

PEOPLE

San Diego artist expresses his own humanity in architecture-inspired work in Carlsbad exhibition



Artist Alvaro Alvarez in his work studio in San Ysidro. (Eduardo Contreras/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Alvaro Alvarez is an architectural artist whose work is featured in the current “Boundaries and Connection” exhibition at PHES Gallery in Carlsbad

BY LISA DEADERICK

JUNE 18, 2022 6 AM PT



Although just 29 years old, [Alvaro Alvarez](#) can quickly name his lifelong love: architecture.

During math class in the third grade, he taught himself to draw, focusing on the hotel buildings that were all around him. It was the specifically atypical hotel architecture of Tijuana, where any building could serve as a hotel, that gave his young imagination great freedom.

“I found the colorful hotels by (Mexican architects) Ricardo Legorreta and Luis Barragan to be particularly playful and relatable,” he says.

He would go on to use that inspiration as his focus in college, majoring in architecture at Cornell University and building a professional career that allowed him to lead the design and construction of a Riviera Maya EDITION hotel in New York. Now, he’s a full-time architectural visual artist (who’s presented his work at La Jolla’s Salk Institute on the relationship between neuroscience and architecture) and is featured in the current “Boundaries and Connection” exhibition at [PHES Gallery in Carlsbad](#), alongside artists [Kaori Fukuyama](#) and Kline Swonger, through July 30.

Alvarez — who lives in San Diego’s Otay Mesa West neighborhood, between San Ysidro and Chula Vista — took some time to talk about his binational art, what it means to him to be a self-described “border boy,” and his ability to do spot-on impressions of the people around him.

Q: Tell us about the “Boundaries and Connection” exhibition at PHES Gallery in Carlsbad and the work you have on display.

A: I met [gallery owners] Paul Henry and Ellen Speer in 2021 when Kaori Fukuyama introduced us as they were searching for emerging artists in the region. Then they brought all three of us together. One of the purposes of the exhibition was to highlight local artists who created abstract work. We worked with the space itself — sequence of gallery rooms, walls, natural light — to curate the paintings.

The work I’m displaying belongs to my present engagement with the concepts of edges and density as they relate to freedom and constraint. They begin with an arresting first impression due to their larger composition and aspire to lure you in with their intricate detail and active

linework. Seven of the paintings are done on paper and three on canvas; the only “colors” of ink used are black, white and sepia, with dimensions ranging from 13 inches-by-10 inches and as large as 40 inches-by-40 inches.

Q: What do you want people to get from this current work?

A: I would love to instill in them a sense of curiosity. The gallery layout allows for a first impression of my paintings from a distance. This first encounter is of a recognizable geometry — sphere, diamond, square — so it is easily identifiable. As viewers approach it, they would realize that it is, in fact, a form of gestalt in its means of organization: much more intricate details and smaller linework creating a larger composition, both scales being equally important.

Q: What medium/media do you prefer to work in, and how does this style speak to you as an artist?

A: I feel the most comfortable with graphite, charcoal, ink and paper. I use the density of linework to suggest shadow and its absence to imply light. I also love the innate fluidity of ink because even though I try to control it, it has a mind of its own and will move as it pleases. It is a good lesson, through materiality, that we can't control everything, and beauty can come from letting go.

What I love about Otay Mesa West ...

Most importantly, how close I am to my family — on both sides of the border. Secondly, is nature. I am a short bike ride from Imperial Beach and a number of beautiful parks around me, including the Tijuana River estuary and Otay Valley Regional Park.

Q: How would you define/describe what you call binational art?

A: I would describe it as art created through a dual lens of belonging to two different homes, separated by human-made borders. I consider my artwork binational. However, artwork that wasn't necessarily created by an artist from either side of a border can also be “binational” if it expresses a relatable story with themes such as those we see around here. [American sculptor]

Lee Bontecou's beautifully crafted sculptures and drawings, for instance, convey to me a positive flow of energy in all sorts of directions, until they are stopped by their own physical limitations.

Q: What are you trying to express in your work?

A: My own human qualities. I struggled with overthinking and overdoing, which led to physical and mental health difficulties. Art has been in my life for as long as I can remember, and most recently, contributed to my healing when coming out of a depression in 2019. Three years later, I am healthier than ever, but have in me a duality that will accompany me for the rest of my life: One, the intensive passion in which I embark any project; and two, a relaxed calmness striving for stability. I express this duality in my artwork, specifically the work currently at the PHES Gallery.

Q: What inspires you in your work?

A: Most importantly, joy. Even though my paintings might share stories of struggle or an abstract conflict, they are done with joy because of how much I love creating art. It is the No. 1 barometer when I begin a piece of work, which supplements my other clear sources of inspiration — architecture and storytelling.

Q: In your bio, you mention being born in San Diego and raised in Tijuana, Mexico, referring to yourself as a “border boy.” What does this term mean for you?

A: Growing up crossing the border so often, it became a quotidian part of my life. When I left Southern California/Baja and moved to New York, the border became a stronger part of my identity. I realized how special it is to have two completely different worlds as part of a single community of what I called home. The term “border boy” means, to me, belonging to more than one home.

Q: How would you describe the cultures of where you grew up, and how did that inform your art?

A: Another duality. Growing up, the culture in Tijuana was fast-paced and very social. Families were very connected to one another, and a big part of life was done “outside the house” at event spaces, hotel ballrooms, restaurants. San Diego, instead, was always calmer and nature-focused — at least, where I frequented as a child: Balboa Park, the San Diego Zoo, Sea World, Coronado

Beach, etc. Today's culture seems to remain the same, only larger — I still get my dosage of social gatherings south of the border and enjoy the natural beauties available in Southern California.

My art intends to address concepts which are not one-dimensional and, instead, bringing forward two parallel forces and allowing them to confront one another in search of coexistence. An example of this is in my current work, "Imperfect Boundaries," where stability attempts to contain chaos. I aspire to this by instituting a sense of rigor and defining an edge, not allowing the ink to "cross" to the other side of it. This enables the ink to flow freely within the "safe" perimeters, though sometimes the boundaries are indeed broken. I see this conversation (between the ink and the boundary) as a similar behavior between Tijuana and San Diego, where a delineated margin has been established and different degrees of energy flow on both sides of it.

Q: What is the best advice you've ever received?

A: To ask for help. My dear mother gave me this advice and it helped with my health and my art. Having always been very self-determined and strong-willed, I regularly tried to solve my problems on my own. Though this yielded professional results in my career, it also took a toll on my body and mind. To heal, I started asking for help — therapy, family and faith — and became emotionally healthier. Similarly, when I changed careers to become a full-time artist, I asked for professional help and found a group of incredibly talented artists, including Kaori, here in San Diego who offered guidance and mentorship, led by artist and professor Pia Stern.

Q: What is one thing people would be surprised to find out about you?

A: I am very perceptive to other's mannerisms, expressions and body language, so people burst out laughing when I do an on-point impression of them. Professionally, it always comes as a shock to people how much I've lived and experienced — both wonderful accomplishments with success, as well as significant failures that have helped me mature, all at such a young age.

Q: Please describe your ideal San Diego weekend.

A: I love going on hikes and camping in San Diego County. Some of my favorite spots are Cleveland National Forest and Palomar Mountain, as well as Anza-Borrego. My family and I often visit Julian, Balboa Park and museums in North County.