

ARTnews

An Incisive Exhibition in Buffalo Defies Expectations of What Latinx Painting Should Look Like

By Maximiliano Durón for ARTnews | September 4, 2026

There is a painting at the Buffalo AKG Art Museum that I still can't get out of my head, six months after I saw it. It only measures 40 by 30 inches, and I missed it on my first walk through the gallery. Made by Los Angeles-based artist Karla Diaz in thinned-out acrylic paint, it shows two Latino men, both with mustaches, one carrying the other on his shoulders. The painting's joyful casualness belies its subject matter, clues to which can be found in the coyote on one of the men's shirts and in the work's title, *Uncle's Crossing* (2022).

Diaz depicted her late uncle, who was a coyote, or someone who helps undocumented people cross into the United States. The role of the coyote is controversial in Latinx communities, often regarded as a necessary evil: someone who may help you get into the US but exploit you along the way. Growing up, Diaz recalled, talking about her uncle's job was taboo at home. "He would whisper, 'Okay, I'm leaving for work,' and I was like, 'Okay, why are you whispering? You're just going to work.'" At the time, she didn't know exactly what job her uncle was leaving for; it was only later that she learned the truth.

Four years ago, shortly after her uncle passed away, Diaz was recovering from a stroke and had to relearn how to talk, walk, and paint. Throughout this rehabilitation, memories of her uncle returned to her. "It was a vulnerable time," she said. "I'm the type of person, when something is very vulnerable and scary, instead of running away from it, I confront it. Even if that means putting myself in a space that is scary emotionally, I feel I can grow and learn a lot from it."

She felt compelled to make this tender work because it was an image she had never seen before in art history: a portrait of a coyote. "In a way, it's something that has been erased. It's a controversial story to tell. I hope that people come with questions more than anything. I know that my uncle, in the most humane way of being able to do that, was trying to help people."

The work, she added, asks "What does it mean to make taboo stories visible and tell others about them?"

Uncle's Crossing features in "Let Us Gather in a Flourishing Way," which closes this weekend in Western New York. Painting surveys like "Let Us Gather," which will soon depart on a national tour to Iowa, Phoenix, and Seattle, were once a standard feature of contemporary art museums, though they have recently fallen out of favor. The exhibition is an exciting intervention into the history of painting surveys, ambitious in scope yet thoughtfully executed in both its installation and its creation of new scholarship.



**Karla Diaz, *Uncle's Crossing*, 2022.
Private Collection**