

**'Nice' Objects: Reflections on Lindsay Cuenca-Walker's Solo Exhibition, *Tough and Tender* on view at Nationale
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By Lindsay Martin**



First Thought, Best Thought

A bright sunny painting of a four scoop ice cream sundae welcomes the viewer into Lindsay Cuenca-Walker's exhibition, *Tough and Tender*. The sundae stares down at me like a prized trophy. Besides the ice cream, there are many sweet objects in this gallery. I view bright palm trees, roses in an alleyway, cups of coffee and radiating stars. Each image is centered on a medium sized canvas and created with a warm color palette by Cuenca-Walker, whose style has a digital, illustrative gesture. The work seems awfully cheerful. As a child, I remember when my family ate these large sundaes at pastel-colored diners. While I stared at the large banana split between my grandfather and I, he would discuss my school or career choices. We still use sweet desserts to talk because their pleasant presence sugarcoats any tough conversation. As an adult, I still direct my attention to pretty plain objects for meditation and respite. While I look at the paintings of flowers, a bouquet, ice cream, or a dish in *Tough and Tender*, I believe Lindsay Cuenca-Walker is trying to do the same.



A Look Into The Real World

I feel summer sunshine permeate through Nationale's windows, much like I do with Lindsay Cuenca-Walker's work. For the second time this month, I am aware of palm trees in a Portland gallery. The gray Pacific Northwest must crave more paintings of the tropics as palm trees allocate a world where happiness instantly materializes with the fantastic weather. Cuenca-Walker's paintings eliminate the gloomy Portland weather by radiating fantastic light: the kind of sun associated with sunglasses and vacation. Each painting experiences a black afternoon shadow that is not ominous, but more like a ground for a landscape or a place for an object to rest.

The show's title, *Tough and Tender* explains the show's purpose and allows us to view these objects in a contradictory manner. However, Cuenca-Walker's paintings provide little relationship to text, title, or background detail, omitting the specificity of content. Within her paintings, an undocumented, uncomfortable conversation could be at play but the viewer is left out by a red herring of bright pigments and an illustrative paint application. Perhaps the paintings are made during a discussion of current politics, personal trauma or exhaustion. Maybe, Cuenca-Walker's world is all clear skies and I am just a pessimist. I believe that her titles such as *Alleyway* and *A Look at the Real World* continue to conceal each painting's purpose rather than offering us another narrative or alternative story to suggest the objects are more than what meets the eye. *Alleyway* contains two roses, but no dark corners, no dirty brick walls or festering garbage that an alleyway would normally contain. Have you ever seen an alleyway where roses are growing? Perhaps in Portland, the rose capital. When is the *Real World* a mirage of palms? Only in my dreams do roses and palm trees grow in everyday places,

which is why the viewer questions what could possibly be awry. I am able to enjoy the ice cream in *First Thought is the Best Thought*, without even questioning an alternative narrative.



Alleyway

Titles can link paintings to an additional narrative in a poetic way, but Walker's phrases allow more separation between text and image. Thomas Nozkowski spent forty years painting *Untitled* pieces so that his paintings would remain completely abstract, while contemporary landscape painter Shara Hughes enjoys titles as part of a plot to an open-ended book. Alleyways are notorious for concealed acts of discretion, so why do the roses convey such wariness? Could a lover's roses be growing in an alleyway? It would make more sense if a bouquet was thrown than perfectly placed florals. Where is the disruption?

Cuenca-Walker's still life are, as the artist states in the abstract, "clichéd" clues to the 'visible or concealed' parts of everyday life. What are the other clues? The viewer is left to answer all of the questions of the object, as the items are so generic that one wouldn't even know exactly where to find this 'every day life.' I ask questions that the titles do not quite fulfill, yet, I am stuck in a room with happy sunlight. Maybe for some people, like myself, the sunlight is too much to enjoy. Our cynical minds must think of these objects as clues to a hidden story. There are roses and stars and ice cream, but we don't buy the gimmick. Something else is brewing at Nationale.

<https://www.nationale.us/lindsey-cuenca-walker-tough-and-tender-2018/>