket face cakes, crown activists like Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, and Angela Davis, but also James Baldwin, bell hooks, and Rebecca Solnit, in a corona of white light. The gold bases they’re mounted to ape cake supply pads and act as de facto frames, but also halos, giving them the cast of a Catholic icon painting.

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Patrick Martinez

Angela Davis Cake, 2018 Heavy body acrylic, acrylic, airbrush, and ceramic cake roses on panel with gold mirror plex 2018 26 x 20 x 3 in. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Cakes are already loaded signifiers, but Martinez's collide the history of portraiture, a preserve of the wealthy, with the lower art form of cheaply-produced desserts, a medium more democratically accessible. They also complicate celebration and mourning; the cakes imply a party, but their technique speaks more to airbrush memorial t-shirts and commemorative graffiti murals for the recently lost. Martinez says he was inspired by the [video](#) of Tupac Shakur's last birthday, in which Shakur is presented with a cake decorated with his not-exact-likeness, a happy occasion which is haunted now by the knowledge of what's to come.

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Patrick Martinez

Sitting Bull Cake, 2019 Heavy body acrylic, acrylic, airbrush, and ceramic cake roses on panel with gold mirror plex.
Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

A second set of sculptural pieces, heavy body acrylic shaped into sheet cakes and neat, squared-off slices sat upon plastic plates, are strewn along tabletops, as though found in the quiet afterhours of a raucous party. They too complicate the idea of what's worth celebrating, as in a chocolate sheet cake with the Black Panther Party insignia, or another with that of the United Farm Workers adorned with a bunch of acrylic grapes. They're uncanny, pop confections, like something Wayne Thiebaud would have made, if Thiebaud were a leftist fellow traveler, but also grim; you get the sense the cakes have curdled, or had a sour taste to begin with.

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Patrick Martinez

America's Pie, 2018 Heavy body acrylic, acrylic, airbrush, and ceramic cake roses on panel with gold mirror plex 20 x 26 x 3 in. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

One resembling an American flag with large hunks sliced out of its stripes recalls the dead-end debate of what does and does not constitute flag desecration, and how our allegiance to symbols can outstrip our acknowledgement of the more urgent violations happening around us. Two round cakes are iced with the names Jakelin Caal and Felipe Alonzo Gomez, the Guatemalan migrants, seven and eight years old, respectively, who died in the custody of United States Border Patrol last December. They resemble the familiar, very American products of a Carvel or a Dairy Queen, ones that might have been purchased for American birthdays that will now never come.

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Patrick Martinez

Jakelin Caal Cake (In Peace May You Rest), 2019 Heavy body acrylic, acrylic, airbrush, and ceramic cake roses on panel with gold mirror plex 9 x 9 x 5.5 in. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

Distinct from yet intimately connected to these are Martinez's landscape pieces, which he calls paintings, because they incorporate stretched canvases and are hung on the wall, but which can also pass as sculpture: either hollowed out with neon roses set behind wrought iron window bars, or with ceramic tiles and graffitied stucco and found bodega vinyl banners. They approximate the built environment, fragments of the neighborhoods Martinez grew up in, but also become street memorials for lost pieces of the city itself. New York graffiti in the 70s, and Quiñones's strain especially, hurtled social urgency from New York's overlooked periphery into its thrumming center on the flanks of subway cars. Martinez's landscapes are the pieces snatched from the car window, LA's preferred viewfinder. They trade kineticism for the slow burn of realization, the visual information stitched together later.

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Patrick Martinez

Montebello to Chinatown (Electronic Benefits Transfer), 2018 Stucco, ceramic, ceramic tile, acrylic paint, spray paint and latex house paint on panel 36 x 36 x 3.5 in.

There's some neat narrative overlap with their current location; the gallery occupies a Greek Revival townhouse that's managed to squeak out from under the meatpacking district's sustained luxury's blunting. Martinez's neon window signs animate quotes from people like Alice Walker ("People give up their power by thinking they don't have any") and Emiliano Zapata ("Earth and freedom"), approximating advertising language to amplify anti-capitalist messaging.

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Patrick Martinez

Coretta, 2019, Neon, Edition of 3, 1 AP, 24 x 30 x 3 in. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.

It's funny to think of an affirmation of self-empowerment or militant subversion where there would normally be, for example, a Bud Light sign, or, more appropriately here, the Instagram-calibrated decor of relentlessly upbeat grain bowls. In the shadow of a planetary Restoration Hardware that seems to exert its own terrible pull of gravitational polish, Martinez's landscapes sound less like an alarm and more like a dirge. It's something graffiti tried to make us look at, too, until we scrubbed it clean.