

Meet artist Francisco Eme: Seeing through the fog



Artist Francisco Eme with his art installation at Best Practice Gallery in Logan Heights. (Sandy Huffaker/For The San Diego Union-Tribune)

Francisco Eme processes death and grief via a multimedia installation at Best Practice

BY SETH COMBS | CONTRIBUTOR
NOV. 27, 2022 5:15 AM PT



“There was no right way to deal with grief, of course,” Otessa Moshfegh writes in her new novel, “Lapvona.” “When God gives you more than you can tolerate, you turn to instinct. And instinct is a force beyond anyone’s control.”

This assessment could easily be applied to Francisco Eme’s new multimedia installation, “La Memoria es un Pájaro” (“Memory is a Bird”). To hear him tell it, the exhibition’s varying elements have been instinctive processes, a means of not only dealing with grief, but also a tribute to the fragility of life and nature. It is a stunning mix of video projection, photography and drawings, all encompassed by sound and nature. On display at the Best Practice space in Logan



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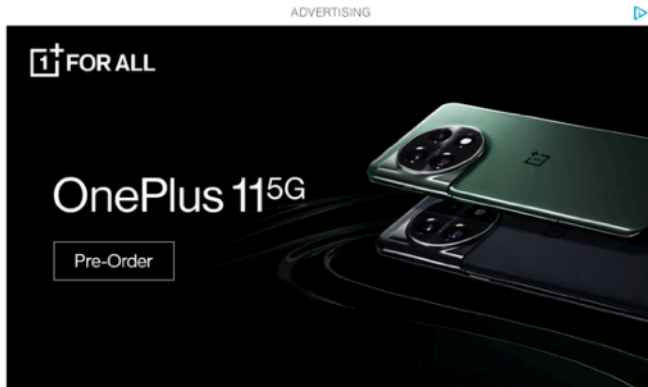
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recordings of birds and nature. On display at the Best Practice space in Logan Heights through Dec. 17, Eme says that the piece has been evolving since his mother's sudden death of cancer in 2019.

"The series is about death, but it's also about family and memory," says Eme, whose real name is Francisco Morales. "My mother dying was a big change in my life. I was trying to understand life, trying to find meaning. All of those thoughts became part of this work."



The initial idea for "La Memoria es un Pájaro" came to Eme after a Christmas visit home to Oaxaca, Mexico, shortly after his mother's death. While flipping through a family photo album, he stumbled upon a stark black-and-white image of his mother, his grandmother and two of his brothers at the Sierra de Chichahuaxtla mountains in Oaxaca.

"It was so beautiful with the fog, it's almost like a ghostly image," Eme recalls of the first time seeing the image, which had been taken in the 1970s. "I brought it home along with a few more images. Then, one day, it was foggy near my house because I live by a canyon. It just turned pure white and it was very beautiful. I had always taken images of foggy mornings ever since I moved here, and I just made this connection within the fog."

That original photo from his family's home, along with pictures Eme had taken of foggy days at his home in Paradise Hills and in Mexico, became some of the projected photographic elements of "La Memoria es un Pájaro." He says he began playing around with the images in programs like Photoshop, creating interlaced images and videos of the foggy pictures. He also incorporated a video of crows flying on a foggy day and the sound element within the piece are reinterpreted recordings of the birds.

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"I got lost a little bit in the grief," Eme continues. "I didn't know if it was worth it. Those questions like, 'What is the point of life? What is the point of making art? What is the point of loving somebody?' All those things that happen when somebody you love passes away. One of things that happens is that some secrets, some things that were silenced, they come out."

This is most clearly represented in "Se Quebró el Silencio" ("The Silence Was Broken"), one of the text-based drawings Eme made for the installation. From a distance, it looks simply like a drawing of the text, but if the viewer looks closer, the letters are actually made up of tiny, individual stamps of the word "ruido" ("noise"), resulting in something of a hypnotic, two-dimensional display of sonic action. He uses this same technique in other drawings within the installation, including a rendering of the Sierra de Chichauaxtla range (complete with the picture he found of his mother and family) and a portrait of his mother made from a text stamp that reads "pájaros" ("birds").

The original iteration of "La Memoria es un Pájaro" was staged late last year at the Galeria de la Ciudad at the Centro Cultural Tijuana. That installation did not include any drawings, and Eme says that those pieces were a "eureka moment" and wanted to include them in the Best Practice installation. He sees the drawings as something like a "bridge between two worlds," connecting the sound and visual elements via text. It's easy to see why he's come to refer to the piece as a "multimedia poem" and as an "experiment in language and sound."

"I've always flirted with other media and have found that I can communicate more with these techniques," Eme says. "One day I was at work and I was using a date stamp and I thought, 'Wow, this is like drawing with words just like sound art is like drawing with sounds.'"

This fascination with both sound and art began early for him. Born and raised in Mexico City, though he considers himself a proud Oaxaqueño, he grew up in an artistic family within what he calls a "bohemian ambience." He began drawing when he was 6 years old and also began to play music on the multiple instruments that were around the house. In his teen years and into his 20s, he played in pop and rock bands, as well as worked on his own music, admitting that he "forgot about visual art" for a while.

"In working within experimental music, I found sound art, and sound art is sort of an extension of music," Eme says. "It's art with sounds. It can be physical and so I found myself looking at sound installations and multi-channel audio installations."



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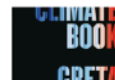
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He never stopped drawing, however, and he says that one day he found ways to incorporate his other artistic inclinations into the sound art he was producing. After moving to San Diego eight years ago, he landed a job with local nonprofit Casa Familiar as the Gallery Director of The Front Arte & Cultura gallery space in San Ysidro. Over the years, he says working there has helped him in his own practice.

"I think I became a better artist because of my work at The Front," Eme says. "I think I'm also good at what I do at The Front because I'm an artist. I've been on both sides. I've applied to galleries just like other artists, and I'm also receiving the applications, so that has been very enriching for both of my practices."

"Now I'm feeling more comfortable about it," says Eme, referring to the ways in which he's incorporated all of the elements to make a larger statement. "It's been a process."

He sees this process as continuing as well, with plans to further evolve the installation in hopes of showing it at other spaces in the future. But just as the grieving process itself, Eme says he's "taking it slowly" when it comes to the art.

"My next goal would be to show it in Oaxaca, because I think that would be the way to close the circle," says Eme, who adds that one of his hopes is to produce another video that features flying words and an even larger, mural-sized drawing using another custom-made stamp. "I have another series of works that I'm working on producing, but I'm taking my time. I haven't yet produced all the pieces I have in my mind."

Francisco Eme

Real name: Francisco Morales

Birthplace: Mexico City

Age: 41

Fun fact: In addition to crafting his own sonic recordings, Eme also plays in an electronic band called Rabbitlight with his wife Lucy Liebre. They are playing a release show for their new album, "Volátil," at The Front Arte & Cultura on Dec. 1.

Combs is a freelance writer.



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