

BOMB

INTERVIEW

Mario Ayala by Rosa Boshier González

Exhibiting the personalities of vans and their drivers.

MAY 13, 2026



Installation view of *Mario Ayala: Seven Vans*, 2025–26. Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, Houston, Texas. Photo by Alex Barber. Courtesy of Contemporary Arts Museum Houston.

A Southern Californian living on the Gulf Coast, I was keen to see Mario Ayala's first US museum exhibition, *Seven Vans*, at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston (CAMH). Ayala's upbringing in the Inland Empire, which is home to the country's largest classic-car show, and his current residence in Los Angeles, make him an expert in the asphalt arteries of the American West. Few other cities understand the romance of car culture like LA and Space City: how our vehicles act as sites for gathering, self-expression, shared identity, and care. The former boasts lowriders and hydraulics. The latter is home of the Art Car Parade and the Slab scene with its spikes studding shiny rims while ripping down Interstate 69 as both decoration and warning.

Parking lots also harbor that vibe of tender menace. Walking into the CAMH's concrete cavernous bunker, I felt a sense of both familiarity and fear. The space captures the singularity and crowdedness of a parking lot. Life-sized canvases of vans float above the air without wheels to create a ghostly yet charged space. It's the little details that make me feel at home again: a bubble-lettered tribute to Mickey Mouse, an ad for Invisalign. This is the van as business venture and creative expression, as a body of work in many senses of the word. I see in Ayala's lexicon of automobiles, SoCal pop culture, and industrial techniques a profound mapping of memory, community, and place. It's a gesture toward collective identity without any demand for disclosure. On Ayala's canvas, the drivers' personalities haunt and activate the space.

González, Rosa Boshier, “Mario Ayala by Rosa Boshier González,” *BombMagazine.com*, May 13, 2026

Rosa Boshier González

Your work is steeped in car culture. How did you get interested in cars?

Mario Ayala

My father has always had a fascination with cars and motorcycles. When he moved to Inglewood from Cuba in the 1980s, he was immersed in the lowrider scene and had Monte Carlos with altered rear-wheel drive suspensions and hydraulics. He was once in an outlaw biker club. Growing up, we would go to early morning coffee and donut car hangs in South Fontana, where old-timers pulled out their hot rods. I would go with my dad on his trucking routes. He treated his Peterbilt trucks the same way he did his lowriders and motorcycles—with a lot of care and intention—so I think that rubbed off on me a bit.

RBG

Tell me about your Research While Driving (RWD) project.

MA

It started around 2020 as an informal way of documenting with my phone the rear-end perspectives of vehicles I came across in my daily commute and travels. The series didn't begin as a series; I had subconsciously been collecting these kinds of photos, and eventually they turned into a compulsive collection. Later in 2022, I started thinking of them as references for painting compositions, which evolved into the body of work that the *Seven Vans* exhibition is a part of. I love Ellsworth Kelly's paintings, and I've enjoyed seeing how his shaped works resemble and reference some of the forms from his photographs as he moved around in his life. In my research, the seven vans revealed themselves as a possible cast of characters that could be interesting for a subseries of paintings.

RBG

Are there specific details you pick up on in your Research While Driving—a dent, a particular sticker, a temporary plate—that signals an owner's story?

MA

It depends. It could be a truck's unique patina, a vanity plate, and so on. There isn't anything really specific. I'm just looking.



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RBG

Seven Vans, your current exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum Houston, is installed in the museum's basement space. You were drawn to this space. Why vans? Why in this particular space?

MA

CAMH's brutalist build and that subterranean space felt like a parking garage. As a Southern Californian, I had been parking my cars in structures like these all my life. I began considering a building's purpose and the context we give it. Some buildings are meant for parking cars, and others are meant to hold exhibitions, but the builds themselves share similar characteristics. I wanted to further explore this thought. There is for sure something poetic about these spaces; they are solemn and melancholic, vacant of almost all existence other than people occasionally parking or leaving. They are empty spaces with empty vessels that contain the residue and history of their occupants waiting for their owners in a purgatorial state.

RBG

The gallery becomes the garage. Obviously, the word *caravan* is rooted in trade. How do these paintings balance the global scale of commerce with the inner lives of the drivers you imagine?

MA

These seven vans have seen a lot of life, so I wanted to highlight that. They were all from different places, and there was a small effort to keep the vans true to where they were from, whether California, Texas, or Portugal. It was an attempt to think of the vehicle as a collective experience most of us have and will continue to have in some form or another. Each kind of vehicle dictates the potential and boundaries for a multitude of expressions. You might activate a vehicle's space differently depending on its functions and purposes. Vans accommodate several functions, whether it be personal or commerce, sometimes both, including services for globalization as well as commuting and migration.

In my previous paintings, the stretcher bars were symmetrical. For these seven vans, the contours were more natural, which lends to the vehicles' actual appearance and natural architectures rather than producing a fabricated, idealized version of a straight-out-of-the-factory car shape. This felt like a more humble, honest approach to these portraits.



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RBG

Mickey Mouses (2025) was the first painting you made for the exhibition.

MA

A lot of my RWD photographs derive from my daily commute or just moving around in the world, such as going to my laundromat. I would encounter this van in particular. It changed quite a bit every time I saw it. I later discovered that the owner, or the driver, was actually in my neighborhood and the neighborhoods of my friends. They themselves are an artist, a sign painter. It was evident that they used their surface, their automobile, as an extension of a canvas. The car bumper was a palette. It felt freeing to see this painterly van moving around in the world.

RBG

Can you talk to me more about the techniques you used for *Seven Vans*? Trompe l'oeil and airbrushing are prominent in your work. What draws you to those techniques?

MA

In *Seven Vans*, I wanted to expand on the way I was painting the vehicles, which was typically airbrushed. With these seven vans there was an attempt to introduce a variety of new and revisited techniques and tools to expand on my interest in the history of painting. I used oil paints, brushes, sponges, and sometimes very thick impasto painting.

RBG

Did you see connections between Houston and Southern California? Their architectures, car cultures, sprawl, and uses of space?

MA

There is a lot of crossover. They both feel impractical to get around without a vehicle. Not impossible, but perhaps not the most efficient. The amount of time people have to spend in their cars creates unique perspectives toward them. The freeways suggest a similarity between the two cities; freeways dictate how people measure distance. The freeways function as an artery that you're constantly aware of.



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RBG

There's so much collecting and exchange in this show. The exhibition includes several sets of archives: from zines like *Teen Angel* and *Mi Vida Loca* to YouTube playlists and QR codes. I'm thinking about shared modes of knowledge. Why the decision to include these archives of exchange?

MA

There was an intention to provide the viewer with a closer look at some of the research and archiving that plays a significant role in my studio practice, and the process of how I build bodies of work. I've always collected things and had the impulse to categorize and organize. I'm not sure, but maybe it's some kind of OCD thing of mine. But as I've matured, the things I've collected varied even more, and a big part of it has been my own photos and references for painting. Around 2007–8, I started making zines with friends, which felt normal; most of my friends were making zines, trading them, selling them, giving them away. It might have just been an era where it felt like low stakes and a way to self-publicize your own art and language. This is pre-social media like we know it today, so I guess it felt like the analog way of showing things you made, and it was easy to share with friends because it could be affordable.

"I've always collected things and had the impulse to categorize and organize."

— Mario Ayala

RBG

In the *Seven Vans* exhibition walkthrough, you talked about the commodification of rascuache. How do you resist this commodification while still working with and honoring the tradition?

MA

I think I meant more about the commodification of identity, which does lend to rascuache aesthetics. In the past few years, we've seen a growth of interest in artists who are POC and make identity-based work, and sometimes it has felt like an exploitation of personal language and imagery that ends up being a watering down of truth to be capitalized on. Not to suggest that my work hasn't done this as well. I'm definitely aware of how I may also participate in this idea, but it was a concern of mine when making the work for CAMH, which contributed to the reason for making these pseudo-portraits rather than more formal portraits of people.

Mario Ayala: *Seven Vans* is on view at the *Contemporary Art Museum Houston* in Houston, Texas, until June 21.
