

Fragmenticos: Memories of Colombia.

by Adam Beal

Gitler & _____ | January 16 - February 21, 2018

When Colombian Security Forces shot down Pablo Escobar on the rooftops of his Medellín compound, Brooklyn-based artist Esteban Ocampo Giraldo was also in Medellín. He was five. Or maybe he was six, visiting his cousin from his hometown of Manizales, just a few hours away. It was a beautiful, sunny day, and the air must have smelled like damp trees and mountains, the way it always does. He was running errands with his aunt when the radio announced Escobar's death. Ocampo remembers celebrating in the car with his cousin as if all the evil on earth had just ended.



But Escobar's story was never his story, just as it wasn't the story of the Colombian population who lived outside of Medellín, Bogotá, and Cali. What he knew about Escobar he learned from the news, from the games kids would play on the playgrounds back in Manizales. The cartel's violence and Ocampo's family never crossed paths and so the politically charged commentary that has come to define Colombian art is unmistakably absent from the walls of Gitler & _____, currently displaying Ocampo's *Fragmenticos* until February 21st. The show speaks instead of a side of Colombia that's just beginning to step out of the shadows of drugs, wars, and cartels. A side of Colombia that's no less Colombian.

Ocampo's paintings portray his childhood in a mountain-top city surrounded by sunwashed fields, flowering coffee shrubs, and flip-flops next to pools. The scenes are rendered with the softness of a dream. Their large swaths of color hang together, teetering between dimensional rendering and an expressive flatness. A minimally rendered hammock sways between three-dimensional trees. Three ceramic shot glasses sit on a wooden beam floating in a grey world. A cigarette leans coolly on a Marlboro box that lacks both the Marlboro logo or its accompanying shadow. What the paintings forgo in figurative detail they gain in expression, allowing them to hover in an area of oblique focus somewhere between a vaporous feeling and a photograph. Ocampo has captured stills of his fleeting memories, achieving a seemingly impossible state of permanence.

How Ocampo intuitively strikes this balance between figurative rendering and expression, he either can't articulate, or won't say, though he knows when he first found it. Until he began his MFA program at the New York Academy of Art, Ocampo painted from photographic references—mostly people. Doing so provides a painter with a textbook's worth of information in the form of lines, shapes, textures, and shadows. But while on a two-month residency in Germany, Ocampo discovered the freedom of painting without references through the works of Matthias Weischer, Neo Rauch, and David Schnell. He discovered a world of color, space, and most of all, feeling, which could only ever exist in the mind.

When he returned from his residency, he resolved to paint only from memory. His paintings from that time reflected his loss of visual reference. He filled canvases with flashes of images, collages of himself left floating in spaceless abstraction. Then he returned home to Manizales after a year and a half of living abroad, the longest he had ever been away, and experienced the surge of appreciation that so many artists and travelers before him have documented upon returning home. New York City provided a counterpoint to his childhood in Colombia. As his past shrank from a seemingly universal experience to a distinctly Colombian experience, it gained value. He found a new subject in his Colombian upbringing, something only he could portray.

His childhood memories in Manizales didn't carry the amount of information he found in photos. They were more suggestive. Their unintelligible feelings and sensations lent his work an open-mindedness he liked. He could pull from a lifetime of memories and paint the ideal Colombian pool, or focus in on a particular handrail from one summer afternoon. He was free to play with perspective, not only painting from a child's upwards gaze, but the impossible top-down view of distant memories. In their simplification, the paintings became almost universal, inviting the viewer to interact with them by tapping into a collective experience.

Nowhere is this invitation to the viewer more successful than in his soccer paintings. In *Telarana*, a spider web clings to the top corner of a two-toned goal post with chipped paint. Anyone who grew up playing soccer knows that corner. Scoring upper-90 (placing the ball in one of the top corners) is like draining a shot at the buzzer or hitting a walk-off homerun. It's glorious because it's risky, almost arrogant. But get it right and everything stops, just for a moment, and that split-second of appreciation before the crowd erupts and the players make their way back to their respective sides is what every kid dribbling a soccer ball alone in the street dreams about.

Esquinas portrays the corner flags of two adjacent soccer fields. Visually, the painting appears almost throw-away in its simplicity, but the feeling it represents is full and precise. Fields placed so close together are a staple of public parks, which always host multiple games at the same time, their sidelines packed with parents, lawn chairs, and coolers. Stray balls constantly interrupt the neighboring games, and players have to yell from one field to another to retrieve them. This suggested energy far outshines the painting itself.



Ocampo's interest with each scene extends to, and stops precisely at, the feeling the memory creates within him and, he hopes, the viewer. The paintings act more as mental hooks than visual feats. As such, they don't demand prolonged study. They have the impermanence of a view from a car window, which lends the show a sense of movement. On first walkthrough, only a select few images will lodge themselves in the viewer's mind, but those that do will produce a kind of visual echo capable of stirring up distant memories and turning eyes inward.

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