

Seráb Sarabia: Community of Care

by Meghan Smith



Seráb Sarabia's photo installation in the 2022 Barclay Simpson Award Exhibition honors the beauty and complexity of family. Sarabia, a first-generation Chicano artist from Los Angeles, makes work that honors his loved ones without ignoring deeper realities of pain, conflict, and loss. Some images directly confront death — like one of a somber young woman holding flowers, a sea of white tombstones behind her — but most are quieter snapshots of everyday life.

I was particularly drawn to how Sarabia obscures the faces of his community. In the diptych *I'll Be Home Tomorrow*, he juxtaposes the blue exterior of a house with the warm interior showing a small child in the bathtub. We see just a sliver of their cheek and forehead, partially covered by the toilet and shower curtain, one eye peeking out at the camera. In *Light of Mine*, Sarabia captures the moment a toddler waves a comically large glove in front of their face. This 'portrait' consists of tiny red sneakers and a halo of curly hair emerging from behind the glove.

The perspective of *Kitchen Counter* peers under a cabinet to focus on part of a man's torso preparing food in a kitchen. *Gas Mask* shows a masked figure lighting up a bong. His body recedes into dark shadow while the camera centers on the brilliant orange glow of the fire. A second person's hand reaches in to help from outside the borders, and so the image becomes a double portrait of fingertips tenderly touching.

What does it mean for an artist to withhold direct access to faces? Sarabia's careful compositions are protective, in a way. Viewers can't immediately recognize, digest, and breeze past these photos.



(1), (2) Installation at Barclay Simpson Award Show, 2022. Courtesy of Nicholas Bruno.



(1) Seráb Sarabia, Light of Mine, 2021, photography
(2) Seráb Sarabia, Kitchen Counter, 2021, photography

We are not easily seduced by the sitter's eye contact or appearance. Our gaze instead turns to the way the light falls on their clothing, the nuances of the landscape, or the stories the objects around them tell us. Sarabia offers us a gentle glimpse into how he sees those around him, leaving out any pre-packaged narratives or simple explanations.

Sarabia's newest installation, *Psalm 51* at The Wat-tis Institute, expands on this strategy. He recreates a portion of the church his father, who passed away in 2018, lost after falling ill. Two aisles of chairs on a plush red carpet face a dramatic red-and-yellow curtain. Draped in the center is a large digitally manipulated photo printed on silk. The image shows Sarabia's mother and father gazing up at a spectral Jesus figure, who leans tenderly down towards them with hands clasped in his lap.

Sarabia pixelated his father's face into a grayscale square, two dark eyes and a mustache vaguely discernible. Jesus' face is covered by a black-and-white QR code. This choice implies movement, as if the QR code was transplanted from Sarabia's father onto Christ, leaving behind a blurry void. Sarabia intentionally removed 51 pixels from his father's face — not only referring to the title *Psalm 51*, a prayer of repentance, but also to the fact that his father was 51 years old when he passed.

When I point my camera at the code, it leads me to a beautiful seven-minute video tribute on Sarabia's website titled [La Iglesia De Dios](#). The film combines footage of his father preaching to his congregation, family photos, views of the gentrifying Crenshaw district in south central Los Angeles, and Sara-



bia himself revisiting such loss (of life *and* space). Viewed together, *La Iglesia De Dios* and *Psalm 51* capture a mournful sense of time slipping away. Sarabia tells me his father's pixelated face "is like a corrupt file, degraded over time, in the same way his health declined."

Sarabia's carefully concealed faces make the opposite stand out even more. His mother's image stares up at Jesus in resolute adoration. "I wanted to honor her by making her extra visible, by showing her devotion to her husband, her family, and to Jesus," Sarabia explains as we talk about his shift in approach. By showing her face, Sarabia hopes to "bring her into the light" and reassert how central she is to their family's story. The composition points to our human interconnectedness — the love his mother provides radiates outward, impacting their community as deeply as loss does.



(1) *Seráb Sarabia, Psalm 51* Installation view, image courtesy of Nicholas Lea Bruno

(2) *Seráb Sarabia, Gas Mask, 2021*, photography

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