

*"While Held by US Immigration, an Artist Sketches His Fellow Detainees,"* by Monica Uszerowicz for  
Hyperallergic, December 8, 2016.

## HYPERALLERGIC

# While Held by US Immigration, an Artist Sketches His Fellow Detainees

Artist José Alvarez (D.O.P.A.) talks about the 30 portraits he drew while detained at the Krome Detention Center in Miami. The drawings, accompanied by each subject's story, are on view at the Boca Raton Museum of Art.



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BOCA RATON, Fla. — In *An Honest Liar*, a 2014 documentary about magician James Randi, the narrative shifts to his longtime partner, the artist José Alvarez (D.O.P.A.), who was charged with living under a false identity. Born Deyvi Orangel Peña Arteaga, he fled Venezuela in the early 1980s. "It was a very violent environment for gay people," he told Hyperallergic. "I had guns pointed to my head by the military police." When his US visa expired, he obtained false papers, thinking it would be a temporary situation. It wasn't — he'd been Randi's partner for over 20 years when he was charged with identity theft. He was eventually detained at Krome Detention Center in Miami, where he spent two months in 2012.

He fell into a deep depression upon his incarceration, sleeping for days at a time. It was Julio, a fellow detainee who'd come to the US from Brazil, who encouraged Alvarez to draw, instructing the artist to sketch his portrait. This temporary balm to his despondent heart transformed into a project, *Krome*, now on display at the Boca Raton Museum of Art.

Krome Detention Center its widespread abuse, and many of the detainees find themselves sent back home — without their families, in spite of the lives they've long established. Alvarez drew 30 portraits and wrote down each subject's story, however personal, promising to share them upon his release.

# GAVLAK

LOS ANGELES | PALM BEACH

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The images line the walls of the space, a row of unblinking eyes that are often tender or harried. Panels next to each drawing indicate the subject's name, country of origin, and, below, their story. Then there is a section dedicated to Alvarez's "ghost drawings." "I started drawing these incarcerated men and then they were taken to be deported," he explains. "I have no name or country for them. But it's not as if they don't exist. That was kind of the point of this: to declare their existence." At the exhibition's entrance, there's a bright, colorful painting of swirls and butterflies; entitled "The Promised Land," it's the first piece Alvarez made upon his release.

Our new president-elect Donald Trump has, at best, condoned insensitive, prejudiced behavior toward refugees and border-crossers; at worst, his potential cabinet's ideology reeks of xenophobic fascism, of the social tenets that led to internment camps. It's fair to say that Alvarez humanizes border-crossers in *Krome*, but that might imply they need humanizing in the first place. They've always been human, bodies who've felt the transitions of place and space and the strange injustice of never feeling safe. Now, more than ever, we need to hear them. I spoke with Alvarez at the exhibition to learn more about the inception of his unexpected project.



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**Monica Uszerowicz:** *Tell me about the first drawing you made at the Krome Detention Center.*

**José Alvarez:** I was very depressed. I was just sleeping. Julio came over and said, "You can't let hopelessness take over. You need to fight it." He gave me paper and a pen and I said, "Okay, I'm going to draw him pretty quickly." That's why that drawing is so crude. When I was drawing him, Philippe came over; he's also from Brazil, and wanted to be drawn, too. Then someone else came, and they were all surrounding me, telling me their stories of why they came to this country: incredible, amazing stories of survival. The more they spoke, the more I thought, "People need to know this." I thought, "Who is going to interview them and talk about this?"

**MU:** *Were they comfortable sharing their stories?*



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**JA:** It was a very organic thing when I started drawing the people who were more talkative. Then I would put the drawings on the floor, so everyone could get familiarized with them. I explained it was for a project I was thinking about. Also, it's a pretty homophobic environment — they're all in this very intimate kind of situation, so I needed to have it all very open. They started to say, "I want to be drawn next." For me — and I think for them as well — art became this kind of ultimate act of survival. It was art not only as hope, but as a humanizer and as a savior. It became all of these things for all of us at different moments. It was a way for us to declare our own humanity, that we were not just human cargo.

**MU:** *Do they know that the work is here?*

**JA:** One of them — Yony, from Honduras — contacted me and said, "Thank you. It made us forget that we were there." He was able to get out, but I think every other person here was deported. I'd told them, "I promise you this is going to be shown in a museum, and I promise that it will be talked about." It was interesting after the museum's installation team left. I was trying to figure out how I feel. It's not pride. It was a project that belonged to all. I think the word is *grateful*. I'm grateful for so many things — that I was able to do this and share this. When someone tells me that they have brought their whole family with babies in hand, trying to cross a desert, with the knowledge that anything can happen, you are in a pretty desperate situation to take those steps. Who would?

That was Brahima. He was from the Ivory Coast. He slept for two months straight; he wouldn't talk to anybody. I asked him if he would mind if I drew him. But when I started drawing, he started crying. The next day, he asked if I would draw something for his daughter. I said of course I would, but I wanted to know why he was crying. He said, "Because I've never been drawn." What I think he meant to say was, "Somebody was looking at me. Somebody was acknowledging me as a person, seeing me as an equal."

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**MU:** *Our world has always been xenophobic and racist, but it feels like recently, more space has opened up for them to behave unabashedly.*

**JA:** Yes, but I feel that in telling these stories, you start seeing them as people — as your fellow man, hopefully. I'm not saying that everyone who comes here is free of fault, but I'm trying to open up a little bit of a window into the experience that is this immigration, this mobilization of so many people because there are simply no recourses. They are being killed by gangs. They have nothing. Roberto, from Guatemala, told me how he would go to soccer fields, wait until the games were over, cut the deflated balls in half, and use them as shoes. We have no concept of that level of poverty, of being so vulnerable to anything. It's important that in the longer conversation about all of these issues, you see all of them as individuals. It's about something fundamental — how we treat the less fortunate, how we treat the people who believe in the promise.

**MU:** *It's not really just about art itself.*

**JA:** It is about art, though, but art as a force.

**MU:** *An energy.*

**JA:** As an energy. I think art is even more powerful in that way. It's not determined by the rhetoric around it, but rather by its own intrinsic nature, which is what it needed to do at that moment. It did it for them and it did it for me.

[Jose Alvarez \(D.O.P.A.\), Krome](#) continues at the Boca Raton Museum of Art (501 Plaza Real, Boca Raton, Florida) through January 8, 2017.