

# ART SY

"Clare Rojas's Mesmerizing Paintings Weave Tales of Chaos and Serenity"

By Alexxa Gotthardt

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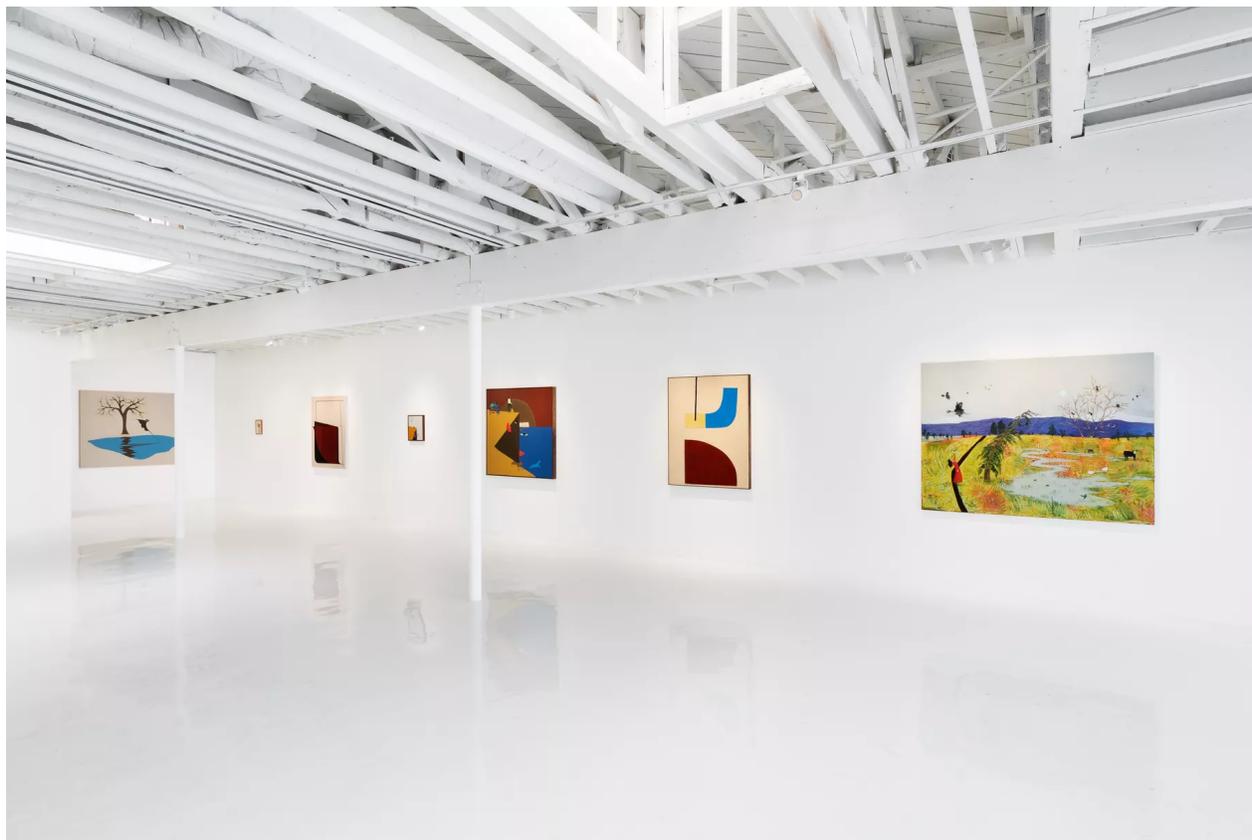
Clare Rojas, *I'll Always Have this Little Movie in My Head*, 2022.  
Photo by Eric Ruby. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

Clare Rojas just wanted to take in the view the day *I'll Always Have this Little Movie in My Head* (2022) began brewing in her mind. But the universe had other plans. What might have been a meditative moment on a California cliff became fodder for the most mesmerizing, disquieting, and humorous painting in her latest exhibition, "The Magic of It All," on view through August 6th at Jessica Silverman's new Los Angeles pop-up.

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The large, commanding canvas shows a knife-sharp cliff bisecting a sea and skyline filled with the omniscient face of an earth goddess, or some other boundless, all-knowing force. On land, a couple argues on a bench, a man gazes triumphantly at the water while ignoring his dog on an extend-a-leash, and a lone woman sits at the cliff's edge while her head falls towards the ocean, ostensibly severed by the dog's rein. "The head coming off, that was me being a little ornery that day," Rojas said, laughing, on the phone from her studio and home in Northern California.



Clare Rojas, installation view of "The Magic of It All" at Jessica Silverman, 2022.  
Photo by Dawn Blackman. Courtesy of Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

"This whole series was kind of about the edge, which felt like a good metaphor for the last straw," she added, citing the fragile state of the environment, fraught contemporary politics, and the anxiety they both provoke. "You're at the end of a road, on the edge of a cliff, at the end of the world...Everything is holding on for dear life. I guess that holding on, though, is the hope."

Rojas, who is now 45 (a detail intimately noted in the signature at the bottom of her paintings), has been making work that harmonizes polar opposites—the good and the bad, joy and grief, hope and fear—for nearly 30 years. "I think my work has always teetered between chaos and the opposite of chaos. Serenity, maybe," she reflected. "I've always been searching for that balance, and the magic is somewhere in the middle."

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Nods to this magical in-between are everywhere in Rojas's L.A. exhibition, which brings together the full range of the painter's recent work—from narrative and figurative canvases to floating abstractions (all paintings were made this year). The artist creates a rich, painterly language that layers bold expanses of color, hypnotic geometric arrangements, emotionally complex figures, and storytelling that marries magical realist fables with contemporary experience.



(Left): Clare Rojas, *Invisible Door*, 2022. Photo by Eric Ruby. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.  
(Right): Clare Rojas, *To and Fro*, 2022. Photo by Aaron Wojack. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

While Rojas's work has indeed matured over her career, these qualities have remained welcome constants—the essence of her practice. "There's been no real shift in my intentions of making work," she explained, "but over time, painting more and more, you learn new languages." The art world has gradually rewarded Rojas for these efforts. After working with Deitch Projects and [Kavi Gupta Gallery](#) at the beginning of her career, Rojas is now represented by Jessica Silverman in San Francisco and Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York. The latter will give her a solo show in the spring of 2023.

Rojas was raised in southern Ohio by a family of storytellers. Her American mother and Peruvian father each brought unique approaches to the tales they told their daughter. Rojas's mother, a teacher, brought home scores of illustrated books in which the stories "were reduced to their

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core essences in a really beautiful, lyrical, poetic way," Rojas remembered. Her father told Peruvian fables, full of magical realism and animism, passed down from his family. Both parents also made music, gravitating towards Peruvian and Mexican folk songs and American country ballads, in which powerful emotions are reduced, like long-simmering sauces, into pared-down lyrics and chords. This imaginative atmosphere was reinforced by the surrounding Ohio landscape, where winters were cold and sparse but dotted with red cardinals and geometric painted barn quilts, almost incandescent against gray skies. Summers, on the other hand, were lush, humid, and alive with fireflies, snakes, and thunderstorms.



Clare Rojas  
*Firefly*, 2018  
Jessica Silverman



Clare Rojas  
*Boundary*, 2009  
Paulson Fontaine Press

When Rojas began making art, elements of these formative folklores and landscapes emerged in her work. She won a scholarship to RISD, hoping to pursue painting, but the pragmatism of her Midwestern parents steered her towards graphic design. "I lasted five hours, I was in tears," she said of her first graphic design class. "All I did was draw lines, and I couldn't take it." The painting program was full by that point, so she opted for printmaking instead; it was a completely new medium to her. While Rojas went on to formally study painting in grad school, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she credits the rich layers and provocative color combinations of her practice to her printmaking beginnings.

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Rojas moved to Philadelphia after her time in Chicago and began corresponding and exhibiting with the artists who'd become her creative community. A fan of Bay Area artists [Margaret Kilgallen](#) and [Barry McGee](#), she began sending them recordings of her music—another aspect of her practice she'd begun to explore. Kilgallen and McGee loved the tapes they received from this "secret country singer," an alter ego whom Rojas called "Peggy Honeywell." A cross-country exchange of music, art, and ideas developed. The trio also shared interests in sign painting, geometry, folklore, and the fraught relationships between humans, animals, and nature. Curators, gallerists, and critics began to take note.



Clare Rojas, *Just watching...*, 2021. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco

In a glowing [New York Times review](#) of Rojas's first New York solo show, in 2004 at Deitch Projects (a gallery which also worked with Kilgallen, McGee, and other artists in Rojas's growing community), Roberta Smith highlighted the painter's ties to San Francisco's Mission School, "a short-lived but deep-rooted tradition of folkish visionary street art." Rojas brought to it, in Smith's words, "a

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distinctive penchant for tightly stitched drawing, peasant art patterns, and crystalline, hard-edged shapes” while “depicting relations between the sexes and the species with a touching, comedic sense.” Over the next decades, solo exhibitions followed at the MCA Chicago, Museum Het Domein, CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, and other institutions.

Rojas eventually moved to the Bay Area, developing her unique painterly language against a backdrop of the roiling Pacific Ocean, 80-foot-tall redwoods, and an increasing profusion of forest fires. These elements—in their extreme beauty and looming fragility—emerge full-throatedly in Rojas’s latest body of work, which is also laced with notes of the otherworldly, the celestial, and the surreal.



Clare Rojas, *She Believed in the Magic of it All*, 2022.

Photo by Phillip Maisel. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

Artists [Leonora Carrington](#) and [Joan Brown](#) come to mind when one looks at Rojas’s canvases such as *Hanging On* (2022) and *She Believed in the Magic of it All* (2022); each features a solitary woman in a wild, intoxicatingly beautiful landscape that brings up conflicting feelings of freedom,

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ecstasy, abundance, loneliness, loss, and vulnerability. Other pieces in the Jessica Silverman show dispense with human figures to focus on ephemeral, whimsical details from nature and, more abstractly, on colors and forms. In *Still-life with Red Poppy* (2022), a small spider dangles precariously from a delicate bouquet of California poppies situated at the edge of a table. The scene feels simultaneously quotidian and magical, intimate and expansive.

Indeed, Rojas excels at zooming in on the everyday in order to engage the universal. "The only thing that can snap me out of the grasp of the media lately—that trance—is nature, every time. "A little spider, a bird, the color of a flower," Rojas reflected, again calling up the pervasive "edge"—that teetering balance between fear and hope, decay and beauty, past and future. "The poppy was just a little bouquet from the grocery store; as it was blooming, it also looked like it was dying. Moments like that really make me want to cry...What power, though."

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