

Navigating  
the In-Between.  
Othiana Roffiel



Sybaris Collection

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Installation view: *Through the Cactus*, 2020.

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Othiana in her Nepantla studio (February 2021).

IF YOU LOOK at the works of Othiana Roffiel from afar, you may get the wrong impression. Her artistic pieces seem intuitive and sensory. Emotional, perhaps. However, behind them there are also intellectual processes and deep investigations. Some of them may border on semiotics, that science projected by Charles Sanders Peirce in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century.

Othiana Roffiel plays with the titles of her works to add layers of meaning. Her paintings are playful and hazardous, but they are also like memory time machines. Among the less obvious aspects of her work is feminism, which she adopts naturally: away from pamphlets or manifestos. Some specialized media have identified her as one of the most striking figures of her generation. In it, formal risk is not a statement to describe her work but an inescapable slogan.

Like few artists, Othiana Roffiel combines her aesthetic interests with writing. In this way, she links processes of the language of letters with that of images. The result is remarkable: the meanings that emerge from her pieces point in different directions. Sometimes complementary; many others, contradictory.

Othiana Roffiel (Mexico City, 1990) unveiled in 2019 *The Persistent Insistence of Play* at Casa Equis in Mexico City, curated by Leslie Moody Castro. Her work has been part of diverse group shows in museums, galleries and alternative spaces in both Mexico and the United States. In July this year she will have a solo show at Galería Karen Huber.

## Interview with Othiana Roffiel

By Regina de Con Cossío

Some artists work with intuitive and emotional processes. Many others do so from a reasoned and even intellectual perspective. I have the impression that in your case there is a fusion of both. You have a solid discourse around your work but you also leave room for emotions to play an important role when producing pieces of art. How does this relationship between the rational and the intuitive happen in your work?

It is a to and fro; and it is precisely this swaying movement which generates layers of meaning in my works. Some layers—both material and conceptual—are more intuitive and others more intellectual. Still, they are not mutually exclusive, but rather operate in a continuum; they affect and constantly reconfigure each other. Sometimes it is even hard to figure out which is at work at a given moment.

Last May, because of the current pandemic, I moved my studio to the Mexican countryside—a different context from my usual one in Mexico City. When I first arrived at Nepantla—the birthplace of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, 17th century writer and poet who is now considered a feminist icon—I was inevitably enthralled by the region's flora and immediately felt the urge to paint the cacti that surrounded me. This drive was purely intuitive, it stemmed from a feeling, from a need, and that was something difficult to rationalize. Yet, once I started to actually work on these paintings a more analytical sort of thinking came into play and discursive layers started to emerge.

In *The Persistent Insistence of Play* there is a vestige of childhood, is that correct? The works have great aesthetic power. But the playful rhythm seems to be connected with the games that many of us play in our childhood at home or at school for fun. This relationship between your present SELF and your past SELF can be seen as time travel. A search for memory. How do you work with these concepts (time and memory) in your artistic production?



*Yet Half I Seemed*

2018

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas

32 × 27 cm

One of the things that most fascinates me in painting is *change* and change is inevitably tied to time. Earlier I was speaking about how meaning is constructed, but maybe a better word is “accumulated”—meaning in a painting is accumulated through time; through the time invested in the manipulation of the material, in the struggle to find forms which will remain, and in navigating (though mostly wrestling) from layer to layer. You think a work is finished, but then turn it around (literally and metaphorically) and realize it is asking for something else.

This is what happened with the pieces in *The Persistent Insistence of Play*, where the transformation didn't only take place in the many layers that constitute each canvas, but these mistakenly “finished” paintings ended up absorbing fragments (the cutouts) from other works, which later lead to the creation of 3D elements that became parts of the pieces themselves. The temporality of these paintings multiplied. After being made and even exhibited, artworks continue to change; how they are perceived is informed by the spaces they occupy and the reading of them evolves over time.

Now, about memory... Our memory is a repertoire of... well, everything! The spaces, hues, surfaces, shapes, compositions and relationships I come across daily inevitably linger in my thoughts and residues of these appear in my paintings. Sometimes I consciously take from this pool of information, but others I am not aware of it until it happens. I might mix certain colors intuitively and once the painting is finished realize that they are the colors of the building in front of my studio!

More so, I approach painting via abstraction and memory plays a crucial role in the processes that come with this specific breed of painterly language. When you are thinking and working *through* abstraction you are constantly searching for *things* (forms, colors, situations) without really knowing what they look like until you encounter them. An artist, I believe Amy Sillman, compares this process to rummaging for something in a dark room, except you don't know what you are hunting for. You might not be able to see, but your other senses are running. How you take in what you touch, hear, smell (and maybe even taste) in that obscure space is being informed by recollection. You sort through a pile of diverse objects and feel something, let's say, something soft, yet even though it's not recognizable, you inevitably associate it with elements you've interacted with in the past. But for some reason you decide that even though it feels nice and fluffy, that isn't what you are seeking for and you



*Growing Out of Them*

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas

32 × 27 cm

continue to move across the dark room. Then, you all of a sudden slip with an object, fall on your buttocks and after collecting yourself, grab the item responsible for the debacle and realize it's exactly what you had been trying to find for the past five hours (or five months). How do you know? You just do. Perhaps it's the intuition we were talking about earlier? You mentioned childhood, isn't this exactly how kids move through the world?

The dedication you have for writing arts texts in different media or for various exhibitions is remarkable. What is the relationship that you find in your work process between art and writing?

I have always felt a strong affinity with the written word, yet writing has played a different role in my practice at distinct moments—though I guess it has always been a way of making sense.

What drove me to art writing back in 2014 was a desire to understand my professional context (the local Mexico City contemporary art scene, as well as the international), but also a keen sense of curiosity for the diverse artistic practices that surrounded me that were apparently “different” from my own—painting. I felt that in order to comprehend these things I needed to write about them. I ended up composing reviews, articles and interviews for contemporary art platforms such as *ARTPULSE* (USA) and *Artishock* (Chile) on artists like Jill Magid, Fritzia Irizar, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, Mario Garcia Torres, Allora & Calzadilla, Abraham Cruzvillegas, among others. Yet It wasn't until 2018 that I finally dared to write about painting—I conceived the curatorial text for an edgy Ana Segovia one-work show, which led to further writings on the work of other painter friends.

With that said, today writing serves me other purposes and manifests itself differently than it did in the past. Though I've always known that these two aspects of my practice (painting and writing) complement each other, I had the sensation that they occupied separate drawers. Before I wrote to understand the enormity of the contemporary art world, now I write to probe on my own artistic processes and undertakings in order to grasp how these relate to my surroundings—yes, to the art world, but also to my mundane quotidian environment. I like to think there is more congruence between my writing and my painting now. You asked me about intuition and about the rational, writing



*Over Easy*

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas

32 × 27 cm

plays a crucial role in this to and fro, it helps me organize my thoughts about what is going on in the work. For me meaning is made in the conjunction of what takes place in the studio and what on a blank page. What I write about these days strongly corresponds with what is happening with my own processes. For example, ESPAC (a Mexico City based non-profit organization, born out of a private collection, which for the past five years has supported Mexico's artistic community) recently invited me to draught a text for a book that they will publish later this year: *ABCDESPAC*. My collaboration aligns with my own work not only because of the subject matter—painting—, but also because of the form the contribution takes. In it I play with different genres: the text draws from the epistolary ( it's structured as a letter), it slightly flirts with autofiction and it also has academic touches. I feel this mirrors what happens in my paintings when I come and go between languages (abstraction and figuration) or between formats (2D and 3D).

In this same sense, I find the way you title some of your pieces really original. In your case the titles of the works are not accidental. Is there a particular process when you name them?

In the case of my more abstract works, the titles are a way of opening the paintings to the lifeworld, a way of pointing to “something else.” They are random phrases like “Hanging my Shit Out to Dry: A Start” or “Over Easy,” for example, that mostly come from whatever it is I am reading at the time. I like to be playful. I arbitrarily pair one of these phrases—I have a list—with a painting to see if they work together. It is a very intuitive process, similar to what happens with the cutouts I mentioned earlier. Yet, in my most recent series *Through the Cactus*, the titles function somewhat differently as they reference the thing itself—the titles of the pieces include the scientific or common name of the type of cactus portrayed.

What are the artists that you find as references or inspiration? What processes or elements do you have in common with them?

In her book *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (2018), Isabelle Graw (cofounder of the acclaimed journal *Texte zur Kunst*) uses the phrase: “no painting without conversation.” I previously spoke about the different



*Whacked a Way Through*

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas

32 × 27 cm

ways in which my work comes about, well, another is most definitely through conversations—of course with artists, but also with other figures in the art world, which I might or might not know personally and may be living or dead. With each, I have a completely different sort of exchange and they enrich my practice in distinct ways.

Amy Sillman, which I mentioned before, taught me how to speak about painting in a manner that is simultaneously critical and playful. It's thanks to her that I can now put into words processes and ideas—specifically about abstraction. Elizabeth Murray showed me that it's ok to have weird, whacky, lumpy shapes and that for some of us, painting is about making conflicting things coexist. Last year, when I moved to the countryside because of the pandemic, Marsden Hartley and Georgia O'Keeffe motivated me to engage with the landscape; they helped me discover how the forms and colors I encounter relate to my own pictorial language and how place inevitably permeates the picture frame. Rachel Harrison revealed how painterly signs operate beyond the canvas. Philip Guston that “bad painting” can actually be the best kind of painting; he also pushed me to embrace my work's aptness to change. Laura Owens reaffirmed this by showing me that it's all right to have a multifarious and disparate body of work that cruises between abstraction and figuration. She also incited me to truly grasp that painting always functions in relation to space. Sarah Lucas allured me with her appealingly discomfiting anthropomorphic figures and shed light on the possibilities of our everyday objects. Maria Lassnig's awkward characters reminded me that the body is always present—it's inescapable. Charline von Heyl allowed me to see how different sorts of painterly gestures can both couple and push against each other in a picture plane. And of course, all of the artists I just named taught me something different about one of the most fascinating aspects of painting: color.

Yet, I am incredibly grateful to also learn from my talented peers: those who pointed me to the artists I just mentioned; who I send pictures of paintings in embarrassing stages; who I constantly bounce ideas with; who see things in my work that I hadn't before; who I call in a fit when I've ruined a painting. They, just like the artists I touched upon, teach me so much through their own work.



*When the Arm is Broken and the Pie is Empty*

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas

32 × 27 cm

In modern times we often hear the relationship between the visual arts and other arts (cinema, theater, etc.) or with disciplines such as science. From your point of view, how can contemporary art be defined?

Art is a becoming. It's a language that through diverse material and discursive processes of investigation establishes a situation—whether it is via the creation of an object or an experience—in which the spectator is confronted with *their* body, thoughts and social context. All sorts of disciplines permeate these investigations. Some artists work in the intersection of diverse fields in more overt ways, while for others, like me, this happens more organically.

I mentioned how I turn to literature when it comes to some of my titles. Also, for the past months I have been studying how the forms and colors (natural and manmade) in my surroundings relate to my pictorial vocabulary. Yet, the information I collect from my lifeworld doesn't only come into the work in terms of the figures in the paintings, but has also permeated it in other ways: found objects such as rocks and bricks have infiltrated the space of painting, opening exciting possibilities in terms of how these elements co-exist with the painted canvases in the exhibition space. When you establish such a close relationship to your environment you inevitably engage with the disciplines which study the elements you are interested in—botany (the cacti I portray), geology (the rocks I collect) or architecture (the bricks I use for my assemblages, but I have also recently been studying the hues of the local facades). Again, another to and fro takes place, this time between the studio and exhibition space, the natural environment, and our domestic habitations, which leads me to make my way through diverse disciplines. Art sets the context for us to break the hierarchies between practices, giving rise to new ways of knowing and approaching our world, and thus revealing links between our shared spaces. ☺



*Hanging My Shit Out to Dry*, detail

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas + modeling clay and acrylic

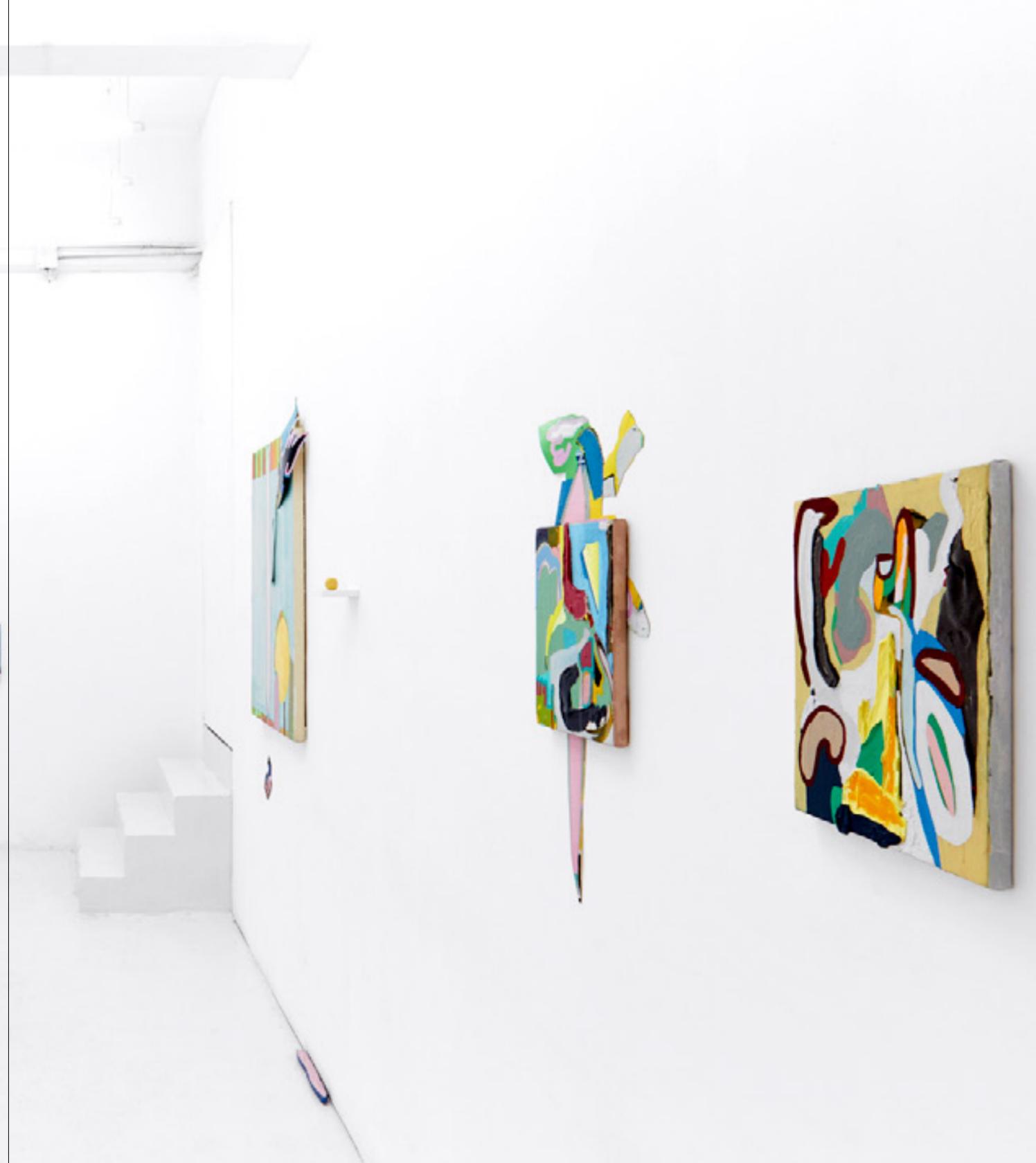
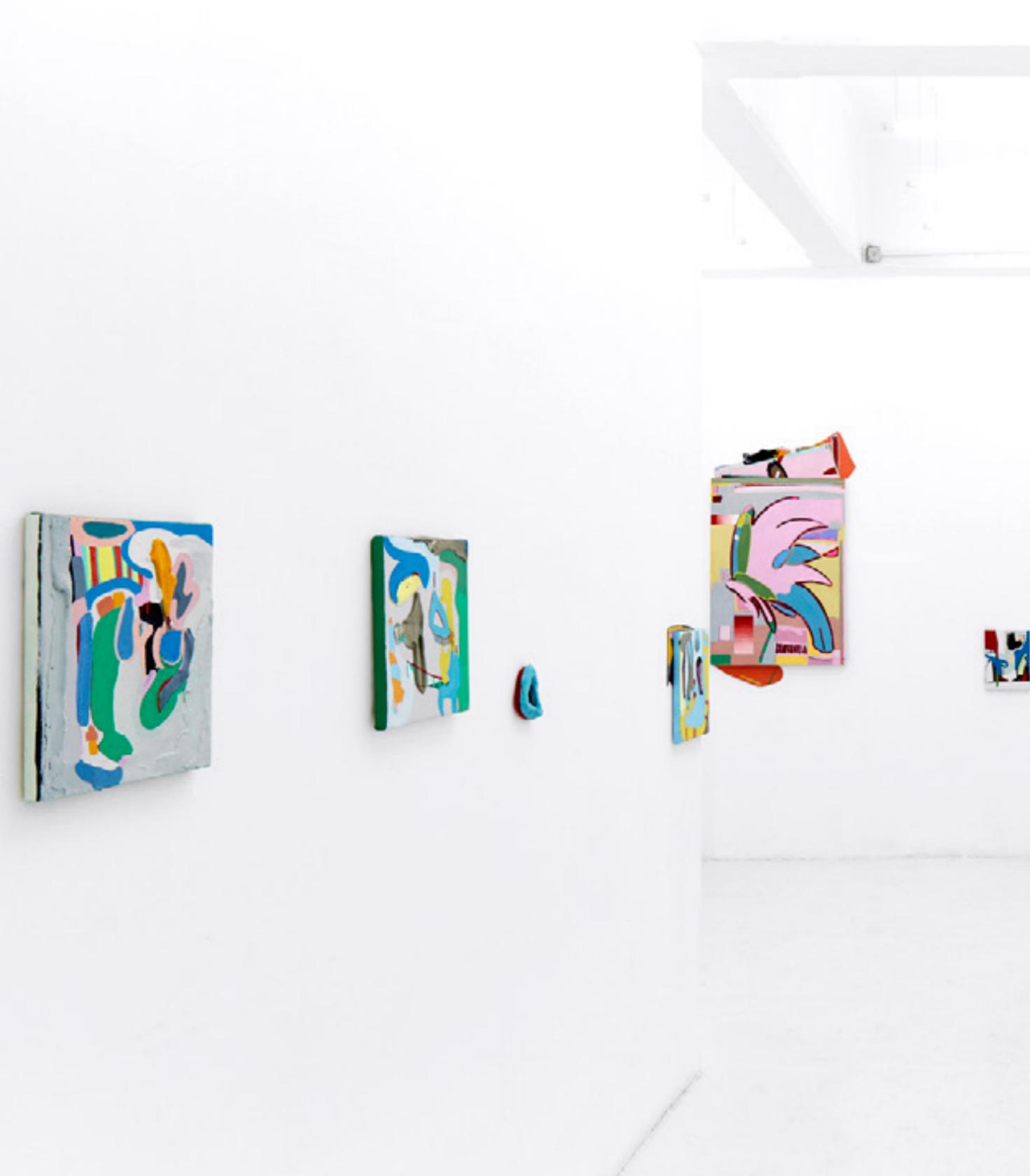
146 × 81 cm + 11 × 11 cm + 3 × 38 cm



*Of What Has Taken Place*  
2019  
Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas  
32 × 27 cm



*I Will but Draw a Circle Around for You to Ponder*  
2018  
Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas  
32 × 27 cm



Installation view *The Persistent Insistence of Play*,  
curated by Leslie Moody Castro, Casa Equis, Mexico City, March 2019.



*Sin saber muy bien por qué, ni a qué, ni cómo, ni cuándo*

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas

32 × 27 cm



*Tight Pants and All*

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas

32 × 27 cm



*Un pedacito de aquello*

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas  
+ modeling clay and acrylic

32 x 27 cm + 5 x 11 cm



*Somethings Do Change However*

2019

Oil, acrylic and plaster filler on canvas  
+ modeling clay and acrylic

32 x 27 cm + 12 x 9.5 cm

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Othiana Roffiel, Nepantla, México, 2021

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