

PETROPIAS: A Preview

2020 presented me with an opportunity to develop and inaugurate PETROPIAS, a solo exhibition curated by Tami Katz-Freiman which was scheduled for Art Basel Week, however COVID-19 changed everything. Even going to my studio became an impossible task, not to mention the challenges of production, so I escaped to the mountains in Colorado and reinvented my year. I took with me a small suitcase with basic materials: four oil paints, black and white acrylic paint, five brushes, my pencils, a couple of sketchbooks, black shiny tubes, thermoforming plastic, a heat gun, and my camera.

By July, we decided to postpone the show but we kept formulating it remotely. What you see here is a sort of a preview, a glimpse into some of the ideas developed in PETROPIAS, where I investigate how oil-rich countries create not only unique physical environments like oil refineries, but also peculiar socio-economic and cultural environments, similar to those elaborated by philosopher Michel Foucault in his concept of *Heterotopia*. PETROPIAS plays on the petrostate, entropy and dystopia and revolves around idea of holes, refineries, and containers as revealed both structurally and metaphorically.

The wall on the right is dedicated to a selection of drawings and paintings I created in the mountains during my COVID-19 isolation. The uncertainty we all experienced took me back to classic painting and drawing, practices I had somehow put aside for many years. I felt like I had to re-train myself, so I started with the simplest still-life: a cup and a round object. From there, I took more challenging subjects and eventually sketched portraits of the artists that most influenced me. I re-discovered how extremely happy I am in this kind of process, which brought me back to my school years at San Alejandro Academy in Havana, Cuba, and the New York Studio School, and the Slade School of painting in London. I also proved the theory that going back to your roots –to your training— is always the best thing to do when you don't know what to do next.

2020 feels like a new system within an old system: a strange hole in time, space and culture, a depression I had to fill-up with focused intention, building with each day a new network and system for finding meaning.

Tony Vazquez-Figueroa
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