

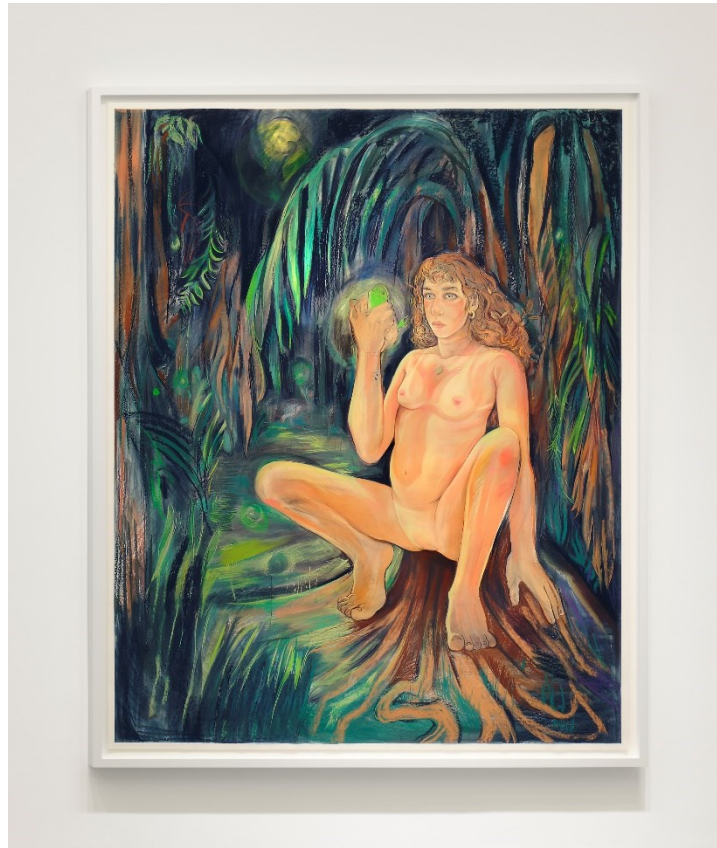
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INTERVIEW

Alina Perez by Isabella Rafky

More than what you can see.

MARCH 5, 2025



Alina Perez, *A girl is an amphibian*, 2025, charcoal and pastel on paper, 90 × 72.5 inches. Courtesy of Yossi Milo, New York. © Alina Perez.

Alina Perez loves drawing. She creates large-as-life artworks that set the stage for fleeting moments that profoundly impact the self and our environment, and conversely that show how our selves and environment enliven these fleeting moments. Her sense of humor and flirtation with the invisible overturn assumptions. Her drawings reflect a perspective from the inside out, pointing to the abstraction in the tangible and validity in the unreal. This is the pulse of her solo show *Family Romance* at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York City. Meanwhile, her drawing also titled *Family Romance* is a striking work featured in El Museo del Barrio's triennial, *Flow States*.

When I met with Alina at her studio in New York City as it snowed outside, we discussed how Miami is a character in her art. She grew up around Miami Metro Zoo and went to Design and Architecture Senior High School in the city. Our conversation was layered with many warm and complex feelings about home, childhood, and queerness.

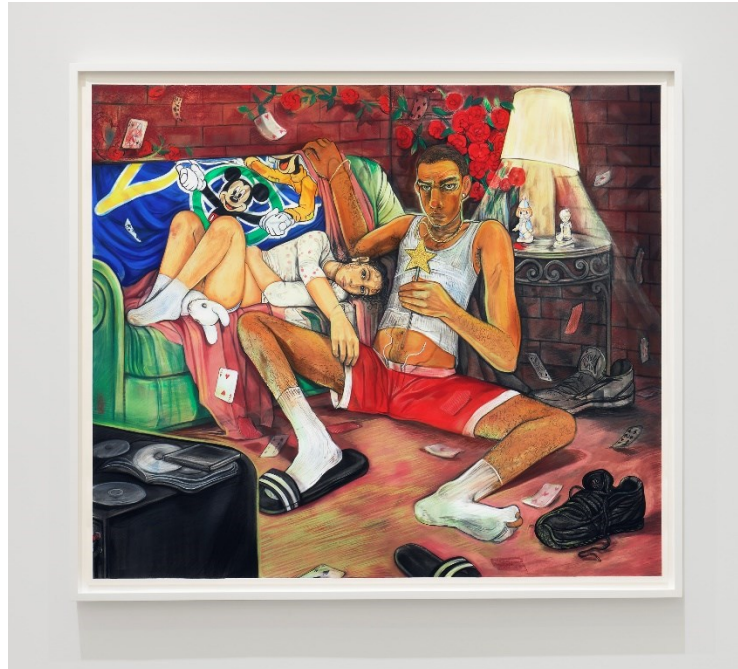
Isabella Rafky

Let's start with the title Family Romance. It's the name of the exhibition at Yossi Milo and of the drawing at El Museo. What brought you to that title?

Alina Perez

The family is a space where there are all of these dramas and romances. It's also not what you think romance means. It's bigger than that: narratives of multiple stories, truths, and weavings of our lives with one another, with plants, jewelry, smell, clothing, jobs, and so on. "Family romance" speaks to the largeness of how we may come from a place and then how we bring that into our future or new relationships, and how we bring our awareness to an unlearning and unpacking of shame, secrecy, and behaviors. "Romance" makes up something as large as a life or as seemingly small as a moment. It

encapsulates all of the different ways that we overlap with one another. In that piece at El Museo, you can see one image of the whole; even something as small as an ear piercing becomes a part of this mapping of culture, story, and personhood. This is the drama to me that the title essentially came from.



Alina Perez, *Precious Moments*, 2024, charcoal and pastel on paper, 65.5 × 75.75 inches. Courtesy of Yossi Milo, New York. © Alina Perez.

IR

In her poem "Songless," Alice Walker asks, "What is the point / of being artists / if we cannot save our lives?"

AP

Our memories are these images in our head, but we believe them, and that's what makes them real. Something did happen, but it happened once, and then it happens a million more times in our brain. Drawings are images too. So when you believe in a drawing, instead of the focus being on this part of the memory, it's instead on the figures' eyes, or a glow, or a frog. There's a pivoting of the importance or turning it on its side. I don't like saying my work is cathartic. I draw myself as a young girl a lot, and there is something about it that's not exactly healing. But I am giving her, or me, or that moment a place to change or a place to breathe or exist not just as a painful thought, along with giving it a little stage because it happened. It just is. Like the drawing at El Museo, there's a lot of pain and bad characters; but at the same time, this stuff is. If we can confront a reality, that has more potential for healing than keeping shame and keeping secrets.

IR

An aspect of your drawings that produces this imaginative impact is their scale. Seeing a portrait of your mom and dad so large is not typical.

AP

The parental portrait *His & Hers (menthols and cigars)* (2025) looks like a family photo, but then it's blown up. My biological father is not in my life anymore physically, but I'm always drawing him, so he is in my life. Who's in your life might be living somewhere else, but they are people that might still be dictating even

subconsciously the way that you interact or the way that you feel about yourself. How do you let go of things that don't serve you, to know what you're capable of bringing to the world? With the image of the mom and the dad, I feel like they're always watching.

IR

There is a certain dramatic quality to *Family Romance*, even in your earlier use of the word *stage*.

AP

A book I was reading asked, "Is a child defined by the ownership of the parental guardians?" Perhaps this speaks to the drama in the artworks because no one's centered, but at times it is the younger girl who's centered, whether she's stealing the razor or having a moment to herself because she's not able to be directly in relation to what's happening around her. Or she's staring at the frog and seeing herself in the frog. No, children are not defined by the fact that they're owned by their parents. I always like to have the florals and animals because we don't have to carry all the weight. There are things that are absorbing it with us. We're not the only ones experiencing it.

IR

There is a complete ecosystem.

AP

The Everglades and the ecosystem of Florida and Miami are such an important part of everything too. The natural world is alongside everything happening, even politically. Near my home, there used to be a nature preserve, and there's a Walmart now. There are parallels in the invasive python. I think of myself as a little girl, and she sees herself in these invasive pythons. Humans go on hunting sprees, and it's not the pythons' fault that they're invasive. What happens in the home is also reflected outside of the home. So many people say the personal is universal, but the personal is also environmental. I wonder what the plants think.

IR

How does Miami appear organically in *Borrowed Razor* (2025) or *Blushing Bromeliad* (2025), as opposed to when you bring it in intentionally like in the cop car in *If you really wanted it you'd take it all* (2024)?

AP

Blushing Bromeliad stemmed from the idea that flora and fauna hold space and hold something that figures can't. The lizards in *Borrowed Razor* become like little guardian angels or moments of life that can offer glimpses into something other or greater than ourselves. Not to sound dramatic, but greater than our suffering are fantastical elements that might be watching her back, like the *azabache*. Protection comes in



Alina Perez, *Inside*, 2025, charcoal and pastel on paper, 59.25 × 75.25 inches. Courtesy of Yossi Milo, New York. © Alina Perez.

different forms too. It's not only the positions of power that have power. We have a lot of control over what we're experiencing. We live in a society that doesn't want us to think we're powerful. How do we take back our autonomy? That's why I love drawing because I can literally draw myself getting fisted in a police car. There's so much potential in drawing that mirrors the potential we have in our daily lives to show up for one another and to show up for ourselves.

“We have a lot of control over what we’re experiencing. We live in a society that doesn’t want us to think we’re powerful.”

— Alina Perez

IR

I wanted to talk to you about the range of sex scenes across your work and how fisting indicates a sort of completeness or oneness.

AP

Fisting can take you out of your body, or maybe what you thought was impossible is actually pretty possible. People think, That's so intense, a whole fist. Well, not if you're in love. (*laughter*) It is an intense feeling of fullness. Why shy away, too, from the sexiness of it all? If anything, desire is where you can transform things. Lesbian sex is not always pretty, skinny, supple, and pink nipple. It's not always clean, beautiful. I've never related to the sentiment that “as a lesbian our hand is our penis.” A hand does so much more, which is why it's so much hotter. A hand builds, draws, so for that to be what's inside of me—a hand is so much.

IR

I'm glad that you brought that up because I wanted to ask you a question about hands.

AP

I remember someone said that the hands and feet in my drawings are so big. And I replied, Okay, fair. But if you are standing and looking at your hands and your feet, it is not the anatomically correct way that they are. Because of our nerve endings and just how much we feel from our palms, they feel bigger than they physically are. Color is very emotive. You can say that eyes and facial expressions are important, but our hands are too. The color change speaks to the psychological. It's a way to convey that there is more than just what you can see. In the portrait *Ring of Fire* (2024), his purple hands make visible emotions that wouldn't be as obvious in real life.

IR

So much of it for me is about mood. Mood is so important to sex, and I feel like it's so lost in art about sex. I like your works because I think they're moody.

AP

That speaks to what you're asking about. All the things in the periphery, or the hands, or the title are trying to speak to a mood. Something greater than what is physically able to be touched. All of the works are very tactile and physical, and they're all in the world. But through the way that they're drawn—or through the use of animals, color, glow, tears, hands—I'm trying to point to a mood. I'm pointing to what is greater than the physical, what's greater than the pain, what's greater than the moment.



Installation view of Alina Perez: *Family Romance*, 2025. Yossi Milo, New York. Courtesy of Yossi Milo, New York. © Yossi Milo, New York.

Alina Perez: Family Romance is on view at Yossi Milo in New York City until March 8; Perez's work can also be seen in the group exhibition Flow States—La Trienal 2024 at El Museo del Barrio in New York City until March 16.

Perez will be in conversation with Isabella Rafky and Flow States—La Trienal co-curator Susanna V. Temkin on March 6 at 6:30 PM at Yossi Milo.

Isabella Rafky is a Cuban American arts writer based in Brooklyn. Originally from Miami, Florida, she studied art history at Barnard College with a focus on diasporic art of the Caribbean. Her writing has appeared in *ARTNews*, *Hyperallergic*, and the *Miami Herald*.