

Artillery Magazine Gallery Rounds
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Jose Alvarez (D.O.P.A.)
The Promised Land
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Gavlak Los Angeles

By Jody Zellen



Detention, deportation, refugee, criminal, other: these are terms that have blanketed the news in the last few years, and are thematically central to a solo exhibition by Jose Alvarez (D.O.P.A.) at Gavlak Los Angeles. Alvarez, who lives in South Florida, came to the United States from Venezuela in the 1980s to escape persecution as a gay man. When his visa expired, he acquired false papers, took on the name of Jose Alvarez, and began his art career. In 2012, he was charged with identity theft and spent two months at Krome Detention Center in Miami, FL., a place now known for its abuse of the undocumented foreign nationals there to await asylum hearings or deportation.

During his incarceration, and at first in an effort to ward off depression, Alvarez drew his cellmate and later began to make portraits of the other detainees. In the exhibition, the works are presented with the name of the depicted detainee, their Krome ID number, age, and their story of how they came to the U.S. and ended up at Krome. Alvarez created each of the 28 drawings using the inner core of a blue or black ballpoint pen on whatever paper he could obtain in the detention center. The core was removed from its clear plastic casing (as the hard substance was considered contraband) and is also on view in a vitrine. The bendy thin device is not an easy tool to draw with and Alvarez's depictions display his skill and dexterity.

What is remarkable about this project is the determination and integrity of the sitters despite their desperate situations. The works capture their intensity, resolve, and disappointment. Alvarez was an empathetic listener who drew and recorded those who posed for him without passing judgment. He juxtaposes factual information— the injustices and prejudices toward immigrants— with compassionate drawings that illustrate their inner strength and beauty as human beings.

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