

Manuela Solano

From tender portraits of popstars to glammed-up dinosaurs and aliens, the Mexican painter shows a secular devotion to popular culture

by Gaby Cepeda



Alien Queen, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 250 × 205 cm.
Photo: René López Velasco. Courtesy the artist and Travesía Cuatro,
Madrid, Mexico City & Guadalajara



Dirrrty, 2024, acrylic on canvas,
190 × 260 cm. Photo: René López Velasco.
Courtesy the artist and Travesía Cuatro,
Madrid, Mexico City & Guadalajara

Manuela Solano's largest show to date, *Alien Queen / Strange Paradise*, comprises 36 canvases that collectively catalogue off-kilter femmeness, captured in colourful, slightly cartoony, acrylic-paint reinterpretations of selected moments from the pantheon of pop culture. *Karen O's Hands or Maps* (2025), for example, is a closeup of the Yeah Yeah Yeahs' electric frontwoman, decked in the clashing, metallic lamé hues and smeared makeup that constituted her uniform during the early 2000s. Solano nimbly captures the performer's boisterous dynamism, her preternatural diagonality, always onstage creating sharp angles with her body so as to better direct the crowd's energy. "She was very important to me as a teen," the artist says earnestly, in Spanish, when I tell her that this is one of my favourites among the works on show at Mexico City's Museo Tamayo.

She gives Christina Aguilera the opposite treatment in *Dirrrty* (2024), a reconstruction of a wide shot from the video, described by *Blender* as a 'post-apocalyptic orgy', of the 2002 single that reintroduced the previously Disney-polished Aguilera as a theatrically oversexualised woman. Solano portrays Aguilera alone in the empty fighting ring (a set from the video), in her leather chaps, thong and red-striped bikini-top, which matches the ring's canvas. Her expression is weirdly forlorn, but her body language, arms folded behind her back to the extent that they seem absent, hints at a submissive curiosity; the tight, straight lines of the ring a contrast to the soft-focus of her body, Solano's looser fingerwork (she applies paint with her hands) articulating tenderness. In the short paragraphs that she wrote to accompany each painting, she admits she was never a fan of Aguilera or her music, but that there was something about the role she played, of her exaggerated calls to raunchiness, that impressed on the artist and today matches a part of her, the one that is a regular of Berlin's nightlife. When we meet in Museo Tamayo's auditorium, the artist herself is wearing an all-white outfit that includes immaculate hi-top Nike Air Force 1s and a wide-shouldered fringed jacket.

In her work, Solano revises previous Pop-art conventions: if twentieth-century Pop took on nascent consumerism and the ubiquity of

the image as its subject, today's Pop is wrapped up in identity, and perhaps more critically, in the muddle between consumption, image and identity.

The painting that lends its name to the exhibition as a whole is a character study: *Alien Queen* (2019). It features the mother of Xenomorphs standing more erect than you'd ever see her in any of the *Alien* franchise movies (1979–), her digitigrade feet apparently manicured and resting on what look like bio-stilettoes, shoulders arched back, a first pair of arms relaxed, her second perched on her tiny waist, her (main) head and huge, crested cranium tilted lightly. She appears to address the viewer with a grin: yes! I am obsessed with her, she embodies the beauty of nonhuman evolutionary design and the poise, elegance and evil streak of my favourite negligibly waisted drag queen, Violet Chachki. She stands in what appears to be a hangar, two circular, breastlike red lights behind her; one can almost hear and feel the alarm and panic that her presence on the screen provokes. And yet she stands there, coolly, inquisitively, cunty.

So much of Solano's prolific pictorial output has this type of psychological patina: many of the images she conjures on her large, unstretched canvases are derived from mass culture, but infused with her own subjectivity, or reflections of parts of herself. Both recognisable and different, these aren't mere reproductions; Solano renders them spikier, more complicated, less manufactured. In her canvases, she grabs these talismans from our collective memories, holds them to the light and turns them as if they were diamonds, picking out the specific effects that consecrated them in her own memory and then pours the distilled essence into her work. And that work is extraordinary, not simply because Solano is a wonderfully skilled painter or because her practice is so aggressively idiosyncratic in her embrace of 'unserious' subjects, or because a voice like hers is so sorely needed in an increasingly homogeneous and self-regarding artworld; but because she is blind.

Over ten years ago, aged twenty-six, she lost her sight after a devastating HIV-derived infection. At that point she had been painting



Karen O's Hands or Maps, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 190 × 260 cm.
Photo: René López Velasco. Courtesy the artist
and Travesía Cuatro, Madrid, Mexico City & Guadalajara

for more than half her life, having started in childhood and continuing to hone her craft as a student at La Esmeralda, the Mexico City art school, during the 2000s, when postconceptualist performance and installation ruled, and painting wasn't necessarily encouraged.

Of her art school years, Solano fondly recalls the professors who broadened her aesthetic landscape, suggesting she look at films, albums and books: "Those references have stayed with me," she says, and that much is obvious in the current exhibition, which is only her third solo show in the city of her birth. She grew up in the north neighbourhood of Satélite, but moved to Berlin in 2019, a move that, as she puts it, "allowed me to blossom". And the fruits of that blossoming have been previously exhibited around the world, in Lisbon, São Paulo, Seoul, Miami and Madrid, among other places.

To her, her portraits are iterations of a solipsistic development of self-representation fused with a politics of emulation. "My work has always incorporated different things, but it begins and ends with myself. It reflects me, but in its being about mass culture, it also reflects everybody else." The power of a bygone, truly mass, monocultural historical period profoundly shaped the ways in which she sees and represents herself. The characters that populate the show are all from that specific era, the formative years of early millennials from the late 1980s to the early 2000s – the years that saw the advent of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), after which Mexican children were first exposed to a steady diet of Disney, Nickelodeon, Mattel and all kinds of US cultural exports. Modes of consumption from that era – everyone gathering around a TV to watch the premiere of a Michael Jackson music video in 1991, or of the *Jurassic Park*-inspired attachment that so many small children developed towards dinosaurs – strike the artist as a type of secular devotion, of communion. Dinosaurs were the subject of one of her best shows to my mind, *Ancestry* (2022) at Carlos/Ishikawa in London, where, in glamorous portraits of the prehistoric reptiles

as models and popstars, she questions why mass media refuses to acknowledge that dinosaurs were most likely feathered, which has long been the scientific consensus, suggesting that the answer lies in the fact that this might render the creatures too feminised, aporetic to their violent and aggressive marketing narrative.

"The idea of seeing yourself in another, with others... those are very meaningful experiences to me. I am not a spiritual person, but to me the emotions [those cultural moments] stir are equivalent. The extravagance, the talent, the commitment, they give me goosebumps, Sinéad O'Connor's ferociousness – there are so many gestures that have become sacred to me, but not only to me, to many others as well."

One of the most striking things about Solano's works is how they evince her proficiency in finding and then rearranging glimmers of authenticity in a world that most people would associate entirely with artifice and spectacle – the

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particular way Avril Lavigne scrunches up their nose, or an actress showing off her chic sternum. And yet, there is a truth in artifice too: "I am more into characters than I am into people," the artist quips. "I heard Divine David say in an interview, 'one can say the truth from behind a mask', and I think that too."

Divine David's masterclass in painting, a short skit in which British performance artist David Hoyle's infamous alter ego demonstrates an unhinged method of painting, was a big influence on Solano when she first saw it in 2011 – she had, at that point, spent an average of seven months working on a single canvas, and felt freed to loosen up her exacting standards. When she started losing her eyesight in 2014, she channelled that rebellious resolve in *Blind Transgender with AIDS*, speedy and defiant works painted with mad fingerwork on craft paper. The series circled Solano's recurrent motifs: Cher, Fairuza Balk in *The Craft* (1996), David Bowie, and included text pieces, one of which read, 'Making shit paintings just because I can... making shit paintings just because I'm blind' (*Shit Paintings*, 2014). They were shown at



above *John Connor*, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 190 × 260 cm. Photo: René López Velasco.
Courtesy the artist and Travesía Cuatro, Madrid, Mexico City & Guadalajara

following pages *Diamond Dogs*, 2021, acrylic on canvas, 162 × 222 cm. © the artist.
Courtesy the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; and Peres Projects, Berlin





above *Please Send Help*, 2014, from the series *Blind Transgender with AIDS*, acrylic on paper, 87 × 57 cm. Photo: Damian Griffiths. © the artist. Courtesy the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; and Travesía Cuatro, Madrid, Mexico City & Guadalajara

facing page *Staring at the Finger that Points* (detail), 2021, acrylic on canvas, 215 × 170 cm. Photo: René López Velasco. Courtesy the artist and Travesía Cuatro, Madrid, Mexico City & Guadalajara



Museo Carrillo Gil and Galería Karen Huber in Mexico City, as well as at Carlos/Ishikawa in London in 2022. Since then, Solano's process has become more sophisticated to the extent that it takes a team of five people including herself to create her works.

The system involves extremely detailed descriptions from her, which then lead to extensive image-research from her team, more intense descriptive back-and-forth, a paper sketch that Solano retraces with her fingers to approve, which is then blown up on a canvas with the help of nails, string, tape and pipe cleaners, to create a haptic outline that she can follow with paint-loaded fingers. Production is lengthy, it can take months to finish a single piece, because it depends on so many people and not just herself. "It's both frustrating and fulfilling," she says, "extremely frustrating when we're trying new things, many moments of uncertainty, of trying and failing, over and over. But it's so rewarding that I get to solve these problems in painting, even if I can't see; that I get to assert myself and my ideas, with a technical skill that I am proud of."

Solano had five solo shows in four different countries between 2021 and 2023. Because of the laboriousness of her process, she is now a little weary of the brutal rhythms of the artworld. "For nine years I've been going nonstop, working seven days a week, often 15 or 20 hours a day. I've been very hardworking and luckily also successful. Every new show is an open question: what if it all suddenly stops going so well? When I lost my sight, I thought I'd lost it all, but I didn't. It is because of my career that I have everything I have now: my agency, the woman I've become, so the thought of failing is terrifying, and at times profoundly exhausting." One way that she is confronting this anxiety is via a new series of works begun last year, *Blind Transgender and Wild* (2024–), which carries on the irreverence and brazenness of the series she created a decade earlier. These too are works on paper, which Solano can make unassisted and quickly. "I was like, 'we'll see what happens', and these paintings, full of mordant, dark humour, started to come out." They are mostly about experiences she's had at fancy gallery dinners, at the club or in the dark room: "I'm out there flirting, trying to hook up, and some moron is like, 'Are you lost,

sweetie?', excuse me, I come here every Saturday, it's so condescending." She doesn't mean to be disrespectful towards the establishment or whatever canons of painting remain, but she also has never cared much for them, "That's why I'm like, not wondering whether a portrait of Marge Simpson [*Marge*, 2024] should hang at the Tamayo, if you ask yourself that kind of question, you don't really understand art." I remember crossing paths with Solano in the postinternet hallways of Facebook groups and Tumblr pages during the early 2010s, when along with her peer Débora Delmar, she was prefiguring two of the main preoccupations that continue to burden the litter of artists that came immediately after them: the questioning of middle-class taste and habits of consumption, and a style of painting that favours cartoons, pop culture and nontraditional technique.

For Solano, art is not really about objects. It's about what happens all around them: the conversations, the multiple tendrils of connections that they spread, germinating within all kinds of people in all types of ways. That is obvious on her Instagram, where she considers the open-ended exegesis of her works to be a part of her practice, but also a service to the disabled community, whose access to art through screens relies so much on alt-text, close captioning and descriptions. She tells me there has been a bug on the Instagram app for the visually impaired for months, which makes it harder for her to post. I ask if she's critical of contemporary cultural voracity, of how identity nowadays seems to be purely prescribed by consumption, at least on social media: not at all. "I want my work to be seen by as many people as possible. I want to be part of that mass consumption, I want to have thousands of followers. I'm so frustrated by the speed at which things are going and not being able to follow as fast as I can, that apps chug along and leave so many of us behind. I'm not ready for a hut in the woods, I want to be exactly where the centre of attention is, the heart of the party." **ar**

Manuela Solano's Alien Queen / Strange Paradise is on show at Museo Tamayo, Mexico City, through 4 January

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