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The Golden Earring, 2022
Oil on linen, 51" x 34"

opposite page
Mare, 2021
Oil on Linen, 43" x 49"





JOSE LOPEZ VERGARA

IN FEARLESS PURSUIT OF ARTISTIC AUTHENTICITY

joselopezvergara.com // words by Elizah Leigh

It happened today while scrolling through an endless blur of social media posts. Or during a sublime dining experience. It may have even occurred while viewing the latest blockbuster movie that everyone's been buzzing about. Something tickled our collective fancy, causing us to gush, "I'm obsessed!". Not in the potentially psychopathic fixation sense, but in the exuberant 2022 language sense. We're hit with such an endless barrage of stimuli that our global culture now uses a word – originally meant to refer to those afflicted with various irrationally compulsive mental disorders – to instead lightheartedly declare our affection for the latest 'life-altering' gadget or pop star du jour's over-the-top fashion ensemble. As far as shades of obsession go, there is a highly productive version, however, that deserves greater prominence in our cultural lexicon. It's the reason why José López Vergara – who has not yet entered his third decade of life and has only considered himself a full-time figurative painter since 2020 – now counts himself among the select group of international creatives whose inspired artistic output is featured among these pages.

There may be a genetic component to the Mexico City-born, Madrid-raised painter's creative aptitude given the three generations of artists in his family. Drawing was always a bit more instinctual to him than to many of his classmates. Upon being exposed to Alan Lee's *The Lord of the Rings* watercolour paintings, however, his passion for creative expression intensified. Gazing at the English illustrator's epic imaginings

spurred him to spend endless hours trying to reproduce them. Sadly, an unexpected plot twist involving monkey bars, the desire to impress bystanders, and "a risky jump" sent the young child plummeting to the ground, the velocity and weight of his own body ultimately crushing his right arm. That "life changing decision" resulted in a complicated compound fracture which required that the eight-year-old wear an Ilizarov apparatus and undergo a full year of physical rehabilitation. José inevitably received seven surgeries, one that removed dead muscle tissue but left him with limited wrist and forearm mobility.

Here's where the notion of a positive form of obsession comes into play. It's certainly possible that his early boyhood setback laid the groundwork for the exacting work ethic that defines his driven personality, but two decades have passed and he's still going strong. Following his accident, the naturally right-handed artist trained himself to use his left hand, resulting in the very refined artistic ambidexterity that he consistently employs to this day. During José's post-accident convalescence, a gift of a sketchbook and coloured pencils inspired him to master hyper-realism. By the time he hit his teenage years, he received global media recognition for his stunningly true-to-life drawings of eyes. The self-propelled creative added digital art, graffiti, caricatures, and mural painting to his artistic repertoire, holding his own output up to the standard set forth by classical trailblazers such as Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Velázquez and Rubens due to their painterly ambition.

top left
Girl In A Black Dress II, 2020
Oil on linen, 12" x 9"

bottom left
Stag, 2020
Oil on linen, 16" x 12"

top right
Fever, 2020
Oil on linen, 13,5" x 13,5"

opposite page, left
Fortuna, 2022
Oil on linen, 23" x 19"

opposite page, right
Gossip, 2021
Oil on linen, 17" x 14"



Of course, possessing artistic talent doesn't mean that your life's purpose is entirely evident, nor does it ensure a sustainable income. For a while, the Madrid-based portraitist wasn't aware that fine art was a viable twenty-first century career path. He considered other pursuits such as architecture, graphic art, martial arts, or even joining the military, the latter two due to the more intense degree of work ethic necessary. In the end, José's painting destiny ultimately beckoned, but he imposed a single towering expectation upon himself; he would have to achieve notable success by the age of twenty-four or suffer the wrath of his eternally disappointed alter ego. Despite the artist admitting that his goal was a little over-the-top, he reassures that "at the time, it encouraged me to work a lot harder".

The high-reaching creative ended up attending one of the more renowned art schools – the Angel Academy of Art in Florence, Italy – which he describes as "an exceptional experience" amplified by the sense that he "was learning magic spells". In typical José López Vergara fashion, he completed their four-year classical painting program in three years and then moved on to New York City, where he further polished his figurative drawing and painting skills at Grand Central Atelier. While he was grateful to possess a firm comprehension of traditional techniques, he quickly realised that advancing his creativity would require a great deal of his own personal extracurricular commitment. Consequently, he used every spare moment that he had – whether walking city streets, eating dinner, or taking subway rides – to endlessly brainstorm artistic concepts, a habit that he admits was firmly rooted in obsession.

The now twenty-eight-year-old has already landed his first NYC solo exhibition – which is a notable achievement for any artist – but for an individual with his degree of ambition who is a mere two years into his professional painting career, it is especially meaningful. José's indefatigable spirit is quite evident in the underlying symbology of several of his self-designed coats of arms, including a monochromatic Swiss Army knife-style emblem that depicts his scarred right arm with a paint brush and pencil serving as stand-ins for his two broken bones. That image acknowledges the free-fall of his youth that ultimately galvanised his unstoppable mindset, making him much more adaptive to life's challenges and perpetually inspired to push "even harder when things get tough".

In his quest to manifest portraiture that is honest, visually exciting, and creatively innovative, he's been actively breaking free of his classical shackles for the past few years. His personal motto, "if it scares you, go for it", speaks volumes about how he prioritises authentic work that is motivated by his gut instinct rather than popular trends. The ever-intriguing evolution of his painterly aesthetic can be partially attributed to the minimalistic lifestyle that has happily liberated his mind and living environment. He believes that selective simplification, whether in art or life, is a transformative skill that helps us to identify what is truly essential, a sentiment that Robert Browning first popularised in his 1855 poem, *Andrea del Sarto*, with the now endlessly repeated adage "less is more". José is quite focused on stripping away the extraneous aspects of a visual composition in favour of elevating that which is most aesthetically impactful.

The artist's highly disciplined, goal-realising approach – propelled by the desire to make "the impossible become possible" – is born out of his refusal to leave any aspect of his life to chance. When it comes to conjuring new visual compositions that are worthy of making the leap to canvas, he flagrantly betrays his zeal for minimalism, instead setting his preparatory stage "like a detective investigating a murder". That may seem amusingly incongruent for the painter who – by choice – can fit all of his worldly possessions in a suitcase. The deeper purpose of José's vertically displayed chaos is to help him realise his vision. "I tape photos and sketches to the wall until it's completely covered," he explains, "so that I can find similarities between my references and interests. It's a map and a plan that helps me to organise my thoughts and connect the dots."

Just as individual pieces of art require careful contemplation to fully manifest, identifying one's creative voice can also be an ongoing work in progress. "I've created art that I'm proud of, but I haven't reached my vision yet", he reveals. This is apparent in the dramatic visual evolution of his intense feminine muses, whose multi-dimensionality endures despite their ever-morphing backdrops and adornments. "I want to throw everything that inspires me into a shaker and make



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a delicious cocktail," José says, "but at the moment, I'm still missing some ingredients". He's only begun to scratch the surface of what he truly wants to express in his art, so he hopes that – through his ongoing exploration of diverse mediums and aesthetics – he'll ultimately manifest "elegant, edgy and exciting" portraiture "that can only be classified as mine". Perhaps being superficially obsessed with the dynamic appeal of his head-turning portraiture is just as worthy as being substantively enamoured with his indefatigable journey toward truth.

EXHIBITIONS:

GROUP - September 2022: *Vanguard*
Outré Gallery, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

GROUP - February 2023: *LA Art Show*
Arcadia Contemporary, Los Angeles, CA, USA

SOLO - May 2023
Arcadia Contemporary, New York City, NY, USA