

# ARTIST MICHAEL VASQUEZ BRINGS HUMANITY TO THE UNDERREPRESENTED

BY LIZ TRACY TUESDAY, JUNE 23, 2015



When people from the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery visited **Michael Vasquez's** Little Haiti studio June 13, 2013, the artist thought they might have been wondering if he's as ghetto as his paintings suggest. Vasquez — wearing an oversize T-shirt and a cap high on his head while drinking a Busch tallboy on a recent Thursday — was likely correct in his assumption. But the visit was nonetheless a success.

Seven of his paintings are on the road with the work of five other artists of Latin American descent, part of "Portraiture Now: Staging the Self." The exhibition, which delves into the heady topic of

identity, showed at the historic Washington, D.C. museum from August to April and is now on display at Americas Society in New York City before closing at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque.

## **"He saw our hearts, not our faults."**

Vasquez describes the exhibition as "the most monumental achievement in my career thus far." He adds, "As an artist, what validates us is museum shows. It's really what propels an artist's career beyond a gallery show, beyond showing a piece at an art fair. With museums, there's a tangible record." Hundreds of people might show up to praise his work at a gallery or art museum anywhere in the world, but now the stories he's telling are part of our national history.

Vasquez grew up in St. Petersburg, Florida, the only child of a Polish-American mother. Though he knew his Puerto Rican father, he didn't take on the role of a parent. He passed away when Vasquez was only 12. As a kid into comic books and videogames, Vasquez began creating art in second grade after seeing the attention given to a classmate who was talented at drawing. "I couldn't draw as well as this kid," Vasquez confesses, "but I was going to actively pursue drawing better, checking out books from the library and stuff like that." There's something in that early desire to dominate, to compete, to climb the social hierarchy that comes through in Vasquez's large-scale paintings of tatted-up young men who flash gang signs, guns, and money.

Vasquez is a visual anthropologist — he tells stories of masculinity and community through his brushstrokes and characters. His portraits lure the viewer into a scene, and despite the roughness of his subjects, he's ultimately gentle with his sitters. They may be tough, but their emotions are dynamic when Vasquez paints them. The humanity of a people normally denied its due is preserved in his care.

That's likely because he reflects upon the complicated definition of masculinity, of what it means to be a man through images of his network of friends. Without a father, Vasquez made those friends a touchstone for understanding an idea of manhood. "That's why I identified with that subculture, that idea of extended family," he says.

One of those close friends, AJ Hernandez, still lives in St. Pete. He says he "fell over" seeing his own image projected on a wall outside the Smithsonian. "As kids, we all had dreams, but Mike put his into motion and painted what he saw. We all did some things we ain't proud of, but his story allows us to live forever. He didn't paint thugs; he painted boys who all wanted to believe in something and have a family. He saw our hearts, not our faults." Hernandez wants Vasquez's work to be seen as fine art, "not pics of bangers in all red."

"A Florida boy, St. Pete-raised, Dade resident made it, and has no idea what he's done for all of us back up here in St. Pete. He raised the dirty veil of the '90s, what we were exposed to as kids, what our city has tried hard to pretend isn't here," Hernandez says.





Vasquez's *Totem* (2011) Photo by Zachary Balber

Many of Vasquez's friends also come from fractured families, and they banded together to create their own gangs, using hand gestures, colors, and flags to identify themselves. "That's just kids growing up trying to fit in with one another. A lot of like alpha-male situations — where a hierarchy gets established [with] any kids growing up, nerds, whatever — that exists across the board."

Vasquez says he was probably working out personal issues at the outset of his career. "Thank God my understanding of masculinity and idea of what that is has grown and evolved," he says, "but I guess my work itself deals with a more primal, basic understanding of masculinity."

After studying art at a magnet high school, he attended New World School of the Arts. "There's so much more that happens during those four years of your life that transcends the boundaries of the classroom or a campus," he reflects. Vasquez didn't know at the time that he would end up at such a pivotal moment in Miami's history — coinciding with the launch of Art Basel and proliferating galleries and museums.

At school, he was making work with imagery from old Dick and Jane books, removing every character but Dick and his mother. His teacher and Miami gallerist Fredric Snitzer gave him an internship, then a job after graduation, and ended up representing him. Vasquez became the next generation of Snitzer's star artists, after Hernan Bas, Naomi Fisher, and Bhakti Baxter. He took Vasquez's work to art fairs, gaining the artist exposure at the Armory Show and Art Basel. A solo show, he explains, is the "best context to present the work," but art fairs are great for building an international audience.

Vasquez is a self-identified workaholic. "I'm not going to let anybody else work any harder than me," he says. "I obviously like what I do, but it's hard for me to relax." He's always in the studio, exploring new concepts. Besides the traveling Smithsonian exhibition, Vasquez also has a solo exhibition at Miami Dade College's Museum of Art + Design (MOAD), titled "**Neighborhood Reclamation**."

"He is an artist who continually works new ideas, new formats. He came and visited the space only several months ago after we had made important changes to the gallery — by closing the windows and extending the footprint," explains Wanda K. Texon, MOAD's associate curator and director of campus galleries. "Michael decided that he was not going to do a standard painting exhibition and created the wonderful installation that is on view."

Vasquez used the opportunity to arrange his canvases differently in space. His goal was to create a denseness in this odd room, standing massive boards up with triangles of wood, secured with bags of sand. This "scale and place" gives them, he says, "impact." As spectators walk by each, they're suddenly making their way through a reimagined neighborhood.

For this exhibition, he began creating collages from photographs, making improvements on "otherwise dilapidated and blighted properties." His goal was to "invigorate them through paint, try to instill these properties that would maybe be seen in a negative context," he says. "I wanted to fill them with hope and promise yet maintain a history." He kept these "broken homes" sort of rough but also gave them new life. His work, he clarifies, isn't just about people; it's about how they live in locations — in a landscape, an environment, a community. "Neighborhood Reclamation" offers a stage for his other work.

"I can't sum it up in one painting," the artist says, "so I'm going to make all these components that inform one another." Through his lens, Vasquez brilliantly documents and rescues this any-neighborhood — with its crumbling homes and lonely, tough kids — and lovingly rebuilds them.