

The Pop World of Ruben Nieto

Ruben Nieto, UT Dallas doctoral candidate and artist in residence at Centraltrak, has re-imagined his childhood love for comic books with a new engaging perspective translated through his works of art. He transforms the comic book into highly energetic and visceral paintings, which re-contextualize the imagery. Nieto spent two years working on the conceptual details. He spent hours researching the history of comic books both from a political and creative perspective, the history of text, Andy Warhol, and techniques of Master painters like Millet.



Nieto's work illustrates the balance between restrained and bold gestural brushstrokes. His paintings reflect not only a dialogue with art history, philosophy and contemporary art, but also a sincere and considered engagement with autobiographical content, contemporary events and the essential human conditions of life, death, oppression and revolution. He currently has a show up at the Gallery at the University of Texas at Arlington until the end of the month.

Nieto sat down with A+C writer Rachel Van Horn to discuss his work, process, and philosophy on art:

A+C: When did your passion for the arts begin? Did you always want to be an artist?

NIETO: It's funny, because I grew up with the neon signs. I remember lying down in the back of my parents' car after we would go out for dinner, and looking up at all these neon signs in the stores in Mexico. There were tons; it was like New York you know. That helped me learn how to read. So, when I started school, they were like, 'Wow, you already know how to read'. I was very visual and understood composition at an early age. I used to copy comic books by just looking at it and reproducing it.

Initially, I was going to be a mechanical engineer. I became disappointed with the system, hypocrisy, and politics in Mexico. Then, I found the Guanajuato School of Plastic Arts and decided to do my under-graduate there. They have a 5 year undergrad program. I learned not only technique but the history of art. I got it from the beginning since rock paintings and the evolution of art.

A+C: Did the transition into Abstract Expressionism begin right after college?

NIETO: Yes. Early in my career, I met a curator from the Metropolitan Museum who was visiting in Mexico. She became a strong influence in my evolution into abstract expressionism. Once I finished school, I began traveling all over showing my art. I received a lot of encouragement from the beginning and this allowed me to keep going and decide, this is what I am going to do, I am an artist.

My work has to be placed in a historical context because it comes from the intellect and emotional aspect. For example, you can't just wake up one day and go, I think I am going to paint abstract. Sure you can make gestures you know, paint, splashes, using your fingers and hands and it can be art as an expression. The real question is it will it be good art?

A+C: Is that what makes your art speak to me, a person who did not much care for abstract expressionism? Looking at your art, one cannot deny there is more there and I want to spend more time with these paintings.

NIETO: That is funny that you say that, when I walk into a museum or gallery sometimes I look at a work and spend time with it. Then there is this moment, I am like, “wow I get it, this is good art”. The opposite happens as well. Recently, I went to the The Modern to see their show KAWS, he had some cool sculptures and monochromatic paintings. Then, I saw this shiny pop looking painting which excited me initially. After about 5 minutes it fell flat. It doesn’t engage me. So, that happens to me too, that “wow” moment.

A+C: What are defining factors that helped shaped the style we see today?

NIETO: In my career as an abstract expressionist, I wasn’t into pop art. I didn’t really get it. This pushed me to study it so I could understand why I did not like pop art. I needed an answer, so I could say; I hate pop art because of this reason. When I studied pop art, I realized Warhol was a genius, it is like what Duchamp did with the object for the sculptor, and Warhol did for painter. We are just now beginning to absorb and understand what he did as well as other pop artists. However, Warhol was about the factory and mass production. He showed us how to be a businessperson, how to promote yourself. You can’t be just an artist waiting for someone to discover you. Something I was interested to do with abstract expressionism, with fields of motions. As an artist you would experiment with that and then the art critic could interpret what you did. But with pop art, the art critic didn’t have job. Pop art began to reach to all the classes of people. That is when the reach of art became broader. The gallery system no longer controlled it.

A+C: Did learning about the business of pop art begin to have a larger influence in your work?

NIETO: Absolutely. As a kid, I read comic books. I have great memories from reading comics as a child. As an artist, I always wanted to work with comic books. For two years, I said OK, I need to read about pop art and abstract comic books. How can I put those thoughts together? I tried to find personal connections. How do I perceive it, what is the link to abstraction and pop art other than the composition, what happens in society and the political arena and then, how do comic books fit into that. In the 1960's, Congress was trying to censor comic books. All these children could turn into criminals and all the violence. So they created all these rules and a committee to approve comic books.

A+C: That explains why there is this confronting expression in your art and this sense of knowing the art. Like, “LOOK AT ME, because we have things to remember together.”

NIETO: You see the energy, the formal aspects, the direction of the line. It has movement and depth. It has all these layers. Not only do I make reference Clyfford Still and Robert Motherwell, but how can I put my influences in a new context. How can I deconstruct the comic book and make it my own. Re-contextualize and present it with a pop look that is fresh. It isn't new because everything has been invented.

A+C: The time taken with each seems extensive. How does this process work?

NIETO: I began thinking about how can I spend more time with images. I decided to outsource some of the work. I needed assistants with a similar disciplined approach and educational background. Once I found artists that were a good fit, I began working on the concept.

I began reading about how the comic book is designed and researching the layout. All these subtle changes in my painting people could recognize. I studied the history of text. While I was working on these new ideas I was also

working on other concepts with other work. I was considering architectural influences where I re-contextualize landscapes. Then, I decided I wanted to use oil.

A+C: Your commitment to the process and intellectual approach is a testament to other artists, to show them, this is how you grow. You have to understand the context of what you want to do and come up with fresh perspectives. This must translate in your style of teaching as well.

NIETO: I do it because I am so passionate about what I do and I want to share that passion. If you are going to do something, you need to study to understand the context. In many art schools today, they don't give you the history of art as a required coursework.

It is important to me that people appreciate and enjoy my work. This one time, I was showing in a gallery, this guy came in and he was talking with the owner. He was like, "this one would go with my room, and it is the perfect size". When I heard that I was upset because he didn't appreciate my work. He wanted it as a decoration. I refused to sell it to him. I don't want someone like that having my work.

A+C: Why?

NIETO: Because he is not going to really enjoy it. He just wants something to decorate a room. The man was upset initially but respected my decision. When people get my work, I know they really get it and they enjoy my work.

A+C: Where do you see your work going now?

NIETO: This is my style. I want to see how far I can push it. I am experimenting conceptually in terms of; I am re-thinking the landscape without moving away from my style. I am re-approaching my series in reference to Robert Motherwell. I am still investigating and researching about how I can push the

work without compromising it. I am still discovering. I am investigating more about repetition so I can begin to apply the concepts that the Masters used. The composition stays and I can just put in a new background. I want to grow in terms of scale. This is why I am working with triptychs, taking the image apart, experimenting with different techniques.

A+C: I appreciate the time you have spent with me, and your thoughtful answers. In closing, what is your advice to new artists today?

NIETO: I would say be honest. If you want to be an artist you have to know what it is you are doing. Treat what you do with respect. As an artist, you have to be honest. Like, if you are presenting something, do your research, do your homework, read. Present something that is good. Present something that is going to appeal to the viewer. Be passionate in what you do and committed. Don't do it for the fame. The art is inside of you. Respect it.