

# TexasMonthly

ART

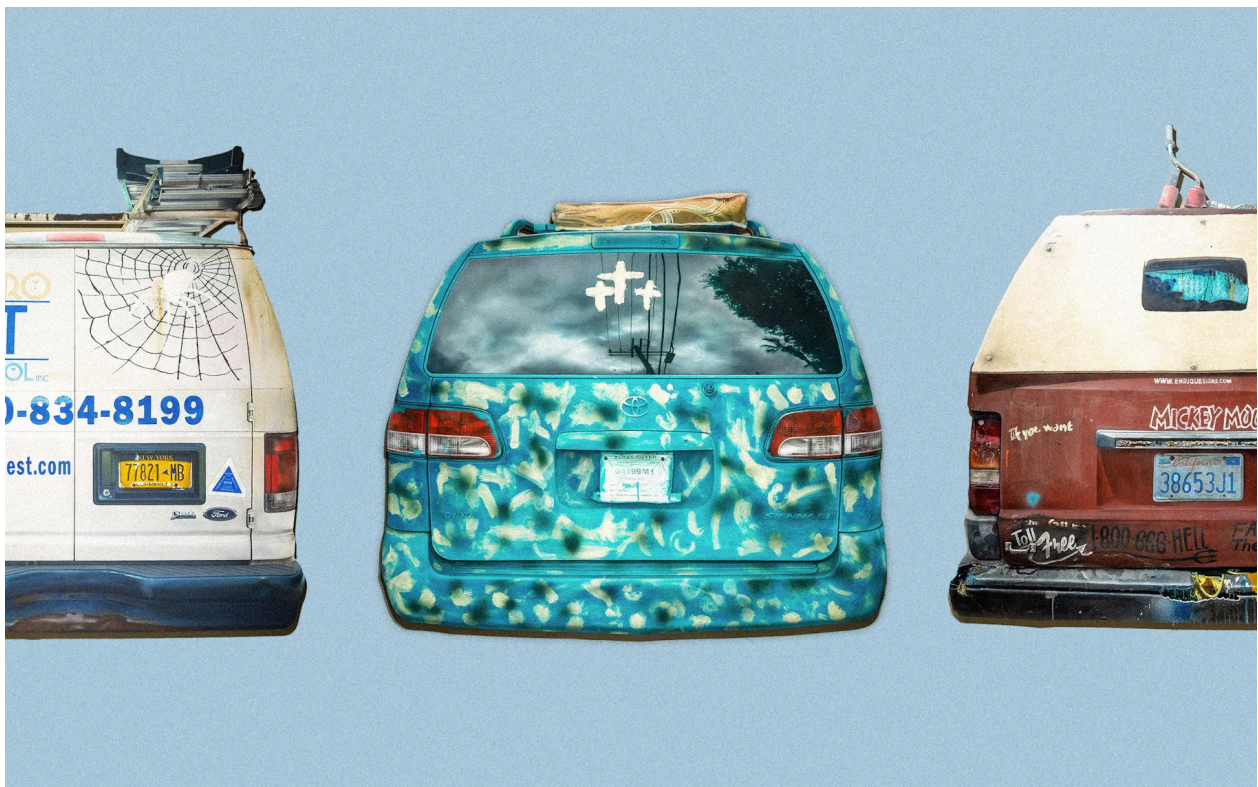
## When the Back of a Van Is a Work of Art

Mario Ayala honors Houston's car culture with seven life-size paintings in a new exhibit up through June.



By Sasha von Oldershausen

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"Mario Ayala: Seven Vans" at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. *Texas Monthly*; exhibition photos: Alex Barber

When artist Mario Ayala first stepped into the gallery at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston that would host his first museum exhibition in the U.S., he was immediately struck by the space: a subterranean, brutalist room rendered in raw concrete. It reminded him of a parking garage.

Thus began a dialogue between Ayala, the space, and Houston itself. Though the 34-year-old Mexican American artist lives in Los Angeles, he says he felt an immediate affinity to Houston for its likeness to Southern California—in both its sprawl and its function as a transit hub. After exploring a couple of proposals for the show with the museum, he created seven life-size paintings, each one depicting the back of a van, composed on shaped canvases using airbrushing techniques and custom paints. Each piece took between six weeks and six months to paint.

The effect of "Mario Ayala: Seven Vans," which opened in November and runs through June 21, is striking. When I walked into the gallery, I too had the impression I was in a parking garage, surrounded by vehicles that weren't my own.



Installation view of "Mario Ayala: Seven Vans" at Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2025.  
Alex Barber

"We envisioned this as a space that I imagine will feel familiar to many Houstonians," says Patricia Restrepo, the show's curator. "Over a quarter of downtown Houston is covered in parking garages." The paintings are facsimiles of vehicles that Ayala encountered in real life—snapshots that he took while on the road. Ayala has hundreds of these photos in his archives. Who hasn't grabbed their phone to capture a funny bumper sticker, an ironic vanity plate, a Cybertruck wrapped in fur? It's a shared ritual, the documentation of the cars around us. And the vehicles themselves become a site of self-expression, a moving extension of the driver. But in Ayala's case, the details that drew him to the vans he showcased felt far less obvious.

"I think my interest has always been of things that maybe are banal to some," Ayala says. "I've always been interested in the things that people sort of pass over, the unobvious." One of the vans, entitled "Camouflage," depicts a teal-green Toyota Sienna with a temporary Texas plate and a facade painted with alternating brush strokes of light green and black. "Their choice of expressing an exterior paint application in a way that represents a perspective of camouflage feels like a political gesture," Ayala explains. (Noticeably absent on the vans is any explicit political iconography.)

Ayala alternates between referring to the pieces as "protagonists" and "portraits." And they do feel like portraits, in the sense that each van offers a glimpse into the driver's inner world—their identity, class, and personality. In a way, the rear of a car *is* its face: It's the plane we engage with the most while we're sitting in traffic.

Ayala says he was drawn to the van specifically for the way that it can contain "multiple lives lived." It toggles between leisure, commercial use, and living space. "Vans are meant to move multiple bodies or multiple objects," he says. "They're used for migration; they're used for commerce. Some are aestheticized with a certain cultural value; others have been solely purposed as advertisement."

The artist grew up in Inland Empire, a region east of Los Angeles that's steeped in car culture, known for its hydraulics scene, and home to the largest classic-car show in the country. His father was a long-haul trucker and a classic-car hobbyist who gifted Ayala his first car, a cherry-red 1967 Ford Mustang. "I grew up with a father who just loved vehicles," the artist says. "I think I always valued them because I saw him value them as extraordinary things that people could make." Still, the idea that customizations could be a form of art didn't really click until he attended college at the San Francisco Art Institute. "I started to think about them as these extensions of the body and painting and sculpture."

The vans continue Ayala's broader body of shaped-canvas works featuring the rear views of

vehicles—sedans, trucks, and oil tankers. Ayala knew the museum's former director, Hesse McGraw, while a student at SFAI. He says McGraw approached Ayala about doing an exhibition two years ago. "The idea was always in some foundational way to respond to the space," Ayala says.

Restrepo says the work felt connected to Houston's local culture—in particular, its Art Car Parade, an annual event hosted by the Orange Show, a beloved cultural institution that champions the ethos of DIY art, as well as the city's slab scene, characterized by low-slung Cadillacs and spiky wheel rims.

As a native Houstonian, Restrepo says she tries to support work that centers the specificity and texture of living in Houston. In Ayala's case, "Seven Vans" felt like a nod to Houston's vibrant car culture, elevating the aesthetics of the everyday to the level of fine art. Restrepo says it's even changed the way she interacts with their form: "I'm constantly snapping the back of vans and thinking about vans as moving billboards and artworks that are flowing through the city."

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