GREG ITO

By Liz Ohanesian

In the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests that unfolded in response to police brutality following the deaths of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and others, artist Greg Ito was contacted by the *Los Angeles Times* to contribute an illustration. The catch: He would need to submit the piece the following morning.

Ito contacted a designer friend to help him make a mock-up ("I'm not good with computers," he admits) and composed a new work with elements of previous pieces. Specifically, he pulled from two paintings that that appeared in *Sun Sprawl*, his 2018 joint show with fellow L.A.-based artist Mario Ayala. One was "Birds," which included the image of a helicopter on fire still shining its spotlight on a point in the urban grid. Another, "Final Frontier," depicts a blaze in the hills as seen through a cell phone screen. In their original form, these images reflected some peculiarities of L.A. life: the voyeurism that comes with all-too-frequent brush fires, the helicopter searchlights that shine during high speed car chases. When remixed, they revealed a new story about the city in early June 2020, when choppers hung in the sky for days and locals relied on cell phones to capture and watch news that probably wouldn't make it to television or print.

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Ito grew up in a Japanese-American family with deep roots in the area. His great-great-grandparents settled in L.A. in the early 1900s and his family has links to many corners of the city: Boyle Heights, the Westside, San Fernando Valley. Today the artist lives in Chinatown and maintains a studio in South Los Angeles, near USC. Details of his hometown manifest in Ito's paintings with some frequency: helicopters, palm trees, tiny lights sparkling against the hills, fire.

The narratives in the paintings are open to interpretation. They are, he says, spaces "for people to enter" and find personally meaningful connections. The titles of the works are as much a portal into the story as the images. "The title is usually a slight introduction to what I was thinking and it leads the viewer to go on that adventure, dive into that rabbit hole, and see where you come out," Ito says, by phone from his studio.

"Most of my paintings have this haunting, melancholy feel to them, but they are also very colorful and very crisp," he says. "They are very visually appealing to look at, so you get this strange mixture of emotions when you look at them."

Take the fires in his paintings as an example. They can be a sign of impending doom—as Californians know too well during wildfires that are no longer confined to one annual season—or something more hopeful, like a sign of change or new beginnings. "These are all ideas that circle my brain while I'm painting," Ito says.

There are symbols that Ito often repeats throughout his work, like scenes set at twilight. "For me," he says, "that's a symbol of transformation." In exhibitions, he has incorporated tall candles into the installations to represent people. "We're all a burning candle. We were born, the candle is lit. When we pass away, the candle extinguishes," he explains. "Time is precious." Visual representations of time, like the hourglass, have also appeared often in his work.

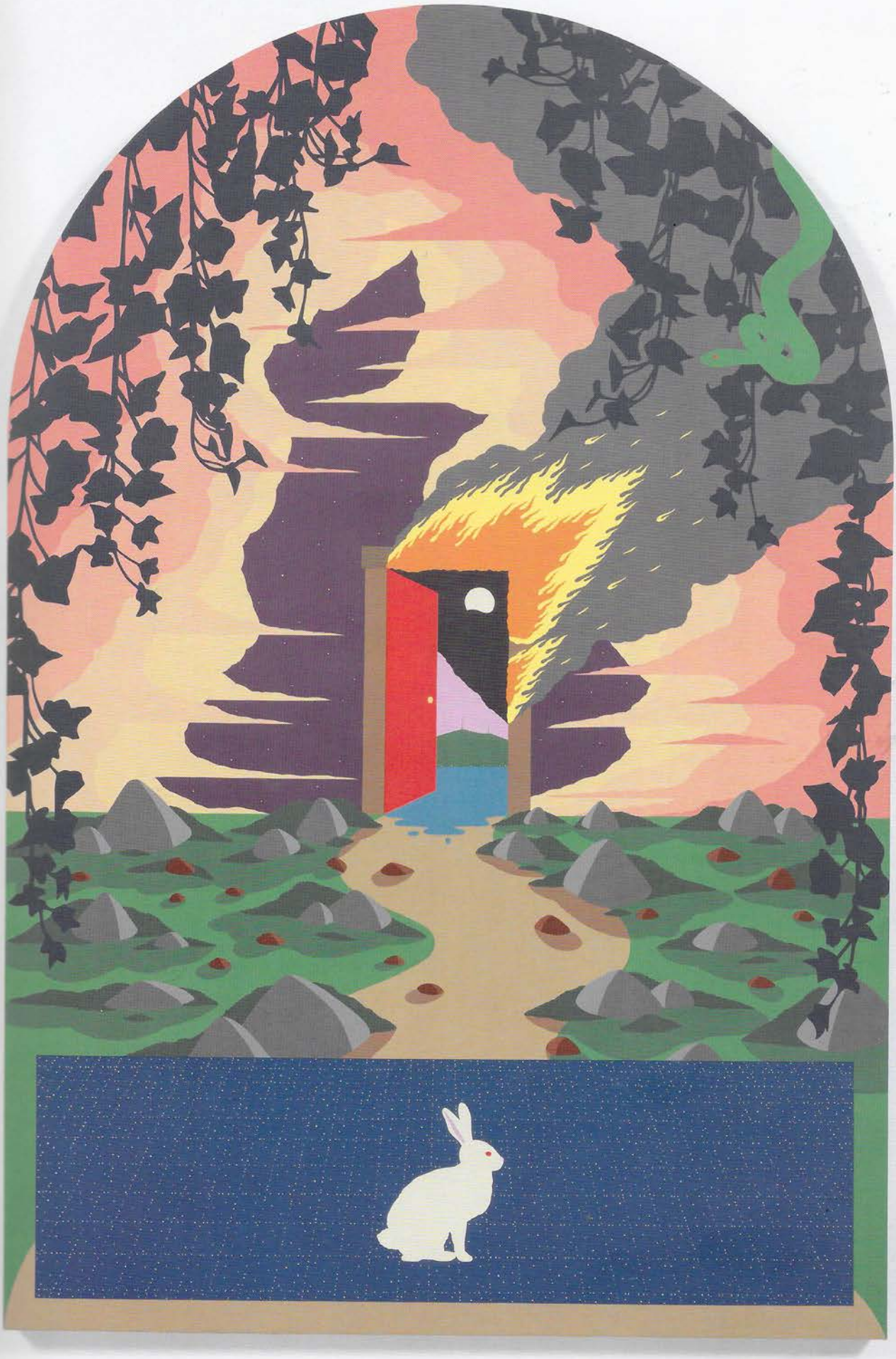
Many of his paintings reflect Ito's headspace at the moment. Last year, he got married and has been thinking about the difficulties for people of his generation in trying to establish a home. One of the paintings that reflects this is "Fall of the Keeper of Keys." Ito notes the strings of ivy that reach towards each other at the top of a neighborhood scene. "It's like the hands, the gesture of hands," he says, referencing the clutched hands that often appear in his paintings, "two bodies reaching for one another."

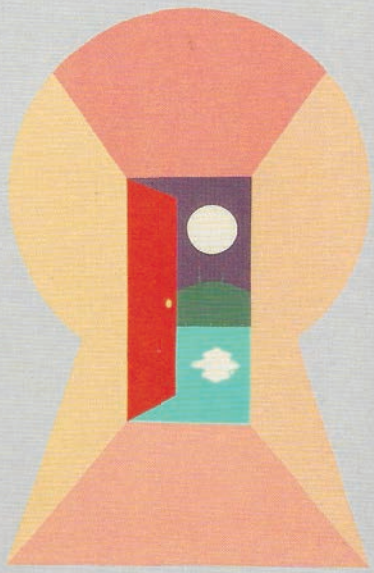
"The key: it represents the key to all the places that we're locked out of. It could be a level of success," he says. "It could be as simple as a place that you wanted to get, but you didn't get it because your application was shoved to the bottom because you weren't a trust fund kid moving to L.A."

There's a long-running creative streak in his family. His grandmother was a seamstress and his grandfather painted signs while working in the grocery business. His aunts and uncles have forged careers in L.A.'s creative industries. One uncle is Peter Shire, known for his association with the Memphis Group and recognizable to Angelenos for multiple public art projects in and around the city. "There was a lot of creativity growing up in my family," he says.

"WE'RE ALL A BURNING CANDLE. WE WERE BORN, THE CANDLE IS LIT. WHEN WE PASS AWAY, THE CANDLE EXTINGUISHES..."

OPPOSITE:
"The Doorway", acrylic on canvas over panel, 60" x 40", 2020, image courtesy of artist and Anat Ebgi Gallery, Los Angeles





LEFT:
"The Key", acrylic on canvas over panel, 60" x 38", 2020, image courtesy of artist and Anat Ebgi Gallery, Los Angeles

OPPOSITE:
"Walk with Me", acrylic on canvas over panel, 40" x 30", 2020, image courtesy of artist and Anat Ebgi Gallery, Los Angeles

"EMOTIONS AREN'T ALWAYS BLACK AND WHITE. EMOTIONS LIVE WITHIN THE SPECTRUM."

And Ito's own parents, who were doctors, encouraged him. "That's how my love for art began. It all started from the very beginning. It was my foundation," he says.

His art is steeped in Los Angeles, but Ito began his career during a stint in San Francisco.

In 2005, Ito left Los Angeles to attend San Francisco Art Institute. While there, he landed an internship at Jack Hanley Gallery, which had become known for showing the San Francisco Bay Area artists associated with the Mission School. "That's what drew me to San Francisco in the first place," he says, "so interning at this gallery was a dream come true."

After graduation, when Ito was only twenty years old, he and a group of friends opened their own gallery together, Ever Gold, in the Tenderloin District. Shortly thereafter, he co-founded the publication *San Francisco Arts Quarterly*. He spent several years working on those projects while making art. "San Francisco was really conducive to that because it's such a small city and, at the time, before the huge tech boom, people could still live out there and create," he says.

By the middle of the '10s, the situation was different. "The cultural landscape of San Francisco changed so much. There was the exodus of artists. Galleries were closing," Ito recalls. He decided to move back to Los Angeles. "I missed my family and I knew that I had learned as much as I could in San Francisco and applied myself as much as I wanted to, but Los Angeles was where I was from and I'm really lucky to have a family here and a network here and so I made the move."

Ito headed back to his parents' house and started over, a moment he describes as "humbling." Back in his hometown, though, influences gleaned from the Bay Area remained, particularly the Rothko paintings he saw at San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

"If you stand in front of a Rothko, you really see the power of his color fields," says Ito. "One color field might make you feel really uneasy and the other would make you feel more melancholy, the combination of those two creates a dynamic emotion. Emotions aren't always black and white. Emotions live within the spectrum. That's something that he was pushing."

Ito was profoundly impacted by Rothko's use of color and that became a launchpad for his own vignette paintings. "The vignette paintings are extremely important because that's what brought me to the paintings that I'm making today," he says.

In his vignette paintings, Ito looks to the composition of Rothko to build narratives. "If you look at the composition, it's like a Rothko," he says. "You have a field on the top and a field on the bottom and you have this negative space in between."

In Ito's own work, he keeps the painting flat, with no visible brush strokes (he was also a fan of Superflat mastermind Takashi Murakami in his formative years) and precise. His works are made by hand from the drafting through the painting process, and everything you see was the result of an intentional decision. "They're not accidental," he says of his paintings. "It's a crafted piece."

Ito's vignettes led to his more recent series of paintings. One series centers around windows, connecting interior and exterior worlds. The other is the series of shape paintings, where the scenes unfold in the middle of shapes like a keyhole. These works incorporate much of the symbolism that has manifested in the course of the artist's career.

In 2020, Ito's art evolved off the canvas as well. When L.A. first shutdown in mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Ito got together his supplies and began working at home on small canvases. These paintings also serve as studies for larger pieces that he will show for his solo exhibition scheduled for January 2021.

Then, with the death of George Floyd in late May and renewed Black Lives Matter protests across the world, Ito had a profound shift in the approach to his art. "My wife and I, we rose up to the call of action," he says. Ito put together the art materials he had on hand and spent $300 on cardboard and wood posts to make protest signs. He set up a booth at a rally near Los Angeles City Hall where people could take a sign and add their own message. The activation was so successful that he decided to do it again.

Two art actions at protests in Hollywood followed. For the first of those, Ito raised money to bring one thousand three hundred signs to the protests. "We passed out every single one of those," he says. For the second, they made two thousand signs. There were some leftover and Ito decided to take a break from the protests because of the pandemic, but made kits available, which people could pick up before attending one. "That was great because it taught me how to activate my art in public space," he says, adding that it also made use of all the skills that he picked up, not just from his art, but from his gallery and magazine work.

After that, he shifted focus to fundraising for social justice organizations through art auctions. "When you can, or when you have artwork lying around, I think that it's important to activate that and offer it back into the world," he says. "Why not take that art, activate to help change, and put it back out there?"

For Ito, it's a new practice that's becoming increasingly important for him. "For me, it's going to bring more value," he says. "This artwork is going to help this organization for these people's needs."✦

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OPPOSITE: Artist portrait by Karen Galloway, courtesy of artist and Anat Ebgi Gallery, Los Angeles

ABOVE: "Into the Night", acrylic on canvas over pane, 60", image courtesy of artist and Anat Ebgi Gallery, Los Angeles