

# Alex in Wonderland

ALEX BECERRA'S BOLDLY SENSUAL THEMES HAVE SHAKEN UP L.A.'S STODGY ART SCENE. NOW A DEBUT SHOW MAY MAKE HIM A STAR

BY MICHAEL SLENSKE



ON A BREEZY February evening in 2022, a who's who of local and international curators, collectors, and artists crammed into a tiny gallery called One Trick Pony in Little Ethiopia, iPhones recording every *skronk* of the saxophone played by the bombastic, bearded L.A. artist Alex Becerra. Dressed in a ten-gallon hat and an oversize trench, the 33-year-old bleated improvisational notes while shuffling around a foam sculpture of a 1977 Mercedes-Benz 300SEL called *Garage Fanfare*, adorned with acid-hued Plexiglas windows covering oil paintings of rims or kitschy landscapes, sculptural self-portraits, and empty beer bottles.

"It's the main brain of the studio," says Becerra of the sculpture during a late July visit to his Inglewood studio where he's preparing for his September 24 solo debut with VSF.

Becerra's densely layered, maximalist oil paintings and drawings of

himself, his family, his jazz icons, and his sexual fantasies have earned him magazine covers and solo shows from Chicago to Berlin. But this slime-green *gesamtwerk* offers perhaps the most complete window into his shape-shifting oeuvre and the wide berth of his inspirations, from German expressionist painting and lowrider culture to his upbringing in the farming town of Piru, California.

As such, his art includes ceramic versions of Mexican folk masks and Dadaesque performances wearing a "Taco Belt," distributing the street-food staple to unwitting gallerygoers.

"I think the car will contextualize where I'm coming from," says

Becerra over a lunch at the Jon & Vinny's on Slauson, where we run into his partner, Helen Johannesen, the founder of Helen's Wines, who is the subject of a tender new painting, *Skyy's Mom*, in which she's breast-feeding their toddler. Whether he's expressing the personal, political, or parodic in all his work, Becerra is trying to achieve the "feeling you get from music where you don't necessarily need an explanation."

To accomplish that in this exhibition, he will reprise the *Garage Fanfare* performance at the opening in the outdoor sculpture garden. Inside the galleries he's inviting visitors to play albums

from a curated selection—think free jazz compilations from Grupo Los Yoyi or Eddie Palmieri—that inspired several of his new paintings. While some feature vanitas skulls and album-cover tableaux, or folk icons from his upbringing, many are filled with hypnotic renderings of scantily clad women inspired by the ads for sex workers in *L.A. Xpress*, who are playing instruments while also holding over-the-shoulder gazes that put them in the seat of power.

There are somber counterpoints to these, like a painting of a woman whose body is comprised of a dozen or more shades of blue. She holds a bass and stares over her shoulder, an Amazon commanding attention against an ultramarine background.

At a moment when the art market is catering to weak abstraction and easy figuration, Becerra seems intent on muddying the waters between the two modes of painting. Perhaps it's why he focuses on the concept of opacity—of literally being able to see through multiple layers of paint to understand a more complex reality—which seems fitting in this head-spinning moment of human history. ■



**FUN HOUSE**  
Becerra in his Inglewood studio. Above, *Garage Fanfare*.