

Alex Becerra  
with Fletcher  
in the artist's  
Los Angeles  
studio, 2015.



# THE OUTLAW

■ A DEEP SPACE JOURNEY  
INTO **ALEX BECERRA'S** ■  
■ HARD-PARTYING,  
OIL-SMEARED, ■  
■ TACOBELT-ED WORLD

*By* MICHAEL SLENSKE

## BEHIND

### THE FROSTED WINDOWS

of a nondescript 1,700-square-foot storefront in Inglewood, California, just a few minutes south of the world-renowned Randy's Donuts, billows of cigarette smoke envelop the Castroesque beard of Alex Becerra. The young artist is dressed in a blousy, cement-toned double-breasted suit, a plain white T-shirt, and camouflage-patterned Crocs with a half-cashed American Spirit hanging from his lips and what appears to be a Remington shotgun (but is really just a wax cast of one) in his hands. On the floor, to Becerra's right, his white German shepherd, Fletch, gnaws on a gnarly hunk of rawhide. Scattered around the dog are hundreds of drawings—in marker, calligraphy ink, and oil pastel—on papers marked with human and canine footprints and random leaves of stationery (some pilfered from local businesses, others handmade to resemble those from *Life* magazine or the old Heritage Valley Inn in Becerra's hometown of Piru, California). Small constellations of empty Rex Goliath wine bottles and colored milk crates—stacked against drawings and paintings of those very same bottles and crates—are tucked in the corners of this makeshift live/work space, along with painted Styrofoam sculptures of Igloo coolers and Coca-Cola bottles (embedded with a bladder for cocktails and a keytar, respectively).

While the optical overload from all this artistic flotsam and jetsam—not to mention the exuberant fashions for today's photo shoot, inspired by one of the artist's theatrical selfies—might seem excessive, it's nothing compared to the image bombs exploding from the thickly impastoed canvases lining the walls. In the span of a few years, these densely packed paintings have turned the 27-year-old artist into a critical conundrum and a market darling. At press time he holds fourth position on ArtRank's "Buy Under \$10,000" index, though some of his works fetch more than twice that from his dealers, which

now stretch from Hollywood to Brussels, Chicago to Berlin; he's spent the better part of spring making a series of air-dried sculptures, drawings, and a few oil paintings for an opening at Weiss Berlin this month.

Still, some have a hard time digesting Becerra's oeuvre. After seeing his fall 2014 solo debut at Ltd Los Angeles, "Las Putas Problematicas," which loosely evoked Picasso's nudes and Becerra's Mexican heritage, *Frieze* magazine had to "marvel at the self-granted freedom that allows Becerra to paint a picture that no white artist would dare put his name to." In her review of the 2015 NADA fair in New York, where Ltd brought a few more tough works, *Times* critic Roberta Smith labeled them "rude, cartoony pseudo-Expressionist paintings, thick and thin of paint."

Despite such mock-offended appraisals—or the fact that he's actually a very thoughtful and self-deprecatingly humble person—Becerra's bad-boy rep has only increased. He has become a minor sensation on the L.A. scene, where his air-horn laugh, Hunter S. Thompson sartorial sensibility, self-administered tattoos, and ever-present Polaroid camera always seem to attract a crowd at openings and fairs—where he's been known to run impromptu tattoo parlors or make performances wearing a so-called Taco Belt equipped with meats, onions, hot sauce, and tortillas...while wearing cowboy boots that have 25-foot hoses attached to the toes.

"Alex is a totally normal L.A. artist, and anyone who thinks he's crazy hasn't lived," says fellow Angeleno artist T. Kelly Mason, who plays with Becerra in the post-punk-meets-electro band Los Tres Pericos (a nod to L.A.'s Los Pericos tortilla company and the Spanish slang for cocaine). "But there's a point where rude gets complicated and you have to keep screwing with it and you have to get comfortable with the fact that you need to fuck with everybody here and there. It's that whole



Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy thing. But it's working for him."

Piru, where Becerra grew up, is a Ventura County farming town that has served as a film location for Hollywood westerns since the 1940s. Becerra is the third of four children of a truck-driver father and a mother who worked for the county helping ex-cons reenter society. His parents supported his early fascination with art, which began with a zine called *Teen Angels* that featured comic-style drawings by inmates of their girlfriends. "That was my first introduction to really elaborate drawings," he says. "The shading would be all wrong and they were really bad, but really sincere."

The artist soon found other inspirations: His loud paintings and Belushi-size persona are just part of an all-encompassing practice modeled after those of his mostly German heroes—Jörg Immendorff, Jonathan Meese, Werner Büttner, and Martin Kippenberger—who introduced him to "the idea of bad painting taken super seriously," he says. "I don't know if that's what people are responding to necessarily in my work. I think they are responding to the freedom I have with painting." That freedom occasionally needs assistance: "Sometimes I'll have a couple of

*Still Life with Fruit Bowl*, 2015. Oil on canvas stretched over panel, 72 x 64 in.

drinks to create problems in the paintings," he admits.

Becerra is intensely attracted to other painters who "live with their work": "It's so romantic how all these dudes, like Lucian Freud or Frank Auerbach or Leon Kossoff, had gambling problems or whatever, but they went to the studio, worked stuff out, and painted every day." The artist has been living quite intimately with his own paintings—whether in half of a one-car garage out by LAX or a 300-square-foot storefront in Venice Beach—ever since he left Piru to study at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles in 2008. "For one of the finishing projects at school, I was looking at artists like Kippenberger, who were kind of all over the place, but they made sculpture and drawings, and everything was related and functioning together. I realized that my drawings should be my paintings," he says. "In context, they can all work together."

The reality is that the artist's decidedly raw canvases—which are modeled after dozens, sometimes hundreds, of drawings—don't succeed or fail as a result of his unconventional subject matter, which ranges from prostitutes with cigarettes in their



vaginas to meaty palm trees to Op art shrimp cocktails. When they work, it's because he manages to master the languages of Cubism, abstraction, and figuration, and elevate the everyday to the level of the sublime, or playfully jab at seemingly dark scenarios (and art historical icons) while capturing delicate, often-times unsettling, moments of vulnerability that reveal themselves over multiple reads.

## “I WAS INTRODUCED TO THE IDEA OF BAD PAINTING TAKEN SUPER SERIOUSLY.”

Another instantly recognizable aspect of Becerra's work is his palette, which he characterizes as “ugly, 99-cent-store” colors. He adopted them after trying to render skin tones via bright markers purchased at the bargain store. “I end up figuring out a lot of color combos just from walking the neighborhood,” Becerra explains. “There are all these really bad Home Depot colors”—the Oops paints, improperly mixed at the store. Those off-tones figure prominently in one horizontally striped pink, mauve, and purple diptych featuring an arachnid-limbed, dog-faced woman pulling a watermelon from her vagina on one canvas beside the rearing head of a cobra on the other.

Often, Becerra's characters aren't quite anatomically correct—“but visually, your eye puts everything together.”

These muddy tones and triple-jointed creatures take various forms: numerous life-size portraits of the artist working in his white painter overalls; paintings of earlier paintings surrounded by outlined voids reminiscent of coloring books; a pimped-out version of Manet's *Olympia* wearing a tiger-print coat that dissolves into a white shag carpet, while a bottle of Ripple stands erect beneath a half-tumescent phallus; various perception-altering still-life vignettes depicting the everyday vices and vegetation inside the studio; and numerous neo-Cubist reductions of contorted call girls inspired by the advertisements in *L.A. X...Press*, the local adult-entertainment newspaper.

“A lot of these paintings are fantasies of mine,” remarks Becerra, who points to a drawing embedded in one of the Igloo coolers. In it, a creepy kingpin version of the artist whistles from the back of a limo while driving by a cartoony stand-in for his ex-girlfriend. Last summer in Brussels, at the Levy.Delval gallery, he translated the limo drawing into a massive painting whose rivers of oil seemed to amplify every unsettling aspect of the image by a factor of 10. It's the same kind of effect that led one female collector to close her bedroom door to avoid seeing a painting of his she'd purchased—it was simply too grotesque. “But now,” Becerra says proudly, “she loves it and has grown with it, and she and her husband want more.”

“The paintings that he's making are very bold and unconventional. They're also quite obnoxious, but he doesn't censor himself,” says Ali Subotnick, curator at UCLA's Hammer Museum,

who put Becerra in the 2012 Venice Beach Biennial. At the time, he was working as an art handler and making half-oil half-wax paintings and huarache-sandal sculptures from cuts of poured latex paint, which he sold alongside pizza boxes full of drawings from a stretch of sand along the Venice boardwalk.

Another admirer of Becerra's work is L.A. text artist Eve Fowler, who sold her own wares a few booths down from Becerra during the VBB. "Alex kept riding by on his bike wearing this flowery, flowing muumuu," recalls Fowler. "Someone kept saying there was a rabbi riding around in a dress. I was like, 'That's not a rabbi, that's Alex Becerra.'"

The day after the biennial ended, Fowler visited Becerra's house, saw his paintings, and offered him a show at her apartment gallery, Artist Curated Projects, where he showed various still lifes and a thick painting on a blanket of a band of mariachis gathered around a tiger.

Dealer Shirley Morales was another early fan. After meeting Becerra at his biennial "booth," seeing a self-portrait he'd done in another artist-curated space, and making a couple of studio visits, she offered him a solo exhibition at Ltd, her gallery on Sunset Boulevard.

"When I did the first studio visit, it was in half of a small garage space, and there were so many paintings in there that you could turn around and touch all of them," recalls Morales. "His love of paint and his fearlessness in applying so much of it really blew me away. It was very in-your-face, but there's a lot of vulnerability in his paintings. The subject matter really came second for me. I don't think of them as rude; I think of them as playful or taunting and teasing."

OPPOSITE:  
Two paintings  
in progress  
in Becerra's  
Los Angeles  
studio.

BELOW:  
*Las Ranas*,  
2015. Oil on  
canvas  
stretched  
over panel,  
72 x 128 in.

After working for a year, Becerra had enough for a fall 2014 exhibition at Ltd, including the self-portrait of his alter ego, Chach, drunkenly passed out over a wine barrel (*Chach (Half Gone)*); the reclining black male Olympia (*Rex Goliath*); a white-heeled, Angeleno-prostitute send-up of *Les Femmes d'Alger* (*Fresa*); and an elegant Philip Guston-like study of a female posterior woven through a white chair (*Brookstone Woman*).

Becerra also took the opportunity to showcase his facility with a tattoo gun and opened a parlor inside the gallery. In the two years since his debut, he has used Morales's space for one of his "TacoBelt" performances (notably serving Danny DeVito) and for the debut performance of *Los Tres Pericos*, who performed inside an inflatable TV.

Becerra is now looking ahead to a solo show with Chicago dealer Shane Campbell, which will likely take place in the first quarter of 2017. "Alex brings a level of authenticity and soulfulness to art that was absent with the recent embrace and quick dismissal of process-based abstraction," says Campbell, who plans to show a new series of square paintings with palettes integrated into the canvases.

While those works are undoubtedly a breakthrough for Becerra, they were mostly accidental. Last summer, he got a deal on ten 5-by-5-foot aluminum stretchers. "The size that I wanted was just too expensive, so I went to the overstock room," he says, noting that while the square format presented its own set of problems, he figured he could rise to the challenge.

"I painted a couple of them square, but I had to adjust the drawings to the format, so I had five left and realized if I just taped them off, I could use the rest of the canvas as my palette," explains Becerra, who begins painting his composition on the left of the canvas while using the sliver of space to the right to clean his brush and mix pigments.

At the time of my visit, he had completed two works from this new series, including a white-and-black nude posed on her knees atop a bed and a caramel-toned female in a yogalike child's pose. (Just below the latter, on the studio floor next to a lusty *L.A. X...Press* spread, lies an ink study for the image on stolen stationery from K.E. McCarthy & Associates, "Consultants in Executive Solution.")

"You get two distinctly different paintings. One is the image, and the other is the rub-offs," says Becerra. He admits that the serendipity of this new series may well be its most powerful conceit. "It wasn't like I thought, 'This is going to be a great move with the palette knife.' It's the same moves, just somewhere they're not supposed to be." MP

