

# Painter Chaz Guest's Long, Lively Road to Art-World Acclaim

The longtime Angeleno finally has a studio of his own to welcome serious collectors, curators—and a new level of fame

MICHAEL SLENSKE • APR 8, 2021



*Photo by Nabil Elderkin*

Shortly after Chaz Guest first arrived in L.A. in the late '90s, he ended up at the *Vanity Fair* Oscar party. "I only needed to do that once," says Guest. "I almost got in a fight defending the director Antoine Fuqua." He elaborates: "I was talking to Richard Gere about Balthus, and from the corner of my eye I caught these guys approaching Antoine. I excused myself and jumped over a rail and stood in front of Antoine with my hand on his chest. I said to the guys, 'Fellas, not tonight.' I was training hard in kyokushin karate at this point, so my awareness was keen. I remember turning to my friend later and saying, 'I'm so happy that I was never bitten by the desire to be an actor; the hustle is real.' It made me feel great to be a painter. But it was a hell of a party!"

In the years that followed, Guest eschewed the glitzy life for a monk-like existence traveling the globe and painting wherever he could, be it in tiny ryokans in Tokyo or in a palace in Ghana. Nevertheless, Guest's honest renderings of Black figures—historical and fantastical—have attracted a steady stream of high-wattage collectors. Oprah Winfrey owns a Guest painting of a young Maya Angelou. Barack Obama had a painting Guest did of Thurgood Marshall installed in the White House. Netflix chief Ted Sarandos owns no fewer than five of the artist's works, while Angelina Jolie commissioned Guest to create a portrait of her daughter Zahara. And now, at 59, Guest is gaining even more attention and buzz. He recently landed spots in two plum shows: one at New York's Half Gallery, which ran through February, and another at L.A.'s Night Gallery, which opens April 10.

"Chaz's works have a certain patina to them," says Night Gallery owner Davida Nemeroff. "There's a part of him that exists in a different time period."

The road to art-world acclaim has been long and lively for Guest. The seventh of nine children, he was raised in Niagara Falls by a housewife mother and a Baptist-preacher father. When Guest was ten, his parents divorced, and his mother took him and his siblings to West Philly on a Greyhound bus. "It was tough. When we went to school, the kids stole my Mickey Mouse watch off my wrist, and they used to hit us," says Guest. "I stuttered severely and that put me in silence."

When Guest's older brother came home from the Marine Corps in 1970, he taught Guest karate to defend himself. Guest also started training in gymnastics, eventually earning a scholarship to Southern Connecticut State University. When he didn't make the national team, he was eager to succeed in another area of his life. "The only thing I had a little bit of talent in was drawing," he says.

After graduation, he moved to New York, where he palled around with Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine crew, including renowned illustrator Antonio Lopez, who became a mentor. When Lopez died of AIDS in 1987, Guest booked a one-way ticket to Paris and picked up work doing illustrations for fashion magazines. "Christian Lacroix said I should pursue painting," he recalls. So Guest returned to New York, where he lived on a SoHo roof and sold paintings of jazz icons on Sullivan Street before coming west.

After years of painting on the fly—from the street outside Balthus's Swiss chalet to his own garage—Guest got a studio of his own last spring. Housed in a Mid-City acting school called the Imagined Life, the space is filled with toothsome sumi ink-and-oil portrayals of semi-fictionalized characters, from a toddler Michelle Obama to a wild-eyed '80s Miles Davis. Having the studio has allowed Guest to better showcase his work to both art-world luminaries and himself.

"It's the first time in my life," he says, "that I have space to truly step back and see my paintings."

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