

Manuel Solano

PIVO, São Paulo



View of “Manuel Solano,” 2021. From left: *Heliplaza*, 2021; *Heliplaza Logo*, 2021. Photo: Matthias Kolb.

Manuel Solano’s earliest childhood memories of Heliplaza, a shopping mall on the outskirts of Mexico City, are mostly about light and texture: the way the sun cascaded through its geodesic dome and sparkled in the fountain in the atrium, the brilliance of its smooth white tile and curving parapet accented in cream and yellow, the glass bricks that shone like diamonds in a tiara. This was in the early 1990s, ten years after Heliplaza was erected in Ciudad Satélite, a suburb of tract homes and roundabouts that by then had lost some of its midcentury glamour. But for Solano, the mall offered a fantastical escape from the banalities of nuclear-family life, a safe place for a nonbinary kid to play dress-up, wander, and daydream.

This information is imparted in an interview, published in Pivô’s in-house magazine, with João Mourão and Luís Silva, the curators of Solano’s exhibition “Heliplaza.” The mall lent not only its name but its image to the show, which

opened with *Heliplaza Logo*, 2021, the mall’s glowing neon ensign, mounted on one of the gallery’s freestanding columns. A nearby diptych, *Heliplaza*, 2021, offered two views of the building’s interior in acrylic on unstretched canvas, their geometric precision particularly astonishing given that Solano completed them without the use of sight: In 2013, the artist became blind from an HIV-related infection and since then has developed a painstaking method for painting images from memory. The surface of *Heliplaza*, like that of all of the paintings in the exhibition, is punctured by almost indiscernibly tiny holes where pins were inserted to guide Solano’s paint-dipped fingers along the lines of an underdrawing. This process enabled Solano to produce their most intricate work to date.

The largest painting in the show, *Liverpool*, 2020, depicted another shopping mall. A semiabstract mural of gulls against a dusky orange sky fills its upper half; below lies a hall full of display cases and clothing racks so vast the scene appears to have been rendered from the perspective of a child. Escalators ascend, like a stairway to heaven, to a ceiling studded with starry recessed lights. The painting was tacked around the most prominently curving wall in the gallery, connecting the midcentury architecture of Ciudad Satélite to the sinuous modernism of Oscar Niemeyer’s early-1950s design for the residential tower and mall where Pivô is located—and, more subtly, to the shape of a retina. Tapping a well of nostalgia with such an insistently visual medium, Solano invokes the absence of their sight and of the shoppers noticeably missing from these spaces, which are empty, as if visited in a dream.

Two figures did appear in these paintings, side by side. In *El Chapoteadero* (The Wading Pool), 2020, a small boy plays with a toy dinosaur in a swimming pool, while *Bangles*, 2020, features a woman wearing chunky bracelets and smoking a cigarette while arranging lilies in a vase. Both figures are turned away from us, quietly withholding. Their pairing in the exhibition might have been a celebration of the artist’s own transition into the kind of modish woman they admired as a child. A small painting above the vase in *Bangles* depicts a group of geometric forms, brightly colored Memphis style, that Solano also translated into literal exhibition architecture. *Untitled* (Installation for Pivô), 2021, agglomerated angular forms with a short staircase covered in indigo carpet, recalling a cat tree. With its faux-marble veneer and neon-yellow PVC film, the sculpture is an orgy of imitation, an acknowledgment that the dazzling surfaces Solano remembers were probably tacky and cheap, exemplifying what Susan Sontag, in “Notes on ‘Camp’” (1964), called “the triumph of the epicene style.” There are no shoppers left at the Heliplaza, now a medical office building, but, as Solano reminds us, we need never stop dressing up and daydreaming.

— Evan Moffitt