

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021 nightgallery.ca

Erik Gonzalez, "The Artist Mover: Interview with Robert Nava", *Art Handler*, September 30, 2015.

Art Handler

The Artist Mover Interview with Robert Nava Erik Gonzalez



Robert Nava. *Ohohuul*, 2014.

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One afternoon last summer, I met with [Robert Nava](#) to discuss his work both as an artist and as a mover. We met in a typical Bushwick industrial building: stairwells festooned with spray-paint, hallways thick with that mix of spoiled takeout, solvents and the smell of student debt accruing interest. Through a large door, Nava welcomed me into the dimly lit common area of the live-work space he shares with another artist. Above a cluttered kitchen counter hung a painting of black, handwritten text on a ground the color of not-quite-dried-blood, “You keep drawing fucked up pictures of people.. You think that shit is funny?!” Apparently a quote from [Tales from the Hood](#), it’s an apt question. Through a smaller door off the kitchen we moved into a light-filled space with high ceilings. Except for a sleeping area lofted over part of the space, it was overflowing with paintings and drawings in various states.

I first met Robert Nava in the fall of 2009 when he started his MFA at Yale University. It was my second year there and his first. Nava is a strong and stout guy, built like the accomplished mixed-martial-arts fighter he is. He wears his hair somewhere between shaggy and spiked with a rye smile and impish eyes. There is something wholly enigmatic about him that rhymes with his paintings.

Nava is a prolific painter who takes his cues as much from the Western Canon as he does from healing crystals. Like the complicated relationship between author and audience in the aforementioned painting, he enjoys exploiting and manipulating his viewers’ expectations of both art and artist.

EG

Why don’t we start with how you’d describe yourself? You meet someone, and they say, “What do you do?” How do you answer that?

RN

Usually, I tell them that I’m an artist, making work: mostly paintings. And, if the conversation leads into it, I get into what I do on the side to make money, to keep my practices alive. That’s basically moving furniture, driving a truck...being a mover. People want to know if you are living solely off your work or not. They want to know a money type of question. And for that, the answer is usually telling them that thing on the side, but I always let the thing on the side not be first place. It’s artist first. Moving is temporary.

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EG

Let's talk about your work first then. We'll put some pictures up with this, but how would you describe your work to somebody?

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RN

Oh, man. In one sentence, it's so hard. They're often playful paintings that deal with absurdities of everyday life and extreme situations. I like to dabble in the realm between absurdity and what people might consider serious things. They're kind of these dumb paintings, and many times people think a kid could have done it. So that's how they would look. I think that's what I'm attracted to and interested in aesthetic-wise. Comedy and tragedy is an area I like to work in a lot, but not totally. Um, paintings of alligators killing people for no reason. I like that zone of not having to have a reason necessarily, but having this blunt presentation.

EG

That bluntness seems to connect to the heavy use of text in your paintings.

RN

Yeah. I was always attracted to where image and text meet up and can sway the mind. I like to push nonsensical things with the words, but they always have something to do with an image or something alarming. I think a lot about where a painting can live. One space that's in my mind is a corporate lobby. Like a large painting that might say, "You are a piece of shit," in the center of an airport or something. I would love for this to happen. Although, I don't think society would do such things.

EG

There's also a consistent violence, like the alligators. In the text the violence is sometimes directed at the viewer. Does this have to do with wanting your paintings hung in lobbies or hotels or airports?

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RN

Oh, hotels would be the best, just thinking of where they could live. The white gallery space is neutral, and could be its own thing depending, but another place is different...like a sign that startles you. Sometimes driving around the Midwest, I remember seeing some things that were very alarming—religious and almost humorous—so overtly serious that you can't take them seriously. These are just signs off the highway.

EG

You mean the billboards that fundamentalist groups put up?

RN

Right! You know, "Jesus is real. Hell is real." It's like, what do you do with that? I like the contrast of those things being in an unsuspecting place.

EG

Is there is desire to jar people?

RN

I don't know. Maybe. I think it's about things that people in these spaces feel, but can't say. The neutrality of these public spaces won't let things like this happen. If you put an alligator killing someone for no reason right when you enter a building, I believe that it's within mass-psychology that many people would smile, and it would make them have a better day.

EG

So, it's a generous thing. It's not a big middle-finger to the space.

RN

No. There are images that would be that middle finger out there, but I'm not trying to do that.

EG

I think it's hilarious that you insist on saying that the alligator is eating the guy "for no reason." Why is that?

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RN

I had an idea: What happens if I walk past a gallery that had 20 big alligators hurting people in various ways for no reason? I would think, “Man, this gallery is on top of things. They are ahead of the game. They get it.” And so, nobody’s done that yet, so I gotta do it. [...] People really get scared when there isn’t a reason. I think that they want reason, and when the violence doesn’t have any reasoning, it makes it either scary or interesting. The violence doesn’t have a *to* or *from*, it just *is*. By not giving those answers, it lets people have a blank slate to fill their luggage into. It’s completely a fill-in-the-blank, and the blank is huge.

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I think it was Wittgenstein that talked about nonsensical writing or no-sense-making in writing. Hopefully, people will give more strength to that. You can purposely go with the intention of making no sense today, so that maybe you’re speaking loudly years ahead of yourself. Maybe, it’s a way out-there way of thinking, but if you purposely don’t make any sense right now, maybe in 300 years someone will make sense out of it. We don’t know why Stonehenge got the way it is. I heard someone in a forum talking about Stonehenge. He said, “Ya know, if I had a time machine, do you know how many pointless things I would do just to see what people would make of them later?” I just thought that was not only sincere, but super interesting nonsense. I dunno, this is a little far off tangent, but I think we need to embrace more things that are way out there. Imagination causes everything. If you want to make something you have to have thought of it first, and if thoughts are being freed, randomness and absurdity can be the seeds to new things.

EG

Yeah, it really seems like you are asking your viewer to go out there with you. How do you get there? What’s your process like for coming up with this stuff?

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RN

I draw. Works influence other works. Certain things...I don't know where it comes from sometimes. One morning you wake up and there's a story. For example, [gesturing towards a text painting on a sofa-cushion-cum-canvas] "My dad told me that he saw a hook come down and hit someone in the head." And I told that to someone one day in the truck. I don't know why I said it. Oh, we were driving on the highway and I see a dangling hook, and I said it. My coworker was like, "Damn Rob, that's pretty morbid." And I started laughing, and I was like, "Yeah, it is."

EG

Wait, is that something your dad actually said? Or did you dream that up?

RN

No, he told me this. It's something he said he saw happen at the steel mill.

EG

What happened?

RN

It killed him. Yeah, those hooks are heavy. It's an alarming fact of life. The painting's not showing you an image or a video of it, but the thought of it can be...I don't know, while the accidents aren't funny, it's this interesting realm of karmic debt and it sparks a lot of wonder, and the unfortunate side of it.... I'm wondering if it can be undone through humor... perhaps. I don't know if humor can undo violence or violence can undo violence, but with the way it's presented, people can be aware of what's in everyone's head. Anything I do can't be as bad as the newspapers, and I'm not trying to compete with them or what they're doing.

EG

You also have these two back-of-truck paintings: a moving or box-truck and an ambulance or emergency vehicle of some kind. I'm not saying we have to read these together, but then there is this story of a workplace accident and you're telling it while on the job. You think about violence a lot. Do you think about workplace violence much?

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RN

Haha, yeah. I guess it's... I think it's hard. Some people will look at it and see humor and some people will not think it's funny at all. I think that divide is a kind of discussion maker. They're sort of unacceptable subjects, I guess, but it's not so bad. I don't think anything is not fair for discussion. With these trucks it's a lot of just formal decisions, but there are also these masks and portals... that's some of my hidden meaning in there. I'm able to play formally through a subject matter and just push color and stuff, and then content-wise it might be just a one word thing like: portal. It's a truck you see everywhere, and the fact that paintings could be dedicated to the backs of trucks I think is, in itself, a great idea. Well, I don't know about great idea, but... if painting is still this sticking-your-chest-out-this-is-on-canvas-and-important deal, then the back of a truck? C'mon man, you know what I mean?



Robert Nava. *Ev Em Heru*, 2014.

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Robert Nava. *Cham ix Cham*, 2014

EG

And that must be informed by your spending a lot of time staring at the backs of trucks...

RN

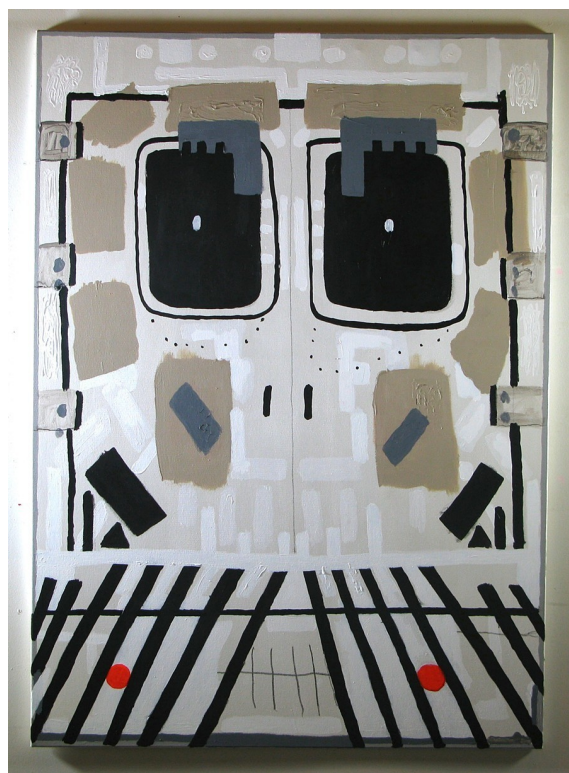
Well, yeah, and there are those moments when you see the last wall of boxes and you're like, "We're almost done with this!" And then you've got to be careful, because you can be overly excited and hurt yourself because you're almost done, which happened to me a couple weeks ago. We were almost done with a rush week: 9 days straight of like 3 jobs a day. On the final boxes, I spun around too fast and ended-up bashing my knuckles in the wall. And it's just the job telling you, "OK, now you can go," or, "You are that idiot," you know? I don't know if it's just my spirit, but I find it humorous when stuff like that happens.

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Robert Nava. *Bacab*, 2014.



Robert Nava. *Dimituh*, 2014.

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EG

How else do you think the moving work is related to your studio work?

RN

Well, what's cool with the job is—though you can't be totally mindless—it lets you kind of space out a little...as long as you're careful and don't drop anything or hurt yourself. You can think about certain paintings in the downtime of this job. And I guess you can't really separate anything you do from influencing the work, but the job does put you in an interesting situation. You're this mover so sometimes you can be treated like just this grunt, like you suck...ya know, a tank for a brain and nothing inside. You're just this worker.

EG

Is that one of your text paintings?

RN

Haha, yeah it could be—it might be! But, there's that feeling, and some people, they love what you do. They understand that someone has to do this. It reflects in basic things like how a box is packed or if the client offers you any water. I've worked with people who look right through you; I've worked with people who call you a hero. I had to tell this lady—I was like, “You know ma'am, we're not heroes. I'm here to take your stress away, and make this easy on you.” It feels good to help people, but sometimes you get a nightmare client and it's terrible. Sometime they'll talk about us like, “Oh hey, the movers are here.” And I'm like, “I'm right here in the room, and I have a name.” It gives you an insight into the hearts and souls of people in general.

EG

Hm. It's interesting that de-contextualization is so important in your paintings and yet, in some way, you're saying the nightmare clients are the ones that see you as de-contextualized.

RN

Yeah. Being looked through by a client is just...you just get used to it.

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EG

There's a mirror to that too though, where you just see them as someone with a bunch of boxes. For the client, there's so much in these boxes, but for you there just this heavy box you have to carry around and not drop.

RN

Yeah, a client can just become another client, but then there are those that do stick-out. You do so many moves it's easy to forget. Sometimes I step out of the job and think what would people see us as? Sometimes they're like, "Oh you guys are young! I thought you were gonna be like 45 years old with back braces." Like the movers from [Happy Gilmore](#). Even in film, a lot of times, the mover is just there. They're definitely not going to be a protagonist or an antagonist. Though my buddy has talked about a horror film idea called, *The Mover*: "We know where your address is; we know all your stuff; we know how to open up the doors." You know, like a stalker/slasher film. For instance, we unloaded a job in Connecticut, and my buddy's like, "I feel like we're in a Stephen King movie, right where there's the opening credits. There's one of us pushing a box out of the way, and you

see the house!" There's this situation where, heaven forbid, I'm not even gonna say smarter than the client, but you show that you're not just an idiot, that you're well educated. Sometimes it can be a bad situation to even say anything at all, because you're already stronger than them physically. They need your help, and *you're the help*. I've seen attitudes really switch up if you show any sign of being something else.

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EG

Oh, so it can make people uncomfortable to have to see you as something other than just muscle?

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RN

Some people get that from the start. I've had some clients that are like, "You guys aren't professional right? You just do this on the side." And I'm like, "Yeah, you know we're all just good at doing it, but we all have other passions." It's kind of a cool job I can stay under the radar in. Sometimes I prefer that invisibility. It's comfortable. It's like an invisibility cloak. Then other times, you want to be looked at and not looked through... But, what's nice is that you get a lot of time off in between rushes, and that's when I get to paint. Like coming up now, I have four days off to just dive back in. And to get back into the painting it's like not stretching before you go run. You need to warm up, and then ideas just start coming and you can take-off after that.

EG

And you've had a lot of time to dream-up new ideas on the job?

RN

Yeah, you get a lot of humor. Luckily, a lot of the guys I work with have a similar sense of humor. Not everyone wants to joke around, but the day goes by so much faster if you turn it into fun. You know, like pretending a box is heavier than it is or saying a joke to a client. Recently we've been playing this game of shouting at tourists on the street that we just saw [Rick Moranis](#) walking around, because he seems like the kind of guy who could just be around and nobody would know.

EG

Does he live in New York?

RN

I don't know! I know he's Canadian, but we just tell people stuff like, "Did you know Rick Moranis designed that building?" Oh we just have tons of inside jokes. And I could bring some of them into painting, but I don't know if a general audience would get it.

Erik Gonzalez visited Robert Nava last summer in his Bushwick studio to discuss his work both as an artist and a mover.