



Roksana Pirouzmand, *in a dream: I ran after you on a freeway. Then I was in a room. I don't remember who it was but she told me I should go to my mom. Then I was crying at her feet* (2025). Ceramic, patina, steel, 102 x 48 x 24.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Jeffrey Deitch, Los Angeles.  
Photo: Charles White / JW Pictures.

## Art as Memorial in Lotusland

I should tell you I went to see 2025's *Made in L.A.* presentation at the Hammer Museum in October a few days after one of my friends passed away—the first time a death had been so personal to me, and so sudden. This edition of *Made in L.A.* has no title and no theme. Plenty has already been made of curators Essence Harden and Paulina Pobocha's statement that Los Angeles's "dissonance is perhaps its most distinguishing feature,"<sup>1</sup> but no matter how this turn of phrase frustrates or evades, there really is some truth to it. Ten months after some of the most destructive wildfires the city has ever seen, it's beautiful out. It's unseasonably warm, and lately, there's been a diffuse mist in the air, making for spectacular sunrises and sunsets. Yet each dreamy day is punctuated by ongoing immigration raids—people plucked from their families, their communities, their homes. Lotusland,<sup>2</sup> as Mike Davis sometimes calls L.A. in his seminal book *City of Quartz*, sits on at least five major fault lines.

A certain amount of denial serves us—a denial that feels, in the early stages of grief, especially potent. I wandered rather absently through the first half of the biennial, letting my subconscious rove. Mostly I thought of a high school field trip to the museum, walking through the same gallery, trying to remember if my friend was there, too. On my phone, I looked through old photos and Facebook posts—I needed evidence we had affected each other. I wanted to close the distance between us again, to access a plane where we both existed.

**Aleina Grace Edwards**

I stood for a while in Freddy Villalobos's installation, *waiting for the stone to speak, for I know nothing of aventure* (2025). It is a small, dark room with the walls painted black. Two plinth-like sculptures along the periphery glow with purple neon phrases: *'til somebody / loves you*. In the center, a video is projected on a frescoed wall: It's a first-person vantage, the view of a ghost, taking a night drive up Figueroa Street—the same route Sam Cooke's body took to the morgue after he was shot at the Hacienda Motel (now an apartment building) in South L.A. The elegiac installation is a dynamic memorial, mapping time through the sound and image. The plinths are topped with frescoes, too, which reverberate and disintegrate, their dust trapped under a thick layer of fiberglass. This past year, in *Made in L.A.* and beyond, I've seen local artists use their personal archives of images and experiences to reckon with varying degrees of loss and the overwhelming dissonance of grief, creating visceral sculptural installations that serve as communal sites of processing and reconciliation.

Opened in late spring 2025, Jackie Castillo's solo exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA), *Through the Descent, Like the Return*, was born from a brief but vivid moment of destruction she witnessed: On a usual walk through her Mid-Wilshire neighborhood, she watched builders tossing Spanish terracotta tiles off a roof and into a dumpster, where they crashed and shattered. In the ICA LA gallery, Castillo arrested that image, transmuting these iconic architectural details—symbolic of her home and family in Los Angeles, as well as the nefarious legacies of colonialism—into sculptures. Elegant arcs of orange shingles laddered from floor to ceiling and down again, each sweep of tiles suspended in time and space with rebar, a choreography outside the normal bounds of physics. The sculptures required you to weave through the room, observing the installation and other visitors from various angles, their bodies reconfigured

between the tiles—it was enchanting. For Castillo, this installation was restorative, a way of creating an enduring archive of her neighborhood and its history, as well as her own family’s labor (her father and sister helped her craft the structures). “Unlike the moment where I saw [the tiles] falling and heard them cracking, they never crash here,” she explained. “There was one tile on the floor, like a corner shaved down to lay perfectly flat. It seemed to fall through the floor, and continue on to a different space and time, perhaps to return.” As the exhibition title and Castillo’s language suggest, this notion of return, of memories resurfacing and reanimating, is central. On one wall, there was a photograph of rebar towers reaching to a cloud-spotted sky—Castillo’s grandfather built them atop his family home in Mexico, where Castillo visited often as a child. “My grandfather passed away in 2013, and it was the hardest thing I’ve gone through,” Castillo told me. “[This exhibition] considers the cycling of time, and people, and place, and material.” In this way, Castillo creates a simultaneity: The dead and living, the tender and tragic, all exist together.

Amanda Ross-Ho has been grappling with the mortality of a family member, too: Her father has been living in a medical care unit for the past five years, and she’s been his primary caretaker. Her 2025 *Made in L.A.* presentation includes four enormous replicas of the door to his room there, meticulously remade right down to the dings and scuffs, draped in holiday decorations. The doors are called *Untitled Thresholds (FOUR SEASONS)* (2025), but they offer a perplexing mix of time markers: There’s a “Happy New Year” sign with a paper skeleton and a black cobweb, a wet-paint warning accompanied by hearts and Easter bunnies. Ross-Ho purposefully scrambled the chronology of the decorations: “I’d always taken pictures of my father’s facility,” she explained, and “the whole installation is enacting a glitch, based on a photo I had of a forgotten Halloween spiderweb next

to Chinese New Year decorations.” Indeed, in her work at the Hammer, the skeleton sits on top of a gold “Happy New Year” sign, surrounded by balloons and confetti stickers. Death and life at once, as told by Party City decor. The doors represent the contamination of memory, the collapse of years and experiences accumulating in a camera roll that doesn’t make much sense. Ross-Ho described time as her medium and subject. “The currency of time in the medical unit is about taking stock, about accounting for one’s time, calculating the time remaining, and how to give that value... There is no pure moment,” Ross-Ho continued. “There’s always an interruption.” Grief leaves us disoriented, sorting through the detritus of our minds and emotions, trying to get the details straight.

Like Ross-Ho, Iranian-born Roksana Pirouzmand considers the strata of time, materializing the points of contact between past and present in her figurative ceramic and sculptural pieces, where duplicative bodies converge in one scene or moment, touching, pushing, and pulling at one another. In *Counting the Days Until* (2022), a 16-inch ceramic tablet on view in Murmurs’s Felix Art Fair booth in February 2025, three etched women tumble across a spare room, dark holes punched into the clay where their faces should be, thin lines of hair tethering them head-to-toe. “I was painting these bodies like beads,” Pirouzmand explained. “The faces could become doorways that the thread could pass through, bringing another body with it.” Though she has used family photos in past work, Pirouzmand inspects herself in her newer pieces—these are different versions of the same body, her body. By showing all these figures in one frame, Pirouzmand acknowledges her own evolution and the losses it implies. At Jeffrey Deitch’s *It Smells Like Girl* group show in September, I stood under a nearly nine-foot-tall steel and ceramic sculpture with five busts of Pirouzmand’s likeness arranged along the top of a metal



Jackie Castillo, *Through the Descent, Like the Return* (installation view) (2025). Image courtesy of the artist and ICA LA.

sheet, cheek to neck in a serial effigy.<sup>3</sup> From left to right, the figures became more patinated, the last with her face pressed against the metal, skin gone grey. Up close, you could see the cracks across the figures' necks and shoulders. Rust ran from their faces, dripping down the sheet and to the floor like red tears. "Erosion is a resilience, and a sorrow," Pirouzmand said, by way of explaining the relationship between change and grief. The visceral texture of the clay, the changing sheen of metal—the physicality of Pirouzmand's pieces renders them akin to entropic altars. There is a sense, looking at the aching intimacy of her figures and the deterioration of her materials, that she shows shifts in psychological states, mourning past selves who, like memories, can never be perfectly preserved. "Destruction is just a form of change," Pirouzmand concluded.

When I spoke to Villalobos about his *Made in L.A.* installation, he pointed to the potency of a certain destructive force, too. "It's more revealing when something cracks," he observed. So he breaks convention: His lengthy, looping video denies us the clarity and conclusion of a linear timeline. The soundscape—composed of chopped-and-screwed versions of songs—has no high or mid-tones, more felt than heard. Villalobos's work has a "phonic materiality":<sup>4</sup> The work, like grief, punctures our sense of space, creating a hole we might step through. He showed me the dust accumulating under the plexiglass on his plinths as the soundtrack slowly shakes them to pieces, and I thought again of earthquakes, of disasters and ruptures, but also of accrual—there is a sedimentary quality to Villalobos's work. Personal and political histories are stacked along his route down Figueroa, so close to where generations of his family have lived.

Living in the place where I grew up, I can't escape what's happened here before, either. I've been to the same places across many years, with old and new people. I live two blocks from my childhood home—it's so easy to

conjure the past. Lately I've been imagining my friend at every threshold, just out of sight, always about to walk into the room. I come back to Ross-Ho's doors, to the door itself as an extended possibility, a portal my friend might pass through at any moment. Death prompts a reconsideration of the material logic of time, and in response, these artists grasp at ephemeral moments, freezing and dilating the transitions between one state and the next, evaluating and articulating the effects of one body on another, whether they are immediate, or many years removed. They are looking at fires burning and cooling, buildings rising and falling, bodies moving, embracing, breaking. These works render the physical dimensions of grief and frame loss as a portal through time and space. We share our space with death, always. But in these works, there might also be safe passage to the next place.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Aleina Grace Edwards is an arts writer and essayist focused on preserving and promoting locally-rooted arts and culture.

1. Jonathan Griffin, "In L.A., a Loss of Nerve at the Hammer, but Art Hits in the Galleries," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/23/arts/design/review-hammer-museum-galleries-los-angeles.html>; Alex Paik, "Made in L.A.'s Anti-Curation Doesn't Work," *Hyperallergic*, November 9, 2025, <https://hyperallergic.com/1055851/hammer-museum-made-in-la-2025-anti-curation-doesnt-work/>. Made in L.A. 2025, Hammer Museum, <https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2025/made-la-2025>.

2. "Lotusland" is derived from Homer's *Odyssey*, which featured an island-dwelling people who consumed lotuses for their narcotic effect, effectively numbing themselves against life's difficulties.

3. *In a dream: I ran after you on a freeway. Then I was in a room. I don't remember who it was but she told me I should go to my mom. Then I was crying at her feet* (2025). Ceramic patina, steel, 102 x 48 x 24.5 inches.

4. Villalobos referenced Fred Moten's concept of "phonic materiality" articulated in his 2003 book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press).



Top: Roxsana Pirouzmand, *Counting the Days Until* (2022). Ceramics, 16 x 12.5 x 1 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Murmurs. Photo: Joshua Schaedel.

Bottom: Freddy Villalobos, *waiting for the stone to speak, for I know nothing of adventure* (installation view) (2025). Image courtesy of the artist and the Hammer Museum. *Made in L.A. 2025*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, October 5, 2025–March 1, 2026. Photo: Sarah Golonka.