

# THE BROOKLYN RAIL

Daniel Gibson: *Ocotillo Song*

Nicholas Heskes | July 14, 2021



Daniel Gibson, *Into the Sea*, 2021. Oil on linen with Sand Dollar, 38 x 46 inches. Courtesy Almine Rech. Photo: Dan Bradica.

The most recent exhibition by Los Angeles painter Daniel Gibson at Almine Rech summons various descriptors to mind: psychedelic, floral, surreal, Boschian. But the one that connects them all is *autochthonous*. Originally derived from the Greek word *autokhthon* (meaning “sprung from the land itself”), it is the most appropriate characterization of Gibson’s body of work, which is to say a certain earthiness permeates Gibson’s iconography of gardens, flowers, butterflies, and farmers, all sprouting up from the soil like the exhibition’s namesake, the native ocotillo plant of southern California and northern Mexico. Gibson’s earthiness has to do with labor, familial roots, family history, and genuine contemplation of *this* locality in particular. We see his specificity, for example, in *Strawberry Fields* (all works 2021), which pictures Gibson’s mother picking strawberries in Salinas, surrounded by mountains beyond which the beaches of Monterey Bay and Marina touch the Pacific Ocean. This is a California that is still really Mexico.

The most obvious artistic parallel for Gibson’s paintings are those of Diego Rivera, specifically his series of flower vendors. The fertility of Gibson’s giant, spiny desert flora evokes the sheer abundance of Rivera’s flowers, both their virile bloom and the rich, pak choi-like thickness of their stems. We see this clearly in works like *Vase No.6*, *Sinaloa Clouds and flowers*, *Butterfly #11 Ocotillo Song*, and *For BIHA*. The flourishing of Native American and Mestizo culture is emphasized by the brown-skinned figures that sprout from the soil in *Vase No.6* and admire the large white flowers of *For BIHA*—a powerful contrast to the dark women of Rivera’s pictures, who often appear burdened by their harvest. The implication here, as with Rivera, is as much mythological and aesthetic as it is political. The past and a people’s collective heritage are like crops that must be carefully sowed, tended, and reaped.



Daniel Gibson, *Strawberry fields*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 72 x 72 inches. Courtesy Almine Rech. Photo: Matt Kroening.

Gibson's most potent symbol, his strawberries, suggest to me an entirely different artistic lineage, however: that of Hieronymus Bosch. In the central panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1510) strawberries appear throughout the composition, carried on backs, held and hugged, at the center of weird rituals. I see Bosch's and Gibson's strawberries as complementary, though not precisely the same. In both cases, they represent the yield of an expansive garden landscape, but they are more than just a product of toil in the field. For Gibson, it seems that the fertility of the landscape and the crop itself stand in for matriarchy and familial origins. As I noted earlier, Gibson's own mother is pictured farming strawberries, masked, giving the middle finger to the onlooker in *Strawberry Fields*. She is also innocently posed in the mud guarding a strawberry in *Lil' Virginia in the field*. The strawberry also comes to represent a vessel that connects the root of the earth to the blossoming of new generations in paintings like *Holding a heavy Strawberry Vase* and *Flowers with Strawberry vase*. Gibson's strawberry has little to do with literal strawberries; instead it is analogous to a womb, alchemical furnace, or cocoon. The strawberry can also suggest endings—it serves equally as both womb and tomb, as we see in *Strawberry Tomb*. Here, plump, ripe strawberries and flowers sprout from the vine, extending to the frame's edges—as this painting's title implies, harvest time is always a return to death as well as a new beginning.

In a recent interview for *Widewalls*, Gibson calls his paintings “borderscapes,” in reference to the unique conditions along the border between California and Mexico. In many parts of the desert between San Diego and El Paso, the border between the United States and Mexico is not actually marked in any way, because the desert itself acts as a barrier to be crossed at one’s own peril. The ocean likewise serves as a treacherous barrier, despite the fact that it stretches across all political borders. So it is not surprising that Gibson’s “borderscapes” are deserts and beaches. *Upside Mountain*, *Butterfly #11 Ocotillo Song*, and *Butterfly #10 Indio Ca.* are all desertscapes in which “bright big butterflies [guide] migrants safely,” as he puts it in the same interview. Pacific Ocean shores are represented in *Sinaloa Clouds and flowers*, *Into the Sea*, *Spirited Sunset*, *Two trumpets by the sea*, and *Flowers with Strawberry vase*. All indicate a yearning to linger against the infinite horizon of the sea, and to blossom at its edge.



Daniel Gibson, *Butterfly #11 Ocotillo Song*, 2021. Oil on linen, 73 x 64 inches. Courtesy Almine Rech. Photo: Dan Bradica.

The paintings then, taken as a whole, could be broken into three overlapping categories: agriculture, beaches, and deserts. But it is where the desert meets the ocean that the ocotillo plant, pictured in *Butterfly #11 Ocotillo Song*, *Spirited Sunset*, and *Upside Mountain*, makes its decisive appearance, representing autochthony and resilience across the borderland. Ocotillo is a Spanish diminutive of the Nahuatl word *ocotl* meaning “torch,” in reference to the vermillion flowers that sprout from its long stalks, and though it resembles a cactus, it is more closely related to tea and blueberries, with a variety of medicinal uses. In Gibson’s borderscape, the blossoming of ocotillo flowers represents a native torch that lights the way between borders. But it is also the strawberry of the desert, a symbol for survival even in the most inhospitable of climates.