

Duvvian



Montoya

HOW A MAN AND HIS ART CONVERGE
IN A FIELD OF COLOR AND LINE

By Nicole Sansone with Wendy Logan

“Is this place haunted?” I ask artist Duvian Montoya as we begin our tour of the early twentieth-century St. Philip Artists Guild (SPAG) mansion that houses his studio. Montoya chuckles. Given its history as home to the Lockwood family, then as housing for nuns, and later as the Vitam Center for troubled teens, it would seem that this is a question he’s been asked before. He notes that while he did, in fact, pause at times during the structure’s initial renovations when an unexplained sound could be heard or an odd feeling would pass through him, he now dismisses the idea as mere occupational hazard. The man has a certain serene nonchalance that I soon find out couldn’t be farther from the style of his art.

The mansion is located on the grounds of St. Philip Roman Catholic Church. Just over a year ago it was reborn as SPAG, a low-cost studio space housing twelve artists, thanks largely to the hard work of Montoya and a handful of others. Montoya occupies a comparatively roomy corner studio complete with couch, vestigial fireplace and adorning indigenous masks. As we enter, Billie Holiday is crooning out of a small MacBook and I am struck by the impossibly clean paintbrushes neatly stored in an up-right organizational kit. Montoya has clearly been hard at work producing a volume of detailed paintings that might take other artists years to achieve, yet his studio space is absolutely spotless.

He begins to pull various paintings from their storage cubbies in the entryway to the studio. They are medium to large-sized canvases rich with vibrant oil paints in a tropical assortment of colors. An undeniable swirling line energizes the entire surface of each painting. Long, narrow strokes curve and undulate over foreground and background alike. While he commences telling me about his artistic process, all I can do is stare at the intensity trapped in his paintings.

“I think I’m painting life; my life. I’m telling a story...

going to Europe, going to Colombia, thoughts and visions of my family, immigration, politics...I think a lot of artists paint what they know, drawing inspiration from their own lives.”

Although the narratives and ideas infused in Montoya’s paintings may serve as the jumping-off point from which he begins his process and the ultimate hook for the viewer or collector, they are almost secondary to the initial impact of the works. Far from serene, the dramatic quality of the lines and colors virtually leaps off the canvas. No one is more aware of this effect than the artist himself.



“El Sacrificio De Mis Padres (My parents' sacrifice)”
48” x 60” oil on canvas

“People look at my work and love the technique, love the movement. The paintings are very loud, in your face...look at me...they demand attention,” he offers with an enormous smile. His shoulders shrug as he lets out a laugh, and one gets the distinct impression that the relationship between Duvian and his collectors is very much one of an inside joke, with many left on the outside. “For someone to come in and buy a piece they have to be a special collector — not someone looking for a piece to fit the couch.”

And he’s quite right; his paintings are not for everyone. Duvian has taken criticism in stride, with some detractors telling him that the lines are distracting, overpowering, that the lines simply don’t work. However, there is ultimately no separating the man from the technique.

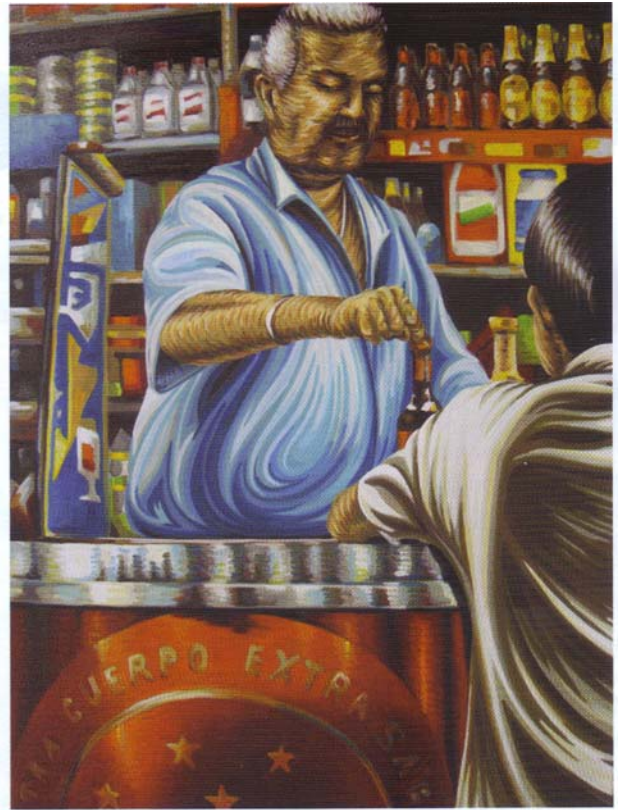
“As an artist, as the one painting it, I get lost in the trance of the line. I’ll pick a certain color and I’ll just go dot, dot, dot...and it goes from there. There are definitely times when I’ll spend twelve, fourteen hours in the studio, leave, then come back and be blown away by what I’ve done.” He laughs again, presumably at his own romanticizing. He pauses for a proverbial reality check. “I mean I could sell out... I’ve tried. I just can’t.”



"The Recycler" 18" x 14" oil on canvas

Many paintings begin with a photo he takes of a scene or a person or an event that strikes him. Each is then sketched out in watercolor pencil, followed by an acrylic underpaint to block in the major color sections. All the detail and line work is then executed in oil paint. The sheer number of lines used to create the effect, the precision of the line work itself, and the fact that Montoya chooses oils to achieve the overall effect, all speak to his remarkable artistic talent. Acrylics are commonly used for more graphic paintings, drying almost instantly and minimizing the chance of the colors accidentally blending into each other and producing a gray, mucky effect. Conversely, oil paints can take weeks to fully dry on the canvas. Some artists, like Montoya, take advantage of this property, using oils to blend colors together right on the canvas, a technique often implemented for painting things like flesh and fabrics whose shadows and highlights are constantly changing. In his finished works, the final effect is a sort of velvety surface that is as warm and inviting as the culture or people being depicted.

Montoya's line technique is an outgrowth of a variety of his life experiences. After graduating from the School of Visual Arts in New York City, he accepted a position restoring early nineteenth-century lithographs at Poster Conservation Inc. He was quickly promoted to head restorer, inheriting responsibility for original lithographs by artistic demigods such as Toulouse Lautrec and Andy Warhol. Following his time at PCI, he traveled to Europe to study the old masters. He had graduated from SVA as a photorealist painter (creating paintings that look much like photographs).



"La tienda de mi tío (My uncle's store)" 18" x 24" oil on canvas

He returned from Europe in 2001 as an impressionist painter, focusing on emotion rather than realistic detail.

"I came back a totally different painter, obsessed with Van Gogh," he explains "His technique, his use of color, his use of line, the energy he was able to leave on the canvas...I started following his way of painting, and then it sort of evolved into a more graphic, finer lines version of it, but still using a very intense color palette. My style definitely came out of an intent to capture that energy."

Montoya's interpretation of Van Gogh's tell-tale style has propelled him through the majority of his artistic career as a painter. After returning from Europe, he moved to New Mexico and it was there that he began to really embrace his line technique. He transitioned from trying to emulate



Van Gogh's style to internalizing it as his own, using the line to capture things that he saw and felt in his everyday life. This time period marks the beginning of Duvian's process that is most true to how he works today.

"Living in New Mexico, it started with landscape. I'd go hike, take my sketchbook, and try to capture that vastness that you see from the top of a mountain. I wanted to re-create that."

At this point, Duvian takes me into the next room, whose lower ceiling allows him to demonstrate the genesis of the vision for his paintings. He holds a canvas shaped like the inside of a spoon to the ceiling. As if someone has taken a regular, rectangular canvas and curved it so that the pictorial plane is curving inward instead of laying flat, he explains how the canvas was supposed to be hung: high up in the corner of the room where the ceiling meets the wall, much in the same way as crown molding.

"I wanted it to hang from the ceiling so you could feel as if you were standing in the painting. I did the first prototype, which this was, and it was cool, but making it was a pain. So instead, I went to perspective drawing, to line work, to give the viewer the same feeling of really being in the painting instead of being an individual looking at a two-dimensional piece." Through no other medium could he achieve the exact same effect that is captured through the concentrated power of his signature technique. "I want the viewer to be a part of it," he says.

No truer statement could be made about Montoya's work than that: he wants you to be part of it. Every work is an invitation, whether to view some small piece of his



life directly or to engage in a conversation that references the things he values most. Nowhere is this more apparent than in "El Sacrificio De Mis Padres," translated as "The Sacrifice of My Parents." Although Duvian was born in Norwalk, his parents moved here from Colombia with little money, education, or knowledge of the English language. In the foreground we are introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Montoya, while seemingly a young Duvian sits comfortably in the center, his right fist held high and an American flag poking up from his stroller. The people and park depicted in the background seem miles away, both literally and figuratively. Lightly tanned people with blondish-brown hair laze about carefree while Mr. and Mrs. Montoya remain stoic reminders in the foreground of a life less worry-free, their eyes gazing off toward either side of the painting, their mouths and brows furrowed in tight self-preservation.

"I lived their [my parents'] life, I saw the struggles they went through, the sacrifices they made to be in this country, starting from scratch. My dad and my mom... they're everything. They're my vision."

In every painting one feels an infusion of sympathy that could only have been possible at the hand of someone somehow privy to the experience. In his "Colombia" series, playful vignettes capture the heart and soul of the country as only Duvian has experienced it.

"They're my memories of Colombia and what Colombia is now...and, you know, it has such a stigma of what it was. They're trying hard to really put on a better face, I guess, and going through a lot of great changes, which I love. I love to see and experience that Colombia that I've never seen before," he explains.

Montoya is able to showcase his political sensitivity without alienating audiences because the narratives he is painting are so intimately tied to his real life. The "Colombia" series has the unique capacity to both directly refer to the artist's personal experiences and to operate on a



"Orchid #5" 54" x 60" oil on canvas



larger scale, calling to attention more controversial issues such as immigration and racism today. While, on the one hand, he might be criticizing Colombian stereotypes and prejudices in American culture, who would dare object to an artist drawing inspiration from his private life? Therein lies the genius.

Montoya defies the image of the artist as untamed and rebellious, flying by the seat of his pants. To him, painting is as regulated and disciplined as any business might be. When he is not working as the assistant and preparatory curator of the GE collection in Fairfield, he is in his studio from approximately 11:00 a.m. on. He is constantly self-critiquing and looking for that new direction for his work.

“You’re definitely coming at a transitional time in my career,” he informs me with just a hint of overwhelm.

Above his studio fireplace is a new still life, “Staying Young,” a painting of various male grooming products. “I wanted to go back a bit to my roots as a still life, photorealist painter and recapture a different sense of light than is found in my other works. It’s been an academic exercise of sorts to see if I could still do it but also now incorporate my own process and line technique...my style as it’s evolved. I’ve done three like this that were really just about playing with my technique. I wanted to see if I could be a different painter.” Unlike the other paintings in Montoya’s repertoire, “Staying Young” is dominated by a color palette of cool blues and grays. The lines are still clearly there, they’re just quieter, more muted...perhaps a subtle tap on the shoulder from the tranquil side of the man to the electrically charged artist within him. Not that he is about to abandon his signature technique, but clearly a slight shift can be sensed in Montoya.

“I think that’s it for those,” he says thoughtfully. “I’ll go back to my colors and the subjects that matter to me – the social and cultural and political commentary that ultimately speaks louder than the style. But I think this more subtle approach is the direction I’m headed in.”

The St. Philip Artists Guild (SPAG) on France Street was built somewhere between 1914 and 1916 by the cousin of LeGrand Lockwood of the Lockwood Matthews Mansion Museum. The entirety of the St. Philip property was owned for centuries by this prominent Norwalk family. In 1779 all the farmland and the original farmhouse, located next to where the current mansion stands today, was burned to the ground by the British. In 1784 a new farmhouse was built in the same spot by Captain E. Lockwood, an American Army Captain whose job as Assistant Commissary of Issue was to distribute food to American troops. The Lockwood Farm continued to operate through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and was eventually inherited in 1858 by Manice deForest Lockwood, Sr. who decided to build a grander house than the original just behind it. It was his son who eventually sold the entire property to the church in 1946. Subsequently, it served as housing for nuns, then was leased to a school for troubled teens before falling into major disrepair in 2000.

SPAG, launched in March 2008, was the brainchild of 20-year resident pastor Father Michael Boccaccio whose idea for a community art venue sprang from both his personal passion for the arts and some casual conversations with a few of his parishioners, including Duvian Montoya. He and artists Ralph Dimarco and David Morrico were charged with the early restoration of the mansion in exchange for low-cost studio space. Today, there are 12 resident artists, representing the total capacity of the space, and each is responsible for his or her own studio’s conversion and upkeep. The artists of SPAG, occasionally joined by other area artists, mount several public shows each year that allow art lovers to enjoy a diversity of mediums and genres, including the breathtaking beauty of the architecture and interior of the mansion itself.

The next SPAG art show, entitled “SPAG’s Full House,” will feature art created exclusively by resident artists of the guild. It opens Friday, November 6, with a reception from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. An open painting class with models will be offered on Saturday, November 7, and studios will also be open for visits on Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

