

Art in America

Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio Captures the Materiality of Disappearance and Resistance

By Maximiliano Durón ☞ February 26, 2024 7:00am



Detail of Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio's 601 sq. ft. for *El Playon*, 2023.
Courtesy Commonwealth And Council, Los Angeles And Mexico City

While planning his debut museum solo at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles, **Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio** faced an unexpected setback in the form of a permitting issue. For the first time in 40 years, the City of Los Angeles wasn't going to grant MOCA a permit to open the elevated gallery at its Geffen Contemporary location—unless, for fire safety reasons, they were able to reduce the room's size by 600 square feet by adding several false walls. That solution didn't appeal to Aparicio. Instead, he proposed installing a sprawling work on the floor in the gallery's center, effectively eliminating the required square footage. The resulting work, *601ft² para El Playon / 601 sq. ft. for El Playon* (2023), measures exactly 601 square feet. "How much more site-specific can you get than [designing around] a permitting issue?" Aparicio quipped as we walked through his exhibition.

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“El Playon” of the work’s title refers to a black scar that a volcanic eruption left in the earth more than a hundred years ago, just outside El Salvador’s capital city. The same area was used as a dumping ground for the bodies of the disappeared during the country’s 1980–92 civil war. Matching the shape of El Playon, *601ft²* comprises some 1,500 pounds of molten amber that mimics flowing lava as it’s poured over a collection of various objects: volcanic stones, specially fabricated ceramic bones, and various items found in MacArthur Park, a main hub for the Salvadorean community in LA. It also includes letters and newspaper clippings related to the civil war that are difficult to read through the amber shell. After the show opened, Aparicio learned that the body of his half-sister had been discovered in El Playon by their father, artist Juan Edgar Aparicio, who fled El Salvador shortly afterward.



Installation view of the exhibition “MOCA Focus: Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio,” 2023–24, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Courtesy Museum Of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles/Photo Jeff McLane

Now, Aparicio is working on a new amber work for this year’s Whitney Biennial. He is drawn to amber that trees secrete as a healing mechanism. But he also plans eventually to reiterate *601ft²*. Each new version will be, literally, darker: the artist plans to add a new layer of poured amber, further obscuring the documents and objects. “This is the most visible it’ll ever be,” Aparicio said. “That’s how memory works, how time works: you forget about it, archives are erased or destroyed.”

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This impulse to capture something before it's gone also appears in another ongoing series, "Caucho (Rubber)." In 2016 Aparicio started casting the bottom portions of *Ficus* trees, a non-native genus ubiquitous across LA, where, for decades, it has been subject to removal efforts. He applies a layer of rubber made from the Indigenous Salvadorean *Castilla elastica*, or Panama rubber tree. Aparicio leaves the rubber on the tree for several weeks before slowly pulling it off, creating a realistic impression of the tree's bark: the knots and whorls, man-made carvings and graffiti, the discoloration from car exhaust and other pollution. At first, the "Caucho" works were faithful reproductions of the trees that hung from the wall like unstretched paintings. More recently, they are becoming more sculptural, as he's started to incorporate new elements in them, like shards of glass or ceramic thorns. Now, he's painting on their surfaces and stuffing some with the cotton fibers from ceiba (kapok) tree seeds.

These works powerfully evoke the unique Los Angeles cityscape. Aparicio was "interested in levels of human interaction that are recorded on the surface," he said. Most of the trees he cast have since been cut down, and these works now serve as the only record of their existence, their previous lives, the marks imprinted on them. *Ficus* trees still abound across Los Angeles. There's a municipal waiting list for the trimming of *Ficus* trees; the wait is upward of 10 years. The wait for tree removal is much longer. Aparicio added, "All to say, they can't get rid of us even if they wanted to."