

Forever Unseen at PLAYSPACE

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by Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle



Forever Unseen opening reception
Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly

VOL.7





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Photo courtesy of Megan Kelly

Forever Unseen, on view at CCA's PLAYSPACE from December 5–10, 2023 and presented as part of the Fall 2023 Creative Citizens in Action series, was a successful expression of expansive storytelling and collaborative possibilities. A “group show” in more ways than one, *Forever Unseen* featured a diverse group of artists and media, and was collectively curated by the students in Marcel Pardo Ariza’s undergraduate photography class “Practice, Process, and Production.” The course not only encouraged students to reflect deeply on their individual artistic practices, but also facilitated creative collaboration through the production of a group exhibition. Students took on the role of both artist and curator, and under Ariza’s guidance, they proposed, curated, and installed the exhibition, in addition to showing their own work. The project bridges the work of curator and artist, highlighting where the two converge and divide, and pointing to the ways in which these often-siloed creative practices can inform and support one another.

This emphasis on collective and interdisciplinary making is well-reflected in the resulting show. In addition to curating their own work, the students invited other artists to participate, situating their practices within the broader Bay Area artistic community and juxtaposing a range of media, perspectives, and lived

experiences. Of the ten artists included in *Forever Unseen*, five were in Ariza's course – Roy Almanza, Jacob Hyun, Emily Montes, Sofia Porzio, and Nick Satzger – and five are other Bay Area artists invited to participate – Jonathan Ramirez, tamara suarez porras, M Tanaka, Lynse Cooper, and Rachel Zhang. *Forever Unseen* demonstrates the ways in which meaningful engagement with the work of other artists can provide insight into one's own creative practice. In positioning our work, and in the process, our selves, in relation to others, we are offered the generative opportunity to reconsider our subject positions and see our work in a new light.



(left to right) Lynse Cooper, *Untitled (Interior Still Life 1)* (2021), *Untitled (Interior Still Life 5)* (2022), and *Fallen Angel* (2022)
Photo courtesy of Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle

As a whole, *Forever Unseen* equally considers the possibilities and limitations of representation, creating a space for the ten participating artists to tell their own stories of identity and belonging. The show features mostly BIPOC artists, communities for whom representation can be fraught. To be seen can be a source of affinity, power, and self-actualization. But as the show's title suggests, visibility can also reduce racialized identities to stereotypes and singular notions of selfhood. The works on view ask us to consider the politics of who is represented, how, and by whom. Through a variety of media, the artists in *Forever Unseen* dictate the terms of their own representation. The mediums represented include painting, graphic design, illustration, installation, and photography, demonstrating a range of material approaches for visually representing one's self and communities.

The show includes very little traditional self-portraiture, and instead iconography and symbolism shine as an alternative,

synecdochal grammar. *Untitled (Interior Still Life 1)* (2021), *Untitled (Interior Still Life 5)* (2022), and *Fallen Angel* (2022) are three inkjet prints on matte paper by Lynse Cooper. These photographs, part of the artist's *Myrtle Vista* series, which poetically documents Cooper's relationship to her grandfather during his final years, are imbued with a presence of absence; rather than depict the people she is honoring, Cooper memorializes her subjects through high contrast images of domestic scenes and objects. tamara suarez porras further pushes the envelope of photographic abstraction in three untitled works from 2023. The black and white images appear to be made by layering several exposures, creating a collage of shapes, light, and fragments. Throughout the show, fragmentation, a word often associated with that which is incomplete or undone, proves to be a visual strategy that gestures towards the complexities of representation and that poetically challenges legibility.

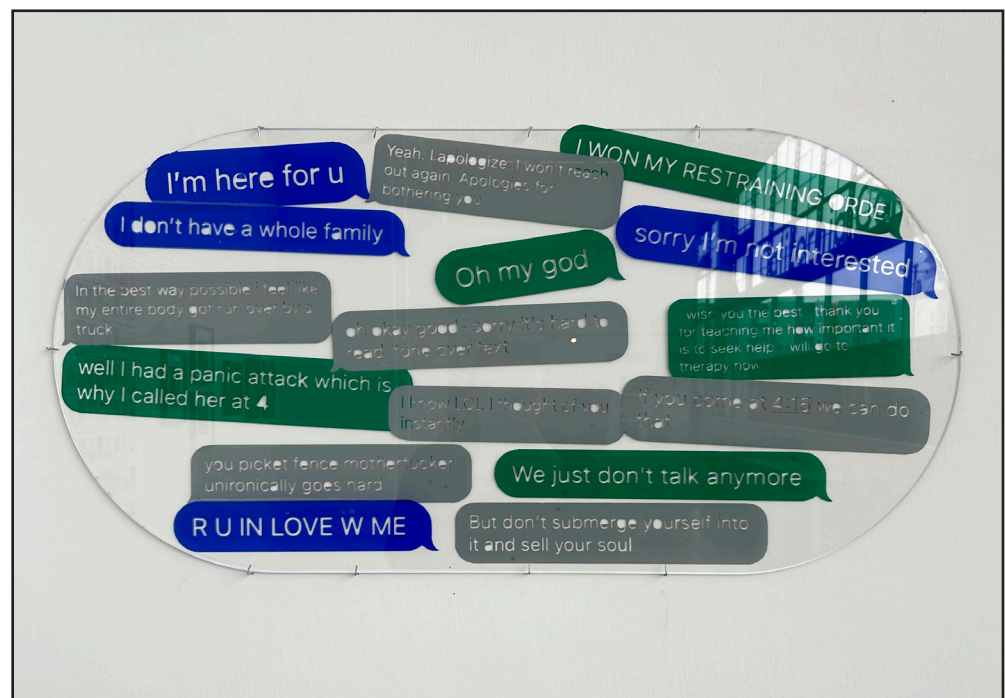


Procesión de los Muertos (2023), by Roy Almanza was a particularly impactful example. *Procesión* begins with a triptych of photographs installed vertically on the wall. Directly below them is a surface draped in an orange cloth, on which the artist has arranged three votive prayer candles, each featuring a different religious figure. In his artist statement, Almanza writes that, through his work, he seeks to “explore identity through cultural and religious symbols” and to “explore the imagery that binds the identity of Chicanos/Latinidad and how we uphold them.” In *Procesión*, these thematic interests are articulated with tender subtlety and empowered resolve. The top image is a detail shot of papel picado, a decorative string of intricately hand cut paper popular in Mexico. Next is a still of two moonlit protesters with their faces painted to resemble calaveras, or artistic representations of skulls. One is holding a hand-painted sign with the names of three people killed by the San Francisco Police Department. The sign reads “ALEX NIETO. MARIO WOODS. AMILCAR PEREZ-LOPEZ. MURDERED BY SFPD! IN COLD BLOOD. NEVER FORGET.” Third is an image of a police

Roy Almanza,
Procesión de los Muertos
Photo courtesy of
Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle

officer on a motorcycle, their back to the camera, driving through a crowd. All three photographs, silver gelatin printed on cotton rag paper, were dyed with cempasúchil, an orange Mexican marigold traditionally used to decorate altars for Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). The vibrant flowers are said to guide the souls of those who have passed back to their loved ones. Together, each component of *Procesión de los Muertos* forms a sparse yet impactful altar, honoring the political and cultural legacy of Chicanos in San Francisco and throughout the United States as resisters of state violence. This work was particularly resonant for me, growing up with my Mexican immigrant grandmother and my mother and aunt, both of whom identify as Chicana and have spent their lives in sociopolitical service to the Chicax and Latinx communities in Los Angeles. For me, Chicax identity is an entangled web of political activism, an identifiable visual language, and a complex relationship between religious and cultural traditions.

While photography has a strong presence in the exhibition, *Forever Unseen* is about image making (and unmaking) of many kinds. The exhibition also included text-based work, including *Text messages I've received and sent* (2023) by Sofia Porzio – a large-scale collage of text messages – and *Digital Kinship – Text Series* (2023), a selection of conversations between Porzio and



Sofia Porzio, *Text messages I've received and sent* (2023)
 Photo courtesy of Emilia Shaffer-Del Valle



Emily Montes, *Finifugal* (2023)
 Photo courtesy of
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her friends and family. One of the most interesting departures from the photographic medium on view in the show came from painter Emily Montes, whose work presented a meditation on the medium of photography itself. *Finifugal* (2023) is a series of 104 3x5 inch paintings made to resemble a polaroid photograph. Each canvas depicts a scene or detail – a disco ball, a birthday cake, one half of a highway sign, a pair of shoes. Some of the polaroid paintings are dated and some have short captions; for example, “mama dulce” and “06/06/20,” which hint at, but never reveal the stories, sites, and memories depicted. Together, the snapshots form a fragmented portrait of a person, a life, we will never see in full. The quality of Montes’s painting is purposefully de-articulated. When people are depicted, they remain faceless; her landscapes are sparse; shape and color, rather than particular detail, produce images that are at once specific to Montes and familiar to viewers. Although the objects, places, and people reference Montes’s own life, the paintings’ formal qualities allow us to project our own memories and stories onto the work. Montes tells us that the work’s title means “hating endings; someone who tries to avoid them and prolong the final moments of a story, relationship, or journey.” To me, this suggests that our narratives, our conceptions of self, site, and community, are subject to evolution and change. The artists and works in *Forever Unseen* sit comfortably in this liminal space and encourage us to do the same.

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