

double trouble

February James & John Rivas

Curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah

With curatorial assistance from
Kiara Cristina Ventura

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ross+kramer gallery

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Double Trouble brings together artists February James and John Rivas whose practices take a provocative and tantalizing approach rendering the figurae. Curated by Larry Ossei-Mensah, this exhibition seeks to highlight the singular voices of each artists in addition to leverage collaboration and artistic exchange as a platform to cultivate a generative dialogue about identity, memory, family trauma, and negating stereotypes to find true forms of creative expression. The title Double Trouble, reclaims and “remixes” what many would consider harmful. Here, it means twice the potential of two artists emerging from personal challenges to establish themselves in the art world.

February James is an artist based in Los Angeles and Rivas works in the New York City area; the two have been engaged in a tête-à-tête via email, phone calls, and snail mail by physically sending artworks across the US to collaborate. Their artistic relationship results in a dynamic visual and tactile correspondence that serves as a platform for exploration between their distinct artistic practices. Both artists are prolific in their ability to employ the use of emotionally charged imagery that articulates and expresses unique and deeply personal points of view on the human condition.

James and Rivas both “paint from the gut” with speed and veracity resulting in the construct of works that exist in each artist’s respective universe. Rivas’ quick, expressive brush strokes and sculptural elements capturing personal histories situates his work in conversation with the likes of Robert Rauschenberg and Benny Andrews, while James’ portraits capturing heavy facial emotions connect to the work of Frida Kahlo and photographer Roger Ballen. Both play with figurative distortion like George Condo, yet debut to the public a new mode of contemporary surrealism; pushing the question, what happens when dreams, imagination, emotions, and memory cross paths on the canvas?

Anchored around the question of what happens to figuration when an artist translates personal memories to the canvas, Double Trouble highlights the vibrant visual languages that James and Rivas utilize when attempting to communicate their complex past experiences in today’s contemporary moment. Both artists distort and transform their subjects to experiment with their own perceptions of the past and to grapple with the unfixed, mutable notions of collective and personal memory.

For **February James**, the work holds an autobiographical narrative, her paintings represent her own experiences and familial relationships, they speak to her and tell their stories. But the figures themselves are devoid of construct, they strive to capture the essence of a person rather than their physicality, so that we are invited to create our own characterizations, based on our own relationships. Using sites such as family through the window of domesticity, the figures become even more personal to the viewer, the storytelling embroiled in our own subjectivity, leaving us to wonder how much of what we perceive is real, and how much is social construct.

James explores what factors influence identity formation: how truth is conditioned by the frameworks through which it is received; she asks the question, how much does the legacy of a family influence our everyday life, our vulnerabilities, our expectations, and explores the hidden emotions that exist between what we see and what we experience.

John Rivas is a figurative painter whose narrative is guided by the stories of his ancestors and loved ones. As a first generation American raised in Newark, New Jersey, Rivas' artwork is enriched with tales of family members many of whom he's met remotely or through photographs. He is concerned with the concepts of legacy, preserving the narratives of lost loved ones, and documenting his upbringing. Rivas' paintings occupy space like sculpture juxtaposing unexpected objects many of which are sourced from his childhood. His brush strokes and rubs of charcoal are expressive marks that add to the visual collage. Each painting is loaded with symbolisms that result in intimate compositions highlighting complex relationships and celebrating the Latinx concept of family and community through the lens of his El Salvadoran roots.

Working from memory and family pictures, Rivas creates distorted figures that unveil how he imagines his ancestors. He reveals what happens when he is painting a visual language rooted in the practice of retracing his childhood-- one that is heavy in emotion and trauma. He reveals what visually happens in that process of translation.