



Eduardo Portillo  
in his studio. His  
paintings are  
available through  
Anya Tish Gallery  
in Houston.  
*Photo by Nathan  
Lindstrom*



# THE IN-BETWEEN SPACES

*A Heart-to-Heart with Eduardo Portillo*

BY CELAN BOUILLET PHOTOGRAPHY BY NATHAN LINDSTROM

WALKING INTO ARTIST Eduardo Portillo's studio, you feel as though you have wandered into the storage room of a museum. Every nook and cranny is filled with interesting artifacts: stacks of art and design magazines, rare books, small renderings that look like architectural studies, a pile of wood blocks in various shapes and sizes. Enormous soft sculptures peer down at you from a loft space above and canvases in various stages of completion hang around the studio, some reflecting unexpected neon color onto the wall. The shaped canvases appear topographical with their unique boundaries and their complex under-working structure riding the line between sculpture and painting. With his sophisticated shaped canvases and whimsical soft-sculptures, Eduardo Portillo has taken the Texas art scene by storm following solo shows at Kirk Hopper Gallery in Dallas and Anya Tish Gallery in Houston.

Originally from the small village El Congo, El Salvador, Portillo moved to the U.S. with his family at the age of 15. As a non-English speaker, Portillo found himself finding his place in his adopted home through art. As a Fine Arts student at the University of Houston, Portillo quickly dove head first into

the contemporary art world, attending as many openings, performances, and lectures as time allowed. Portillo recalls, "I thought I had come to it late but art helped me discover who I really was. It made things way easier to figure out."

For the past two years, Portillo has been devoted to working on a series of shaped canvases that have a very intuitive building process. "A lot of the time, I grab a piece of wood and see where it goes. I realized that I can make the best of plans but it will never turn out that way. I let the piece do what it needs to do." Portillo also finds himself comparing his process to Jazz improvisation, "I go with the rhythm, with the flow of the work, while understanding that there is a structure behind it. Having this basic structure gives me the freedom to make all these spontaneous decisions in the piece. I make mistakes— but good mistakes— they make me think."

Portillo works in a studio at Spring Street Studios in the Washington Arts District. Although, he spends at least 6-7 hours every day in the space, he does not feel bound to any one place. As Portillo explains, "the studio is a neutral (zone). It is important, but at the same time, an artist needs to be able to



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explore. . . like Mexican artist Gabriel Orozco; he doesn’t have a studio all the time but it works for his practice. Photography has helped me understand that you can make work without having physical space.”

While Portillo does on occasion create preparatory drawings, he prefers the immediacy of photography. You can frequently find Portillo riding his bike around the city taking photographs and clearing his mind; many of these excursions occur at night when the city is deserted of people but still has a quiet energy. Portillo explains, “I usually take photos of the “in-betweens” . . . Moments between architecture and sky. Flatness and form. You see a lot of construction in Houston; Things are finished. Not finished. I look for compositions for my paintings.”

With a rich history of Abstract painters merging sculpture and painting in the form of shaped canvases, Portillo acknowledges his predecessors but doesn’t see himself fitting neatly into any one category. Portillo says, “I see myself as more organic. I grab at the natural aspects of geometry that I see everywhere. I’m a painter. Sculpture has the structure of my work.” Portillo has been inspired by the greats Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, and Jessica Stockholder. But mostly, Portillo draws inspiration from his bike rides around the city and his conversations with his mentor, Houston based artist HJ “Harvey” Bott. “Harvey has had the biggest influence on my practice; he helped me understand the humble part of art; to know that creating great work is a process. . . . He thinks about space in painting in a whole new way. I greatly admire him.”



Eduardo Portillo's  
sophisticated  
shaped canvas.  
*Photo by*  
Nathan Lindstrom

A few months ago, Portillo attended his first artist residency at Vermont Studio Center on a full fellowship. In remote Johnson, Vermont, a town of less than 1,500 people, Portillo spent a month creating new work, hiking in the countryside, and meeting new artists and writers from around the world. The experience of the residency was life-changing for Portillo. “It was one of the happiest months of my life. To be in another space, forces you to think twice about your work. Especially when you live in a city and then you go to a rural place. You have these conversations about what your work is about with other artists. I wanted it to be a place where I could take my time, to think about painting in a new way, and to explore other ideas that will lead to next steps.”

The critical dialogue with other artists along with the time spent in introspection opened a flood-gate of ideas that Portillo is currently building upon. Portillo is busy creating a new body of work for his upcoming shows in late 2016 and early 2017. When asked about what direction the work will take in the future, Portillo smiles, “I’ll let the work tell me where I need to go; I want to keep making jumps. Leaps. I want to take my time and listen to the work to make sure that each piece has a presence or personality.” With his career and work blossoming, I for one, look forward to seeing what magic Eduardo Portillo has in store for us all.