



Oscar Murillo, *manifestation*, 2019–20, oil, oil stick, cotton thread, and graphite on velvet, canvas, and linen, 8' 6 3/8" × 10' 3" . From the series “manifestation,” 2018–.

Oscar Murillo

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Since March 2020, amid worldwide Covid-19 shelter-in-place orders, Oscar Murillo has been working out of an improvised studio in his hometown of La Paila, Colombia. But if the pandemic abruptly disrupted the artist’s otherwise peripatetic practice, the paintings it inspired feel far from confined. Murillo’s latest works, part of an ongoing series titled “manifestation,” 2018–, flout lockdown doom and gloom with their energetic gestures, vibrant colors, and monumental scale. Exuding painterly confidence with the majesty of Joan Mitchell’s landscapes and the urgency of Jean Dubuffet’s scratch marks, Murillo’s spirited bursts of cerulean blue, red, white, and black defy the grim subtext of their creation.

Like much of Murillo’s multifarious oeuvre, the “manifestation” paintings evoke themes of social unrest. Seen in France, where the works’ title commonly describes a large public

demonstration—a right (and rite) exercised with fervor and regularity by French citizens—these paintings read as massive abstract protest banners. Three of the largest paintings on view (among them the largest *manifestation* to date, measuring more than thirteen feet wide) hung on adjacent walls under a skylight in the gallery’s main space, their presentation recalling the encircling, naturally lit installation of Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies*, ca. 1915–26 at the Musée de l’Orangerie in Paris. Instead of surrounding the viewer with calming impressions of water, sky, and flora, Murillo’s paintings formed a rousing expressionistic panorama.

While the “manifestation” paintings allude to politics, they are less didactic than some of Murillo’s previous canvases, notably those featuring bold spray-painted words. More recently, the artist began removing text from his compositions. Across the nine “manifestation” paintings on view, all dated 2019–20, only a few unintelligible traces of orange spray-painted letters were visible, the bulk having been covered by a thick and vibrant overpainting. Layers, cuts, and seams are essential to these composite paintings; Murillo created the compositions on top of in-progress canvases shipped from his London studio to La Paila, where he stitched them together with scraps of velvet and linen. The patchworked supports feature looping calligraphic strokes made with a wooden stylus, amorphous oily paint stains, and spray-painted words. On top of all this, Murillo has applied more paint using oil sticks and other tools. Furiously working the oil sticks down to nubs, he ground the ends into the canvas as if stubbing out cigarettes. Wide flat swaths of rolled paint provide a stark contrast to the rugged oil-stick zigzags and butts. Though the letter fragments barely register as such beneath this heterogeneous thicket of overpainting, Murillo’s message is clear: In desperate times, actions speak louder than words.

Instead of text, a graphic floral motif hinted at some unintelligible outcry uniting the nine paintings on view. Roughly bisecting each patchwork support, long thin strips featuring silk-screened red flowers divided the compositions either vertically or horizontally. The pattern was inspired by the cover of a book on cherry blossoms, but the red-printed fabric conjured diverse sociopolitical references: The kerchief in the World War II-era WE CAN DO IT poster came to mind, but so did the armbands worn by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution in China. Ultimately, however, the strength of Murillo’s paintings lies less in their attachment to a particular crisis, past or present, than in their ability to visualize and valorize action as a necessary response.

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