

HYPERALLERGIC

Melvino Garretti on Making Art in Los Angeles Since the Days of the Watts Uprising



Melvino Garretti, "Aha Moment- Eyes See" (2020), low-fire ceramic with glazes, vintage textiles, 20 x 23 x 8 3/4 inches (all images courtesy the artist and Parker Gallery unless otherwise noted)

LOS ANGELES — On the foothills of Griffith Park at Parker Gallery, the Los Angeles sculptor and performance artist Melvino Garretti is having his first solo exhibition in his hometown in more than three decades at a former single-family home. Inspired by the apartment galleries in New York City's Upper East and West Sides, gallery owner Sam Parker began leasing the early 1920s five-bedroom home in Los Feliz four years ago and converted several of the rooms into gallery spaces. (Parker lives in a room upstairs.)

Born in 1946 in what's now known as Historic South Central Los Angeles, Garretti grew up around 42nd Street and Central Avenue before moving to Comp-

ton a few years later as a result of the GI Bill. "I grew up in what they call the East Side, but it's not East LA. Every time there's a rebellion, they change the name," Garretti said, referring to Watts and South Central. I met Garretti at the gallery, where he sat comfortably on a couch in a side room with a bar, dressed in one of his "costumes" (outfits), his white beard sticking out of a mask that barely clung to his ears.

Garretti's earliest recollections of making art date back to the mid-1950s, when being an artist was frowned upon in his community. "Ain't nobody make no living [as an artist]. You know, shoot, you better be thinking about working at the post office or some factory like McDonald Douglas, Bethlehem Steel, or Firestone," Garretti said. Similar to the way it is today for many young Black men, "you would have a better chance of being an athlete."

Just as Garretti was reaching adulthood, a traffic stop during the summer of 1965 ignited an uprising — known as the Watts Rebellion — that resulted in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and the National Guard killing 24 people, thousands of injuries, and dozens of destroyed buildings. That year, Garretti graduated high school with "the thirst to become an artist real bad." Two years later, he got involved in the Studio Watts Workshop, a community-led, arts-driven collective that was born in the aftermath of the 1965 uprising. Garretti compares the formation of Studio Watts to Black Lives Matter. "There were a lot of little

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social and art programs, and so I joined them.”

The exhibition *Vino’s Carnival of Ceramic Curiosities, or the Circuitous Path to Calamity* (a name that Garretti credits Parker for) features more than two dozen ceramic masks and sculptures spread across two rooms at Parker Gallery. Garretti’s sculptures center largely on his reinterpretation of common carnival games and imagery, while his masks, he says, “imagine the superhuman alter ego.”



Melvino Garretti (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

on the street, and the traffic is going by.” In *Vino’s Carnival*, Garretti explores the trials and tribulations of daily life.

“My heroes were John Coltrane, Miles and Thelonious Monk, Dexter Gordon and all the drug users.” After struggling with drugs for a while himself, Garretti says that this month he’ll be 20 years clean. He doesn’t express any regrets, though. Instead, he recognizes how his past is part of his process and jokes that he’s always admired artists that live “corrupt lives.” Later, he recited a saying that he attributed to Daoism: “Our wisdom comes out of experiences.”

Vino’s Carnival explores contradictions. The rides in Garretti’s carnival are empty, for instance. “It’s a calamity,” Garretti told me. “Things are so tragic that they almost become fun.”

The prolific artist reportedly produced all of the works in just a few months last year. The 74-year-old works out of a home studio in South Central that he describes as a mess. “I’ve got so much junk,” Garretti admitted. He credits Parker for being able to sort through “the junk” to curate *Vino’s Carnival*. “I really respect Sam, I don’t know how he could even see some of this stuff.”

Garretti describes himself as “more of an anthropologist than an artist.” Some of the textiles and materials that he used for the ceramic masks in the exhibition date back to as early as the 1950s and were passed down by his entrepreneurial grandparents — who at one point owned a laundromat — and other family members. “My great aunt, she made hats for the church women on [Central Avenue],” Garretti said.

Inspired by jazz musicians from the 1960s and ’70s, as well as the French New Wave and Dadaist movements, Garretti admires artists that reflect their surroundings. “Coltrane, when he was playing his horn, he wanted to make it sound like he’s

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