

SOUTH SEATTLE EMERALD

Amplifying the Authentic Narratives of South Seattle

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By Beverly Aarons



VISUAL ARTIST JUAN ALONSO FINDS WELLSPRING OF CREATIVITY IN PANDEMIC CHAOS

What happens when physical distancing, gallery closures, and solitude leave an artist alone in his studio for weeks during one of the world's most frightening pandemics? In the case of visual artist Juan Alonso you get introspection, reflection, wisdom born from a deep well of life experience, and a brand new body of colorful and lively work. If you didn't watch the news and somehow ended up in social media "jail," peeking through the door of Juan Alonso's studio you wouldn't know there was a pandemic. You would find a solitary man intensely focused on his craft — prepping canvases, applying paint, and contemplating the work at hand. You would also find the tools of a visual artist's trade filling tables and shelves, finished work expertly hung on walls, and the buzz of Seattle's Pioneer Square neighborhood just beyond the windows. When I spoke with Juan about his experience during this COVID-19 crisis, he was calm and even upbeat as

he mentioned being more focused on making this time one of creativity and not just anxiety and fear.

"I think when I realized, 'okay, we're going to be quarantined,' we're going to be not socializing. I can't go out and meet people for happy hour. I can't go to the park. I can't do all these things that I would normally do," Juan said. "So at that point I decided, 'well, I think the best thing I can do is treat this as if I was given this opportunity to just work and not think about anything else.'"



Juan Alonso works on new projects in his studio. (Photo: Beverly Aarons)

And that's exactly what Juan has done to the tune of 10 complete acrylic paintings since March 16. His current work builds upon one of the themes he has explored in practice — horizon lines, specifically the horizon lines Juan would stare at when he was a boy in Cuba spending hours on the beach looking out at the ocean. The vibrant blues, purples, and reds fill the canvas, appear silky to the touch, and pop out against white walls. But this work isn't just about building upon what he has done in the past, this new work is about what he needs to express in this moment.

“I usually have several series of work going on at the same time, which usually baffles people because they want me to stick to one thing and I’m not a good rule follower,” Juan said. “So I like to just do whatever seems right to me at the time. I feel like if you’re going to be a creative person, you should be doing something that excites you at every minute. And when I’m creating, I want to be totally excited about what I’m creating.”



Juan Alonso prepping canvasses. (Photo: Beverly Aarons)

It's an excitement that's apparent from the sound of his voice and the intensity of his focus as he preps his canvases. But what is most impressive about Juan Alonso and his prolific production during this pandemic is that he hasn't allowed himself to become swept up in the chaos of the moment. How does he do it? How does he remain so prolific even as he is living during such a stressful time? The truth is that he's had a lot of moments that have prepared him for today — the death of his mother when he was five years old, the separation from his father when Juan immigrated to the United States, and witnessing firsthand the emergence of AIDS and the tragic number of lives it took.

“I lived in San Francisco from 1979 to 1981. And as I was getting ready to leave San Francisco with my partner at the time, there were these rumors that there was this ‘gay

plague,' that's what they were calling it. There were all these gay men that I knew who were getting sick and nobody knew what it was," Juan said. "There were people dying so quickly. And then of course when these tests came up, I got tested right away but it was still this thing where I wondered, which one of my friends is going to get sick next? And how long are they going to live? And how could I keep myself from getting this disease? And how could I make sure that I'm not the next one who's going to die? And it was very frightening because you feel like you're dealing with this invisible enemy kind of like how we are now. But I think maybe that is one of the reasons why I'm not freaking out as much, because I have lived through this before and somehow I've gotten through it."