

Lyles & King

Farley Aguilar

Closed Game

March 18 - April 25, 2021

My final prayer: O my body, make of me a man that always questions!

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

Farley Aguilar's paintings are confronting. Dealing in clashing colors and collapsed periods of time, the artist intuits that reworking snapshots of the American past with painting's tactile immediacy can reveal something about the state of the nation today. Aguilar intervenes in the way images mediate our relationship to history and by extension, the present, by transmuting documentary photographs into vibrant large-scale paintings. Ten works in oil, oil stick, and graphite from 2020/1 comprise his exhibition *Closed Game* at Lyles & King, all based on found photographs from throughout the 20th century, including, for instance, an image of the Scottsboro Boys from 1931 or of New York's first Black police officer, Samuel J. Battle, ten years later. Three smaller portraits based on mugshots are also on view, where the self-taught artist's close study of the human visage is particularly evident, as furrowed brows or pursed lips ground his kaleidoscopic canvases in a palpable sense of humanity. For the notion of humanity is at the core of this artistic project: restoring dignity to those who have been denied it and destabilizing the posture of those responsible for withholding it. This sense of social justice undergirds Aguilar's canvases, as he broaches the painter's position as one of ethical responsibility.

While Aguilar cites the likes of Fritz Lang's films or Thomas Piketty's writing on capital and ideology as primary influences on his work, the Miami-based artist's oeuvre is inscribed in a lineage of politically-imbued portraiture. James Ensor's (*1860-1949) macabre masquerade is an apt point of reference, as the Belgian painter's indictment of the bourgeoisie at the turn of the 19th-century echoes in Aguilar's clusters of people. The skull-faced figures that populate Ensor's grotesque social commentary stand like skeleton predecessors to Aguilar's spiral-eyed men. Aguilar associates the shape with indoctrination (the hypnosis in Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, 2017 comes to mind) and the symbol shifts across his canvases, encircling the eyes of a red-suited man in *Nine Men, circa 1910* (2020) and radiating around the head of a man standing behind him, whose face bulges in orange-toned red against a receding blue hairline. An affinity to José Clemente Orozco's (*1883-1949) biting critique of the way nationalism corrodes the human spirit in his mural *The Epic of American Civilization* (1932-1934) and Robert Colescott's (*1925-2004) reinterpretations of famous history paintings in saturated colors are also part of this history of painting that Aguilar picks up on.

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Farley Aguilar is concerned with the structural and institutional violence, bolstered by cultural conditioning, that sustains American ideology and perpetuates cycles of oppression. While his subject matter is purportedly historical, the deadpan gaze of many of his figures yanks these scenes into the present. The threat of violence is omnipresent here, but doesn't explicitly take place within the frame. In *Onlookers, 1963* (2021) a closely-huddled group stands watching something in collectively restrained distress, as one woman covers her eyes. By working from carefully selected historical photographs, Aguilar sidesteps the relentless cycle of image distribution that characterizes our present moment, perhaps subtly condemning the mindless sharing of videos of Black suffering. Where Leon Golub's (*1922-2004) politically-charged paintings depicted the brutality of war or abuse of power in unflinching detail by contrast, the development of his Vietnam War cycles is a relevant point of comparison, as the self-avowedly activist painter turned to expressive figurative painting in response to the first televised war, as Aguilar does now amidst a new incarnation of inundating images. Where Golub was dedicated to a critique of toxic masculinity in the sociopolitical context of his times, Aguilar is interested in history and humanity in broader strokes. Something hopeful also seeps through his multicolored scenes: an intimation that if (and only if) history is acknowledged and its remnants confronted, new paths forward can be forged.

- Camila McHugh

Farley Aguilar (b. 1980, Nicaragua) lives and works in Miami, FL. Recent exhibitions include *A Very Anxious Feeling: Voices of Unrest in the American Experience*; *20 Years of the Beth Rudin DeWoody Collection*, The Taubman Museum, Roanoke, US; *This is America*, Kunstraum Potsdam, Potsdam, DE; *Fragmented Bodies*, Albertz Benda, New York, US; *On the Road II*, curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah, Oolite Arts, Miami, US; *Shifting Gaze: A Reconstruction of the Black & Hispanic Body in Contemporary Art*, The Mennello Museum, Orlando, US; and *We are the people. Who are you?*, Edel Assanti, London, UK. His work is in the collections of the Bass Museum, Miami, US; Pérez Art Museum Miami, US; Brown University, Providence, US; Akron Art Museum, Akron, US; and the Orlando Museum of Art.