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is a curator and writer. She is currently the curator of the 21st edition of TULCA Festival of Visual Arts. She has written for Frieze, Burlington Contemporary, Viscose Journal, Girls Like Us, and has an art and access column with Visual Arts News Sheet. She regularly contributes to public programmes and lectures, including at Somerset House, London; KW Institute, Berlin; Konstfack University, Stockholm; and Arts and Disability Ireland. Committed to anti-ableism in the arts, she published a free online access toolkit for art workers in 2023.

Cover image: **Fig. 2** *El Chapoteadero*, by Manuel Solano. 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 201 by 172 cm. (Courtesy Dundee Contemporary Arts and Peres Projects, Berlin, Milan and Seoul; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).

# Manuel Solano: The Top of Each Ripple

by Iarlaith Ní Fheorais • 26.10.2022

The first institutional solo exhibition of the Berlin-based Mexican artist Manuel Solano (b.1987) in the United Kingdom, which occupies the light-filled galleries of Dundee Contemporary Arts (DCA), is sparsely hung, evoking a dream-like atmosphere, as though one has stumbled into another's hazy, disparate memories. The exhibition includes paintings of various scales and styles alongside video portraits of the artist, loved ones, musicians, celebrities, architectural exteriors and domestic interiors. Developed by the artist with the Head of Exhibitions at DCA, Eoin Dara, the exhibition gives us a broad insight into their practice dating back to 2014.

In 2014 Solano lost their eyesight due to a HIV-related illness, marking a shift in their work. It was at this time that they painted the *Blind Transgender with AIDS* series (2014), which they describe 'as a joke [...] that they didn't take seriously'.<sup>1</sup> The series is imbued with a visceral sense of loss and anger; *Giving the Finger*, for example, is described by the artist as capturing a moment of defeat and its title is somewhat self-explanatory. In this exhibition, the first work the viewer encounters is *Triceratops* [FIG.1](#), which is taken from the *Blind Transgender with AIDS* series. The diptych depicts a brown triceratops lying on its side in a field of long grass, the trees in the background are set against a cloudy sky and a person in a blue shirt and a red neckerchief lies across the creature's abdomen. Dinosaurs are a recurring theme in Solano's work; as entities that we know existed but have never witnessed first-hand, they occupy a mythical space in the collective imagination. In the painting *El Chapoteadero* [FIG.2](#) dinosaurs reappear in the form of toy figurines, conflating the extinct creatures with childhood memories – both of which often come to exist somewhere between fact and fiction.

*Blind Transgender with AIDS* could be seen as a reckoning with one's identity, when the conditions of one's life and body shift, ushering one into a new world. Disability and transness reside in similar territories in many ways, holding a heavy symbolic weight that can leave little room to craft an independent sense of self. With this in mind, much of Solano's work following the series touches on the other vital elements that constitute a person's character, such as music, style and the people one chooses to share one's life with: 'all my work is a self-portrait'. This manifests in the pop-cultural references in the exhibition, including *This Fire*

(2014), which is based on Paula Cole's album of the same title released in 1996. The influence of music is also evident in the video work *Masculina* **FIG.3**, which samples 'Drive' (1984) by The Cars. In neon-hued Miami, Solano plays to the camera in a series of 1980s styled outfits, exploring the gendered particularities of the adjective *masculina* – a term that describes someone female who has masculine characteristics.

In the second, larger gallery, the painting *Sala de Espera* **FIG.4** depicts a scene of corporate banality. Through the framing of a doorway or window, the painting is dominated by a circular black leather couch with palm trees erupting from its centre. The floor is covered with a peach-beige carpet and the walls are painted a deep maroon. Upon closer inspection, small pin holes become noticeable along the edges of the painting. Working with a team of assistants, the artist marks out their layout with pins, string and pipe cleaners, which they trace with their hands and use as a guide to apply layers of acrylic paint using their fingers. The title of the exhibition under review is taken from a conversation between Solano and Dara, in which Solano described the process of deciphering how to paint water with their team for *El Chapoteadero*. To map the intricacies of how light passes through water, Solano and their team devised a map of the shimmering ripples: 'almost every canvas requires some degree of innovation. There's usually one detail or one texture that we've never painted before that we need to figure out on the go'.

Many artists producing work for institutions today do so with a team of assistants, although perhaps less openly so than Solano. The majority of studio assistants work strictly, and at times discreetly, to the artist's vision and plan, a system that is dependent on a hierarchy of authorship and value. In Solano's practice, their methods of collaborative production are embedded in the work itself; the partnership between assistant and artist and the innovations that this process engenders craft an aesthetics of access. This comprises more than residual marks and transcends the trap of representation. The value of authorship is still the lynchpin of the art market and Western art-historical narratives, dependent on the aura of a singular, artist genius. However, the techniques on which Solano's artmaking relies reveal the necessity of collective labour. Although not always explicitly referenced, for many disabled artists, support workers or assistants are vital to realising the work they want to make. Inevitably, this raises pertinent questions around access and collective authorship: should such workers be credited alongside the artists they assist?

When Solano lost their eyesight, they began to paint from memory, stating that when something comes 'to [their] mind and [they] like it, it's important enough to paint'. These images can encompass album covers, interior spaces, family members or the artist



themselves. As such, memory is a central concern in their practice, and a collection of home videos, *La Patita* FIG.5, situated in Gallery 1 at the opening of the exhibition, features scenes of Solano as a child dancing and singing at home and on stage. On the opposite wall hangs the aforementioned *El Chapoteadero*, which depicts the young artist playing with toy dinosaurs at the edge of a rippling swimming pool. Additionally, communicating a particularly trans sentiment, the diptych portrait of Solano's aunt Anna in *Oronda* FIG.6 reveals how memory can inform ideas of glamour and femininity. Viewed from the front and side, Anna's hair is coiffed, she wears gold sunglasses and earrings and her lips are painted scarlet.

The memory of spaces and their architecture also play a significant role in Solano's work, notably in the largest painting in the exhibition, *Liverpool* FIG.7, which is dedicated to a department store chain in Mexico City of the same name. The bottom half shows a familiar shopping hall, with its clothes racks, mannequins, makeup counters and display cabinets; two escalators in the foreground and the floor are tiled in the colours of the trans flag. The top half of the painting shows an abstracted mural of white, geometric bird-like shapes flying over twisting forms of earthy brown and orange. Solano has cited this mural as a key influence in their decision to become an artist, recalling their mother using it as a tool to explain how perspective is shown in a two-dimensional image.



**Fig. 1** *Triceratops* from the series *Blind Transgender with AIDS*, by Manuel Solano. 2014. Acrylic on paper, diptych, each 85 by 57 cm. (Courtesy Dundee Contemporary Arts and Peres Projects, Berlin, Milan and Seoul; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).

In Solano's own words, they do not have 'time for [...] cryptic and inert and sterile' art, which they certainly cannot be accused of producing. *The Top of Every Ripple* is a self-assured story of an artist's life and way of working – an expression of the memories, joys, pain and loves that constitute this existence. A generous and delicate exhibition, it provides viewers with a renewed vision of artmaking, which transforms inaccessible models that dictate how and who makes art.



**Fig. 2** *El Chapoteadero*, by Manuel Solano. 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 201 by 172 cm. (Courtesy Dundee Contemporary Arts and Peres Projects, Berlin, Milan and Seoul; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).



**Fig. 3** Installation view of *Manuel Solano: The Top of Each Ripple* at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2022, showing *Masculina*. Video, duration 15 minutes 30 seconds. (Courtesy Dundee Contemporary Arts; photograph Ruth Clark).



**Fig. 4** *Sala de Espera*, by Manuel Solano. 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 215 by 215 cm. (Courtesy Dundee Contemporary Arts and Peres Projects, Berlin, Milan and Seoul; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).





**Fig. 5** Installation view of *Manuel Solano: The Top of Each Ripple* at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2022, showing *La Patita*. 2021. Video, duration 3 minutes 46 seconds. (Courtesy Dundee Contemporary Arts; photograph Ruth Clark).



**Fig. 6** *Oronda*, by Manuel Solano. 2018. Diptych, acrylic on canvas, each 140 by 115 cm. (Courtesy Dundee Contemporary Arts and Peres Projects, Berlin, Milan and Seoul; exh. Dundee Contemporary Arts).





**Fig. 7** Installation view of *Manuel Solano: The Top of Each Ripple* at Dundee Contemporary Arts, 2022, showing *Liverpool*. 2020. Acrylic on canvas, 200 by 496 cm. (Courtesy Dundee Contemporary Arts; photograph Ruth Clark).

**Exhibition details**     **Manuel Solano: The Top of Each Ripple**  
 Dundee Contemporary Arts  
 27th August–20th November 2022

## Footnotes

- 1** Manuel Solano, quoted from “‘The Top of Each Ripple’ exhibition notes’, Dundee Contemporary Arts, available at [www.dca.org.uk/assets/general/MS\\_exhibition\\_notes.pdf](http://www.dca.org.uk/assets/general/MS_exhibition_notes.pdf), accessed 25th October 2022. All quotations by the artist are taken from this source unless otherwise stated.

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