

Art

Art review

Max-Carlos Martinez, “The Pursuit of Happiness (Is a Warm Gun)” After 25 years in New York, this self-taught Mexican artist finally gets his solo break.

Christopher Henry Gallery, 127 Elizabeth St between Broome and Grand Sts (212-244-6004, christopherhenrygallery.com; through Nov 1



Being self-taught has always been a defining characteristic of the outsider artist, as has a figurative distance from the mainstream art world. Painter Max-Carlos Martinez fits the bill in the first instance, but after more than 25 years of living in New York he hardly qualifies as naive. Still, his steadfast commitment to documenting his Mexican-American heritage in a uniquely methodical style (imagine Van Gogh flattened into the paint-by-numbers approach of Lisa Ruyter) has marginalized him. This solo exhibition, his first in New York, is long overdue.

The show comprises nine large-scale acrylic works on paper that depict icons of the Old West: cowboys and Indians, horses and maidens, etc. Derived from the mid-century movies and picture books of the artist's youth, these paintings read like the peyote-induced visions of a modern-day illustrator; their incandescent tracers and wavering figuration convey psychological uncertainty. *Tennessee Waltz*, for example, features a tiny Mexican girl with bright orange feathers sprouting from her green hair. She clings to the waist of a tall blonde girl, dressed in traditional Western wear, whose arms are outstretched. Who exactly is supporting whom is deliberately unclear—the former's feet do not touch the ground, and the latter's appear unsteady. Against a monochromatic sea of teal, this awkward pas de deux pulses with a cacophony of red, orange and electric blue, suggesting the vibrant suspension of an artist waiting for his due. Here's hoping that he finally gets it.—*Jane Harris*