

CULTURED

JONNY NEGRON DEPICTS LIFE'S REALITIES, AS GROTESQUE AS THEY ARE

AHEAD OF HIS NEW SOLO SHOW AT LOS ANGELES'S CHÂTEAU SHATTO, THE ARTIST GIVES A GLIMPSE INTO HIS OBSERVATIONAL APPROACH TO PAINTING AND FILMMAKING, IN WHICH HUMAN FALLIBILITY IS CERTAINLY ON DISPLAY.

JONATHAN GRIFFIN

11.19.2021



ARTIST JONNY NEGRON IN THE STUDIO. ALL PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF CHÂTEAU SHATTO.

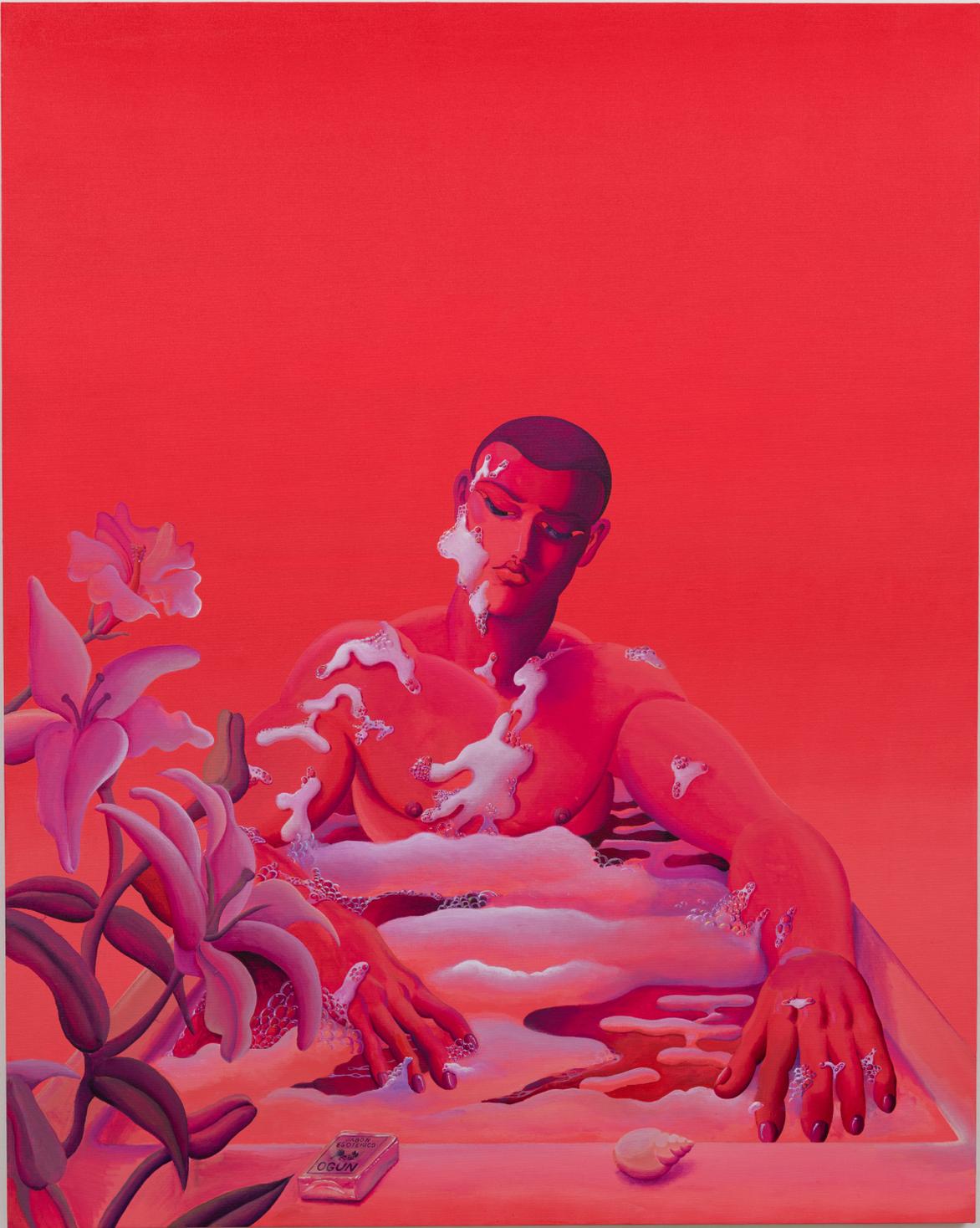
From the busy intersection outside Jonny Negron's studio, you can gaze diagonally across three blocks of Downtown L.A.'s Fashion District and pick out the 10th-floor window of Château Shatto, in the historic Bendix Building, where this week Negron is mounting his most significant exhibition to date.

"Spirits," opening November 20, will include six paintings in acrylic on linen and four video works—a new medium for the artist. Negron's first show with the gallery, in 2018, consisted of surrealistic gouache paintings on paper that built on his early work as a comic artist and illustrator. His latest pushes his material in directions both more personal and more arresting, the scale of his paintings increasing with their ambition.

Negron moved to Los Angeles from Austin, Texas in 2019. "L.A. called me," he says, as he puts finishing touches on the paintings in his studio. Prior to that, he was something of a nomad, spending time in the Bay Area and Virginia as well as New York, where he grew up. (Negron was born in Puerto Rico, but his family left when he was two.)

Largely self-taught, Negron got his start drawing comics in the early 2010s. He garnered a wide following on Tumblr and published with curator Dan Nadel's cult publishing house PictureBox. But even then, Negron's work did not quite fit with the mainstream of comics culture, and he found himself itching to expand his range.

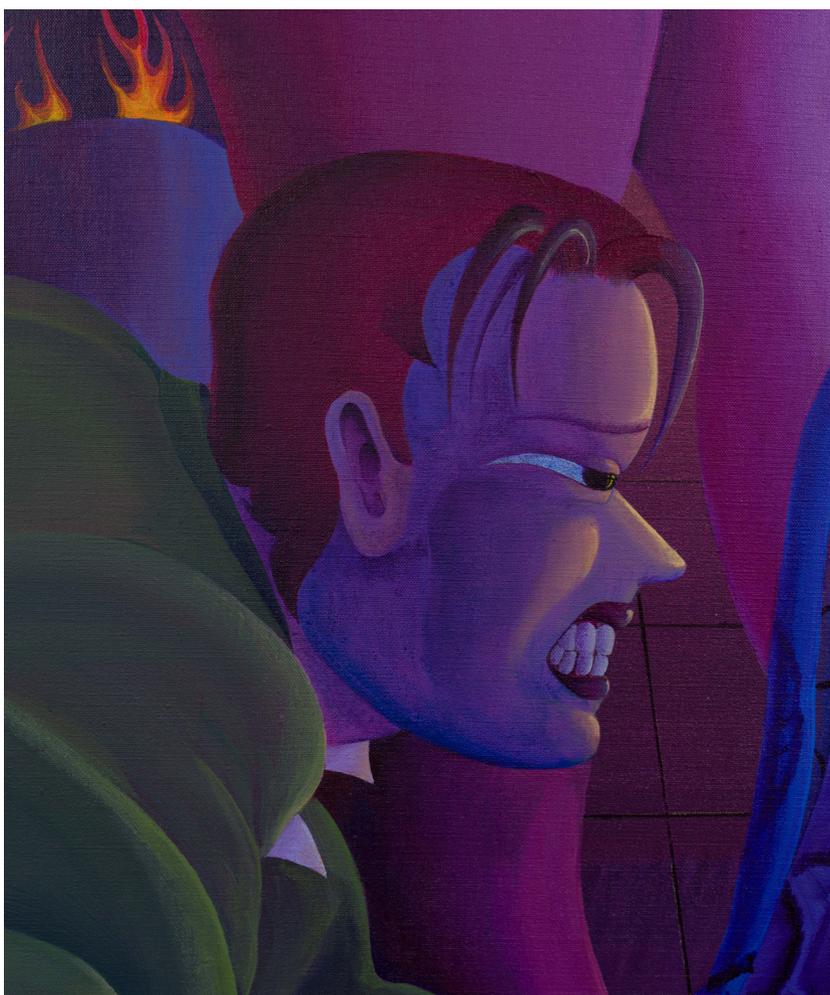
Since then, Negron's star has risen steadily. Despite their scale and formal resolution, his latest paintings remain close to home. Negron denies that they are autobiographical exactly, though they are all inspired by his experience. "I think I'm every character," he says. His new videos are shot from his everyday life on his iPhone and accompany music he has written and performed himself.



JONNY NEGRON, *UNTITLED*, 2021.

Nightlife—both as hedonism and as social communion—is Negrón’s thematic touchstone. He estimates that he parties “more than average,” and he remains unjudgmental about the scenes he portrays, such as a grotesque close-up of a grimacing man sniffing poppers in *Desire Develops an Edge* (2021).

“I don’t feel like I’m critiquing the subject,” he says. “I think maybe it’s more of a critique of the pressure that society puts on people to overperform.” One of the most memorable pictures in Negrón’s debut show at Château Shatto was *Injection Site* (2018), featuring a weeping bodybuilder shooting steroids into his bicep.



DETAIL OF JONNY NEGRÓN'S *DYING ON THE VINE*, 2021.

The profane and the sacred are inextricably mashed together in Negrón's paintings. Religious iconography, classical European painting and occult references exist side by side. In *Untitled* (2021), a quasi-self-portrait, a man in a bath lathers himself with "Jabon Esoterico" (esoteric soap), a product Negrón found in a local botánica. Negrón brings up the recent tragedy at a Travis Scott performance in Houston, Texas, to illustrate how such gatherings have become, for many young people, the equivalent of the kinds of religious experiences in which stampedes claim pilgrims' lives.

During the isolation and loneliness of the pandemic, he says, drugs and nightlife have caused many people to want to leave the confines of their bodies, and to come together in life-affirming ways. Looking at his painting *Dying on the Vine* (2021), showing a shoeless man on all fours in a busy bar, Negrón chuckles, "This guy's gone feral." In his paintings, he says, "I'm like an alien observing humans. From a distance, we're no different to other mammals that are just running around and barking."



JONNY NEGRÓN, *DESIRE DEVELOPS AN
EDGE*, 2021.