

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

5216 Montrose Boulevard
Houston, Texas 77006
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Trust Artists.

Press Release

Exhibition

Mario Ayala: Seven Vans

November 14, 2025–June 21, 2026



Mario Ayala, *Mickey Mouses*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas. 76 x 42 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, California and New York, New York. Photo: Grant Guiterriez.

HOUSTON, TX (October 7, 2025) – Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH) is excited to announce *Mario Ayala: Seven Vans*, the artist's first solo museum presentation in the United States. The exhibition expands his signature shaped canvases to debut seven life-size paintings of the backs of vans. Derived from the word caravan, the van bridges histories of commerce and counterculture and acts as a tool for working people to modulate as a means of survival and expression.

Press Contact

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Ayala's paintings begin with photographs. As part of his ongoing series *RWD (Research While Driving)*, the artist uses his phone to document moments from his daily life. While looking through this image archive, Ayala noticed a recurring focus: the distinctive shapes of the backs of vehicles. For *Seven Vans*, he chose the van as the central subject, designing custom wooden stretchers—or frames used to stretch and support canvas—shaped like vehicle silhouettes.

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Mario Ayala, *Camouflage* (detail), 2025. Acrylic on canvas. 65.75 x 75 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, California and New York, New York. Photo: Grant Guiterriez.

Each painting channels the sensibility and personality of its owner, functioning like a pseudo-portrait. Creating *Seven Vans* as a collective ensemble, Ayala has rendered members of his neighbors and surroundings without depicting their faces. Based on the artist's real-life observations—outside his laundromat, dentist office, and skate park—Ayala invites us to engage parasocially with imagined lives.

Like Ayala's home of Los Angeles, Houston is a city where cars are central to daily life. Yet for many people here, a car is more than just transportation—it is a form of self-expression. Nowhere is this more vivid than in Houston's contribution to American car culture: slabs. Short for "slow, loud, and bangin'," slabs emerged from Houston's hip-hop scene in the 1990s. With custom paint, candy-colored finishes, and booming sound systems, slabs turn the street into a stage.

In Ayala's paintings, we see the many lives and possibilities shaped within vans. Their exteriors become informal billboards, created with limited financial means and strong creative vision. Though no figures appear, their presence is felt through body modifications, dents, decals, and glimpses of the interiors: eyeglasses on the visor or a water bottle stashed in the back. These details offer subtle snapshots of lives in motion, shaped by work, taste, and personality.

"Ayala's impactful engagement with car culture encourages a fresh look at both vehicles and the spaces they occupy," says Curator Patricia Restrepo. "*Seven Vans* is designed to resemble a parking garage, with each vehicle frozen like a performer mid-scene. This eerie stillness may feel all too familiar in Houston, where more than a quarter of downtown is paved with parking lots and garages."

Ayala prepared his canvases using stencils and industrial painting methods such as airbrushing. For some of the works, such as *Mickey Mouses* (2025), he then layered on thick brushstrokes—known as impasto—to create rich textures atop his usually smooth surfaces. This brushwork mimics real-life imperfections: faded stickers, patchy repairs, and DIY paint jobs.

Known for his application of industrial painting techniques such as airbrushing, Ayala produces witty graphic mashups and *trompe l'oeil* (or optical tricks) on shaped canvases. The artist draws from visual traditions linked to his home in California, including Mexican-American muralism, body tattooing, highway signage. Ayala's connection to the automotive community stems from his father's love of automobiles and work as a truck driver, alongside the artist's own lifelong interest in car customization and lowrider culture.



Mario Ayala, *Hot Rod* (detail), 2025. Acrylic on canvas. 70 x 79 x 1 1/2 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, California and New York, New York. Photo: Grant Guiterriez.

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Mario Ayala, *Cosmetic*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas. 62 x 75 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles, California and New York, New York. Photo: Grant Guiterriez.

“Growing up in California, cars have always been my means of transportation,” says artist Mario Ayala. “I daydream a lot while driving, and *RWD (Research While Driving)* developed from this process. Over the course of six years, I’ve been documenting the rear perspective of each vehicle encounter. Houston’s identity reminds me of Southern California with its sprawling space, car dependent roads, and diverse communities.”

Ayala brings dignity to subjects that are often seen as undignified—sights of the everyday, historically overlooked cultural forms, and commercial art. He is concerned with the Chicana art tradition of *rasquache*, a sensibility introduced by Texas-based art historian Tomás Ybarra-Frausto that is characterized by irreverence and resourcefulness in pursuit of cultural empowerment and resistance.

Seven Vans centers the hybridity that defines Ayala’s work: the interplay of presence and absence, of fine art and popular culture. Through this singular blend, Ayala crafts a personal and imaginative visual vocabulary.

Mario Ayala: Seven Vans is organized by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston and curated by Patricia Restrepo, Curator. The exhibition was conceived by Hesse McGraw, CAMH’s former Executive Director.

About Mario Ayala

Mario Ayala (b. 1991, Los Angeles) reimagines a contemporary landscape where identity, observation, and the presence of material fact play equal roles. In his paintings, Ayala brings together figures and forms drawn from every corner of his experience living on the West Coast. Ayala’s work lends interest in traditions and techniques with strong visual ties to California, such as muralism, tattooing, and industrial techniques used in automobile painting and commercial signage. Ayala’s highly personal, often surreal, tableaux are vivid representations of the way in which images course through the world, carrying with them fragments of the past, present, and a future still in formation. His creations live as collectively inspired documents that reflect issues, energies, and aesthetics alive in Mexican American, Latin, and Brown communities throughout the region. Ayala’s sculptures, site-specific works, and collaborations embody his capacity to envision the local and the global as interwoven phenomena. Like his paintings, they locate surprising and even unsettling—moments of cohesion in a world defined by multiplicity and rapid, ever-changing flux.

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Mario Ayala has been the subject of solo and two-person exhibitions at CAC Málaga, Spain (2024); David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles (2023); Jeffrey Deitch, New York (2022), and Ever Gold [Projects], San Francisco (2021). Recent group exhibitions include *Xicana-a.o.x. Body*, Pérez Art Museum Miami (2024) and The Cheech Marin Center for Chicano Art & Culture at the Riverside Art Museum (2023); *Sitting on Chrome: Mario Ayala, rafa esparza, and Guadalupe Rosales*, SFMOMA, San Francisco (2023–2024); *Together in Time: Selections from the Hammer Contemporary Art Collection*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2023); *Hot Concrete: LA to HK*, K11 Musea, Hong Kong (2022); and *Made in L.A. 2020: a version*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2020). His work is in the permanent collections of institutions including the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and Aishti Foundation, Beirut. Ayala lives and works in Los Angeles.

CAMH Mission

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston presents extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally.

General Information

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is located at 5216 Montrose Boulevard, in the heart of Houston's Museum District.

Hours

Wed 11AM–6PM
Thu 11AM–9PM
Fri 11AM–6PM
Sat 11AM–6PM
Sun 11AM–6PM

Admission is always free. For more information, visit CAMH.ORG or call 713.284.8250.

About Contemporary Arts Museum Houston (CAMH)

Established in 1948, CAMH is one of the oldest non-collecting contemporary art museums in the country, and is internationally known for presenting pivotal and landmark work by artists recognized as the most important of the 20th and 21st centuries. CAMH's mandate is to be present, to connect artists and audiences through the urgent issues of our time, and to adventurously promote the catalytic possibilities of contemporary art. CAMH's programming, both in and beyond the Museum, is presented free to the public, and advocates for artists' essential role in society.

Support

Support for *Mario Ayala: Seven Vans* is provided by David Kordansky Gallery.

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston exhibitions are made possible by the patrons, benefactors, and donors to CAMH's Major Exhibition Fund: Anonymous, Chinhui Juhn and Eddie Allen, Louise Jamail, Sissy and Denny Kempner, and Beverly and Howard Robinson.

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