

HERLITZKA + FARIA

# Esvin Alarcón Lam: Erupción lavanda

August 8 - September 18, 2019



*Erupción lavanda*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas. 61 x 61 cm. Ph: Mario Santizo

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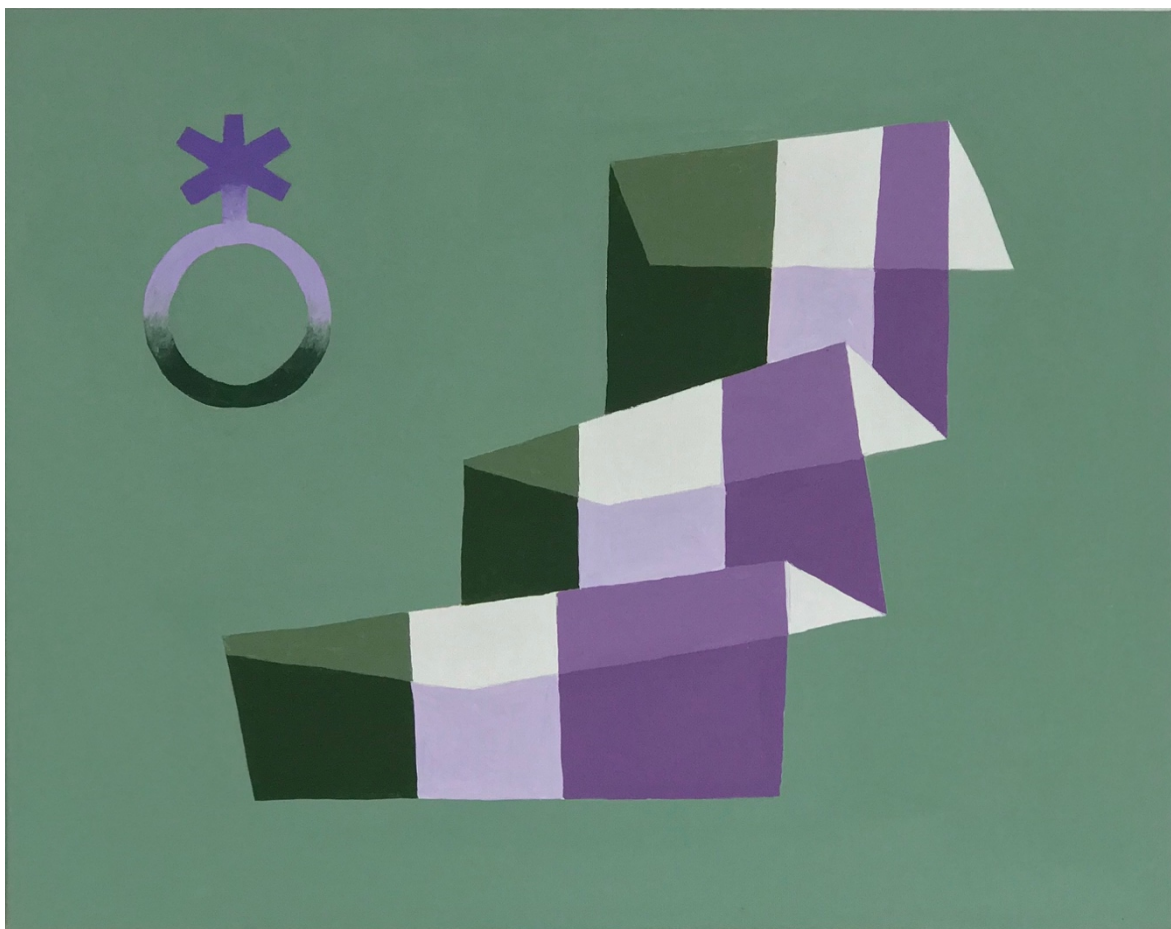
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## Pink Smoke and Rainbow Stairs

I had not imagined the pink triangle, so ubiquitous in the visual politicking of LGBTQ liberation movements, as a powerful volcano until recently, when I saw Esvin Alarcón Lam's sequence of graduated paintings of queer mountains belching lavender and magenta smoke under sweetly chromatic skies. Completed in various sizes, these almost comically abstract compositions propose the enduring symbol of gay oppression and empowerment as a container of chthonic energy—a site of violent potentiality and beatific imaginings. These and the other works in the exhibition *Lavender Eruption* are visual invocations that bring sexuality and nation together.



*Arco del cielo genderqueer*, 2019. De la serie *Arcos del Cielo*. Acrylic on canvas. 40,6 x 50,8 cm

The pink triangle, one of the primary visual symbols of global LGBTQ political movements, was first formulated by the Nazis as part of a broader signaling system that categorized the people they dislocated, imprisoned, and murdered during their dogged pursuit of ethnic cleansing and genocide. This was one of many holocausts aimed at eradicating socially marginalized people, historically hatched by parliaments and dictatorships alike across the long span of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The pink triangle was issued only for gay men, of whom over 50,000 were arrested—lesbians were given a black triangle, a symbol used

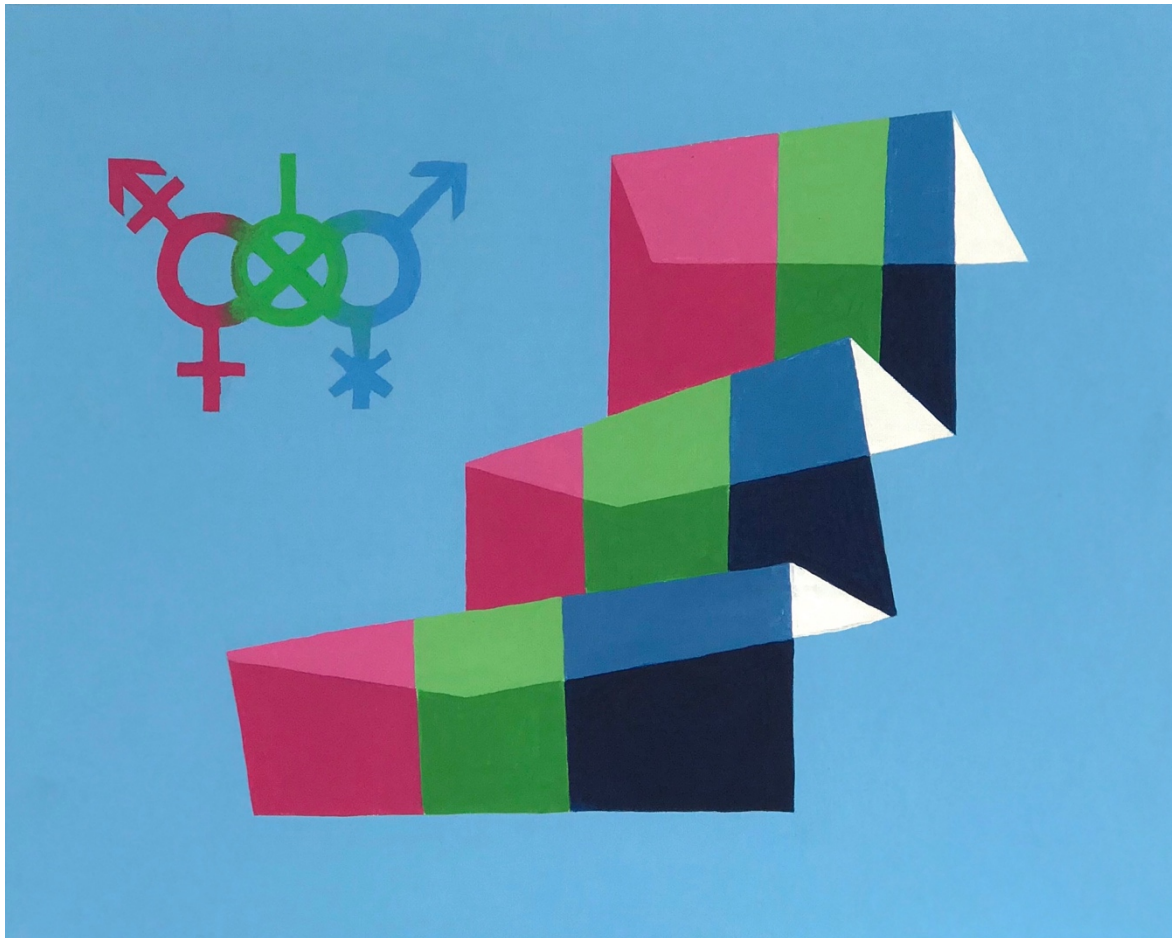
for “asocial” people, including prostitutes, nonconformists, thieves, and those who had sex with Jews. With the defeat of the Nazis, the pink triangle no longer served an official state use. Yet the pink triangle and the people who wore it were not treated the same in the decades immediately following the war; the persecution of homosexuals proved to be more steadfast than an assemblage of shape, color, and constructed meaning. Both East and West German governments continued to punish and imprison homosexuals for decades afterwards. Thus for the surviving men, even when they were “liberated” from the camps there was no meaningful change in their criminal status.



*Nube vertical*, 2019. 40 x 40 cm. Acrylic on canvas. Ph: Mario Santizo

After WWII and with loosening of homosexuality’s criminal status, German queer communities in the 1970s attempted to resignify the pink triangle as a symbol of protest — using it precisely because of its role in state-sanctioned violence and murder. But arguably the pink triangle did not become a global symbol of queer rights and protest until

a group of artist and graphic designers in the United States took it upon themselves to create a graphic response to the rapidly intensifying HIV/AIDS pandemic and the U.S. government's indifference and hostility to the health concerns of those living with the virus. The Silence = Death Collective, as they came to be known, flipped the Nazi pink triangle on its base and added the equation "Silence=Death," in large, capitalized, sans-serif type (the typographical equivalent of a shout). This graphic became one of the most ubiquitous signs of protest in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



*Arco del cielo polisexual*, 2019. De la serie *Arcos del Cielo*. Acrylic on canvas. 40,6 x 50,8 cm

Aware of the long lineage of LGBTQ folks who have invented, refuted, interpreted, remixed, and re-presented long-standing symbols of LGBTQ life and politics, Esvin Alarcón Lam's volcanic pink triangles take the history of this powerful symbol into exciting new, and allegorical territory, building on the implicit meanings of the Silence=Death Collective's graphic, and aligning the strength and power that comes with repositioning historically destructive symbols with one of Guatemala's most distinctive geological features. In combining the triangle and the volcano, Lam makes an ad hoc image of Guatemalan queer identity by providing a graphic concatenation of the personal and the national (as filtered through the ecological sublime). This kind of appeal, which has been critiqued in other national contexts (most notably in the U.S. and in Israel), is a political

necessity in a country which continues to target LGBTQ people, women, and indigenous folks; consider, for instance, the recent “life and protection” bill proposed in Guatemala’s legislature that, amongst many other things, would make miscarriages a crime and would define marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution. Against these continuing indignities the volcano rumbles and erupts, its capacities to destroy and create new ground makes it fearsome and awesome at once.



*Volcán con cielo lavanda*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas. 30 x 30 cm. Ph: Mario Santizo

Like the pink volcanoes, Lam’s second series of work on display here, evocatively entitled *Arcos del cielo* (Sky Arches), also engages in playing with the history and meanings of LGBTQ symbology. Each of the paintings in this series carefully deconstructs flags from the various affinitive intra-LGBTQ communities, highlighting both broad coalitional groups (such as Gilbert Baker’s 1978 eight color rainbow flag which often stands for LGBTQ people as a whole in popular visual culture) as well as niche fetishes (such as the crossed

horseshoes identified with the pony play fetish community—who get erotic joy out of roleplaying as horses). Lam has combined these flags' striking colorways and symbols with a stair-step form created by Josef Albers in the early 1930s (Steps, c. 1931), part of a larger group of flashed glass works completed by the Modernist painter. Steps predates the artist's trips to Central and South America with Anni, by nearly four years, and yet it shares some of the formal qualities with the works the Albers' made in response to their time abroad—particularly in the conjoining of non-traditional painting materials with spatial experimentation. Albums of photographs of pyramids and ancient architecture taken during the Albers' trips dated between 1935-1960, record the artists' approach to their encounters with indigenous Central and South American history as one that tended to abstract and formalize the rich play of meanings otherwise dependent upon interconnected understandings of site, architectural form, and other surrounding or historic ornamentation. Importantly, Lam elides this historical separation that exists between the form he appropriates and the Albers' excursions to Central and South America, a suggestion, perhaps, of the way he intends for a viewer to encounter the symbols and colors of the various LGBTQ flags, denaturing their contextual meanings and abstracting them as a node within larger histories of art and design.

Alarcón Lam has essentially kept the striping and shading that made Albers's initial work live in the deliciously ambiguous pictorial situation of being simultaneously "flat" and recessional; yet the structure of Lam's appropriated shape fractures the continuity of each flag that he uses. These paintings of flags perform a quality intrinsic to community, which is that they present the smooth coherency of flag design as broken, piecemeal, and in movement. The kind of utopian longing that Lam presents to his viewer is central to political identification and struggle; political groups are, after all, made up of people, as different as they come. Lam's paintings acknowledge the impossibility of this coherency fantasy while hinting at its social necessity and political expediency.

Together, these two series of works put the diverse languages of protest, identification, and national belonging (or unbelonging) into direct dialogue, and in so doing, attempt to forge a visual system reflective of the past, but seen from askew—a place where the pattern erupts and breaks, a place where we might engage the political imaginary by remaking it anew.

Andy Campbell

Andy Campbell, PhD. Is art historian, critic, and curator with over a decade of experience in higher education and museum institutions. Sited at the juncture of identity-based political movements, visual culture, and art's histories, his research seeks to illuminate the profound contributions of makers of all kinds sidelined by mainstream/canonical art histories. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Critical Studies at USC's Roski School of Art and Design.

Campbell is author of *Queer X Design: 50 Years of Signs, Symbols, Banners, Logos, and Graphic Art of LGBTQ* (Black Dog & Leventhal) and *Bound Together: Leather, Sex, Archives, and Contemporary Art* (Manchester University Press). He lives in Los Angeles.



*Arco del cielo*, 2019. De la serie *Arcos del Cielo*. Acrylic on canvas. 40,6 x 50,8 cm

**Esvin Alarcón Lam** (Guatemala, 1988) attended the Universidad Rafael Landívar and studied art at the Escuela Nacional de Arte in Guatemala City. His work has been exhibited at the Osage Art Foundation, Hong Kong (2018); MADC Museum, Costa Rica (2016); the Bienal de Arte Paiz, Guatemala (2016); SPACE Collection, Irvine, CA (2016); Materia Cruda, Galería de Arte de la Universidad Rafael Landívar, Guatemala (2016); Líneas de la mano, Sicardi Gallery, Houston, TX (2015); 5 Revoluciones por minuto, 9.99 Gallery, Guatemala (2015); Spatial Acts, The Americas Society, New York, NY (2015) and 5 días: puertas abiertas, Centro Cultural de España, Guatemala (2013). His work is part of the public collections: SPACE collection, Irvine, CA and Fundación YAXS, Guatemala City. The artist lives and works in Guatemala.