



MARC TRUJILLO
FAST FOOD



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What force of attraction draws an artist to their subject? Finding a worthy focus and the ideal approach is a mysterious and highly personal process, and surprisingly, a relatively modern one. Before the nineteenth century much of the art we now revere came about through the desires of wealthy institutions (church, monarchy) and individuals (landowners, merchants). Today there are few constraints on artists, and because of these nearly limitless possibilities, that process is even more intriguing. How fascinating then to contemplate Marc Trujillo's captivating depictions of restaurant drive-through windows and fast food meals.

Trujillo grew up in Albuquerque, New Mexico, a high-desert city of clear air and wide vistas, where most human activity is dwarfed by the imposing landscape. He began to draw as a boy, and the practice remains a central one for him today. Wherever he goes and whatever catches his eye winds up in one of his sketchbooks, where it will likely become a reference for paintings to follow. The significant question is of course, what precisely does catch his eye? An MFA graduate of Yale University, Trujillo studied with the renowned American artist William Bailey. Bailey once posed him a memorable question about painting: is a painting an experience, or is it a representation of an experience that references something outside itself? For instance, does a painting of the Egyptian pyramids make you think of the actual pyramids in Egypt, or do you respond to what appears on the canvas in front of you? Trujillo's focus on these mundane episodes of everyday life, what he calls, "places from the middle ground of common experience," is an ongoing response to that question.

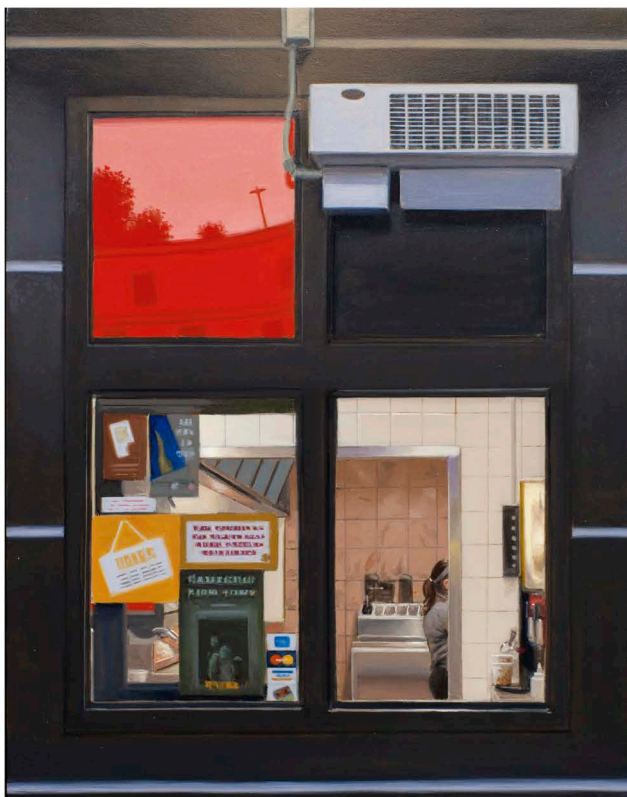
Now a resident of Los Angeles, Trujillo can hardly avoid the banal public spaces that mark the Southern California landscape—its commercial sprawl of gas stations, big box stores, and fast food chains—what he calls *American Purgatory*, (also the title of his recent book). Both omnipresent and apparently unremarkable, these places offer convenience and consistency over quality and originality, functioning as dependable dispensers of basic, familiar products. "People don't go to be there," says Trujillo. Despite, or more accurately, because of his conflicted feelings toward them, he realized there was "something about what I saw that made me want to paint it." So, rather than trying to escape, he moved in closer.

A careful look at Trujillo's work reveals him to be a meticulous and sophisticated artist. As an admirer of seventeenth-century masters Johannes Vermeer and Diego Velasquez, he researched their slower, more methodical artistic processes and adopted many of them. He cuts individual panels for each of his paintings, rather than adjusting a composition to fit a pre-existing support. As they did, he begins each piece with a drawing, working from his detailed sketchbook studies for reference. Finally, he follows with a classic grisaille (gray-toned) underpainting—now an essential step for working out the formal and tonal properties of a composition. Only after its completion does he begin to apply color. Paradoxically, in an unexpected juxtaposition of style and content, he brings these traditional, time-consuming methods to bear not on classical landscapes or portraits, but on drive-through restaurant windows and plates of nachos and cokes.



“ONCE I DECIDE IN A LARGER SENSE WHAT INTERESTS ME,
LIGHT IS WHAT I AM ACTUALLY PAINTING”—LIGHT
IS REALLY WHAT I’M GETTING AT.”

— MARC TRUJILLO



yellow denotes the interior boundary. Our eye travels between the notices taped to the refrigerator, the young men working, and the decal on the surface of the window, finally landing us outside awaiting our order.

Throughout the past decade Trujillo has continued to explore a broad range of these distinctively American interfaces, zeroing in on their quirky individuality and their often mind-bending lighting effects. In *300 Lomas Boulevard NE* (2018), his usual square format turns horizontal to encompass the location's longer series of windows. The dramatic contrast between the two main elements—a small, well-lit interior and its surrounding expanse of cool, reflection-charged exterior glass—generates all the action. As Trujillo notes, “Once I decide in a larger sense what interests me, light is what I am actually painting—light is really what I’m getting at.” The buttery yellow glow issuing from that captivating central space immediately draws us in. Reflections dance off the tile wall and the backs of the busy workers and issue from the oversize drink sign. But the blue gloom of the surrounding panes soon pulls us towards the less inviting, and lonelier world outside. A disjointed, wavering view of the street opposite comes into focus—its streetlight and apartment windows clarify in a series of skewed but absolutely convincing reflections. A subtler ambient light reflects off of the plant leaves and drops a few shadows from the vents above. Trujillo has orchestrated a remarkable scene that invites us to slip through multiple, color-generated dimensions.

Trujillo’s observational virtuosity flourishes in these reflective and refractive environments. In the 2018 painting *14645 Roscoe Boulevard*, a fairly straightforward two-paned restaurant window rests above a bland course of bricks, a worker and coffee machine visible through the glass. But the plain façade transforms completely with Trujillo’s extraordinary rendering of its surrounding red tile border. He conveys the most evanescent details tile by tile—the cloudy orange-tinged sunset with bits of clear blue sky peeking through, a shadowy, fragmented tree—all of which could dissolve in an instant with the merest shift of position or alteration of light. Despite its dramatic intensity, the passage maintains the painting’s compositional balance, merging believably with the rest of the scene—the surrounding gray border, video camera above, and two small windows. “All parts of the painting have to agree, to convey a sense of light,” he says. It’s like a crime where all the alibis have to match up or you don’t get away with it.” Without question, in another *tour de force* demonstration, Trujillo makes a clean getaway.

In the painting *1919 Pico Boulevard* (2018), Trujillo takes a deeper look into the intriguing puzzle of visual perception. Four distinct images produced by light alone play out on the restaurant’s ordering window. At top left, a reflection of the buildings on the opposite street appears in bright sundown vermillion; to the right a blackened pane hides its interior and is itself partially hidden by an air conditioner vent; then just below, a transparent pane allows us a glimpse at the stove and worker inside; and lastly, the surface of the glass itself, plastered with decals, labels and signs, is the focus. Glass changes dramatically depending on the angle and quality of light, and he takes full advantage of all its anomalies here to point out these small visual marvels. As Trujillo notes, “this kind of close attention is always surprising.” He invites us to consider our casual acceptance of appearances and to move in for a closer look. In a new context, even the most familiar things can become remarkable.

Although Trujillo works in an essentially photorealist mode, creating an exact facsimile in paint is far from his objective. Stylistically, the drive-through windows have more in common with Piet Mondrian’s flat and gridded geometric arrangements than with a photograph, despite their apparent visual accuracy. Reflecting his deadpan titles that simply state the street address of each location, the paintings offer no personal cues or dramatic vantage points to suggest a particular narrative. Permeated with an aura of isolation, these straightforward glimpses of what Trujillo calls the “horror of our modern life—being no one, being nowhere,” are today’s everyday occurrences. A sense of solitude permeates the fast food paintings as well. Other than perhaps hunger, no commentary is offered (and titles provide none). Yet we are not just disinterested spectators looking through the window of the picture plane to admire the view. Trujillo makes us his unseen but essential participant, standing alone at the ordering window or sitting at the table preparing for a meal.

In *6182 Sepulveda Boulevard* (2008), one of Trujillo’s earliest drive-through paintings, a close-up view centers on the ordering window’s two narrow rectangles. Through one side, two figures in blue shirts attend to their work but on the other only bland walls, stark metallic surfaces, and a tangle of exposed hoses fill the space—that isolating “nowhere” to which Trujillo alludes. Yet in this apparently straightforward depiction Trujillo makes use of some wonderful compositional strategies. He highlights that lone protruding elbow and centers it within the transparent gap of the restaurant’s bright red emblem. He wields primary colors like pathfinders—red moves toward us, blue draws us in,



Trujillo's paintings of fast food meals, called "Combos," work in just this eye-opening manner. He reenvisioned our now ubiquitous American snacks into postmodern still lifes, picked out in glorious "Technicolor" verisimilitude. Nothing superfluous interferes with these minimalist meals; only essentials are included. Every detail is exacting except for one—the product lettering. Texts, signs and logos seem recognizable, yet none are actually legible. Trujillo employs this same strategy in his drive-through window paintings, and with good reason. He believes, "people latch on to text really hard in paintings, looking for meaning." He goes on to say, "I like the text to be a little bit muted. Ultimately I am making something to be looked at. The way things look is much more open ended and interesting to me than ascribing meaning." He recognizes that once language is engaged, a painting can no longer be purely an experience of time and place, or even an appreciation of a created scene, but becomes a conceptual device to decipher and to contextualize.

Arranged with precision on its tray, each item of food in *Combo 1* (2015) sparkles with neon highlights. Every potato spear is picked out precisely in its little paper pocket, and its two accompanying condiment cups of ketchup glow velvety red. A napkin-wrapped burger and tall cup of soda, with an astoundingly rendered plastic lid and straw, complete the meal. Millions of similar meals have been served and devoured, but Trujillo gives this food a rare aesthetic visibility. In *Combo 3* (2012), he seats us outside, likely under an umbrella, the sun low in the sky behind our right shoulder. The shadows and toned raking light situates us precisely in the space and time for a late summer snack, and turns an ordinary hotdog and fries into objects of marvel and an

experience of nostalgia. In a very different take, *Combo Slice* (2016) brings us to a featureless, cafeteria-style table in a dim airport-like space. This otherwise barren surface holds only a slice of pizza, partially exposed under its spectacularly realized sheet of aluminum foil, and an icy cola. Most of these food items—hot dogs, hamburgers, French fries, nachos, pizza and sodas—would be recognizable the world over, but rarely have they been graced with such devout observation and reverent attention.

Fast food culture would hardly be the prime subject of choice for most artists. In fact, as an American, Marc Trujillo admits to being slightly embarrassed that we've populated the world with these banal spaces, yet he also admits to patronizing them. His ambivalence, which lured him into a close examination of what initially was slightly repellent, only heightens the magnetism of this work. Out of contradictory feelings Trujillo proves that even in the most familiar situations, we can awaken to amazement at what is right before our eyes. He often quotes a line from the poet W. H. Auden: "Poetry is the precise expression of mixed feelings." It's a wonderfully accurate description of this body of work. Trujillo does not intend his art to be a conceptual commentary on American culture but a revelation, so that we might experience the ordinary in a totally new way and discover what, if anything, the image is really communicating and what that means to us. And, unlike the actual places, the longer you stay with the paintings, the more intriguing they become.

—Helaine Glick, Independent Curator



Cover:

6182 Sepulveda Boulevard, 2008, oil on polyester, 8 x 8 inches

Inside Flap:

Combo 3, 2012, oil on polyester, 18 x 18 inches

Combo Slice, 2016, oil on polyester over aluminum panel, 15 x 20 inches

Inside Panels:

300 Lomas Boulevard NE, 2018, oil on panel, 8 x 19 inches

1919 Pico Boulevard, 2018, oil on panel, 11 x 8 inches

14645 Roscoe Boulevard, 2005, oil on panel, 12 x 12 inches

Back Cover:

Combo 1, 2013, oil on panel, 16 x 20 inches

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