Studio Lenca nods to Salvadorian heritage with riot of colour in Margate

Studio Lenca considers boundaries in 'Leave to Remain' at Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate

Studio Lenca, *Ponte las pilas (come on lets go)*
(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

BY EMILY STEER PUBLISHED MAY 1, 2024 IN FEATURES

Studio Lenca's paintings are a riot of effervescent pink, yellow, blue and red. Characters pose in sharp suits and giant-brimmed hats, surrounded by flowers or sweeping leaves. The artist (Jose Campos) emigrated on foot from El Salvador to the USA with his mother at the outbreak of the 1980s civil war, living undocumented and cleaning houses in the States through his childhood. He works under the name 'Studio' to reference the experimental space of his practice, and 'Lenca' to connect with the Mesoamerican indigenous people of eastern El Salvador.

His work now is a proud ode to his heritage, but it is felt inclusively. 'Salvadoran people feel very connected to my work; they get it immediately,' he tells me when we speak ahead of his new show 'Leave to Remain' opening at Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate (running until 16 June 2024). He is also a resident artist at Tracey Emin's nearby TKE Studios. 'But we have people from all over the world coming to visit. This kind of material speaks to different people. This very personal thing can also be about the human condition. Wanting to have a better life is universal.'

Studio Lenca worked with asylum seekers ahead of 'Leave to Remain' in Margate

Studio Lenca, *Sitting with my Tia*
(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

For 'Leave to Remain', the artist has broken down the boundaries that keep many people out of commercial galleries. Ahead of the show, he has both visited and invited a group of young asylum seekers and refugees into the gallery for a series of workshops, in which they have created artwork while discussing ideas of difference, belonging and growth. They also shared food, visited local galleries, and had trips to the beach. The group is led by Kent Refugee Action Network (KRAN), whose young people learn English through creative means. 'We don't all share a common language,' the artist says. 'It's the doing and the materials that connect us. Materials are borderless. Pushing paint on a surface feels amazing wherever you are.'

Studio Lenca, *Quinceañera*
(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

In one group, he invited attendees to explore the idea of roots in relation to both plants and the routes of a journey. In another, they considered volcanos (which famously make up El Salvador's landscape) metaphorically, as the explosive potential that exists within everyone, promising new growth after traumatic upheaval. The resulting three giant papier-mâché volcanos painted by the group are shown in the exhibition, with cross-section diagrams drawn in pencil on the walls.

'When I go in, I feel the movement of their bodies,' the artist says. 'Volcanos form landscapes. Lava creates the most fertile ground for growth. Being from El Salvador, volcanos have always been part of my connection to the Earth. I wanted to work with KRAN because of our shared experience of displacement. When these young people cross borders, they bring their knowledge, histories, and experiences. They are full of potential and possibility.' The audience are invited to move the volcano sculptures around the exhibition: 'Collectively we have to pull these forms in the space and shape it together.'

Studio Lenca, *Volcán*
(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist)

This collaboration has drawn on Studio Lenca's childhood experiences – he tells me how vital free art and dance classes were – and his previous career as a schoolteacher in Peckham, London. The artist's own work features in the gallery's other two rooms, with volcano paintings; a series of pieces connected with El Salvador's folkloric dancers; and images of angels, which explore ideas of faith.

Studio Lenca's work delicately holds together painful realities and hope. There is a resounding feeling of jubilation; a mood that was present for moments of his gallery workshops, as teenagers gleefully drew directly upon freshly white-painted walls. 'There is definitely a lot of joy,' he considers. 'My practice is a form of healing. I always talk about having to hide, having grown up with this huge secret that you might get caught and have to leave the country. I'm trying to subvert that by shouting about it now and making the most bright, beautiful things that I can.'

'Leave to Remain' is at Carl Freedman gallery, Margate, until 16 June 2024

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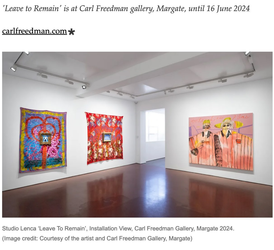

Studio Lenca 'Leave To Remain', Installation View, Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate 2024.
(Image credit: Courtesy of the artist and Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate)