View of "Currents 121: Oscar Murillo," 2022, at the Saint Louis Art Museum.
Courtesy Oscar Murillo

Seven giant paintings by **Oscar Murillo (https://www.artnews.com/t/oscar-murillo/)** nearly fill the walls of two galleries at the Saint Louis Art Museum. With their encrusted layers of paint, they look sedimentary. Murillo laid the pigment on thick in most places: scribbled blacks and bursts of raw color are set tight together alongside dull, flat slabs. Bits of other crumpled material curl out from the peaks of several impasto lumps, as if to emphasize the sheer volume of paint. The series is called "manifestation." In several languages, versions of this word refer to both political protest and to the process of making apparent something that was inward or obscure. Murillo's paintings—per this exhibition's conceptual framing and several prior press releases about the series—try to speak to both those meanings. The aggressive marks that cover their surfaces are meant to be an index of the artist's personal agitation and a visual metaphor for our shaky political moment. Most of the paintings, however, lack the overall focus or sense of arrangement that could connect their commanding presence to their metaphorical aims.

Murillo has claimed that he doesn't deal in the invention of forms. Instead, he sees himself as a recorder of affects. "Creating form in painting" is a "bourgeois idea," he has said. The artist attempts instead to "frenetically download [his] physical energy and emotion onto the canvas." This may seem to relate him to the Abstract Expressionists, but Murillo cites **Jannis Kounellis (https://www.artnews.com/t/jannis-kounellis/)** as an influence for his use of paint as a material rather than a tool for creating illusions. Layering mark upon mark, Murillo intends each stroke to suggest the bodily movements that went into its making, and thus to be "factual." That is, the marks are meant to register (not represent) Murillo's mental state and physical exertion.

Murillo's previous work, however, has been successful not when it actually achieves factuality or antiform, as Kounellis had it, but rather when the forms he has stumbled onto while ostensibly trying to abolish them interact with their own negation in interesting ways. His earlier "word" paintings are a good example: in *Untitled (Drawing Off the Wall)*, 2011, he places two piles of black paint alongside the scrawled Spanish word *pollo* (chicken). The odd proximity of the nonsymbolic splotches to the unambiguously denotative *pollo* suggests a tenuous hint of signification for the former (might all this paint have something to do with chickens?) while the latter starts to seem like nothing more than lines on a surface.

Oscar Murillo: *manifestation*, 2020–22, oil, oil stick, graphite, and spray paint on canvas and linen, three parts, approx. 7 by 39 feet overall; at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Courtesy Oscar Murillo

The "manifestation" paintings on view seem weak, then, because they've given up this tension. The undeniable verve of some of Murillo's gestures is seldom conveyed through the whole work. In all the paintings, a large black mess of slashed lines and heavy blobs amasses somewhere central, or suffuses the canvas, generally either overlaid with or surrounded by streaks of color similarly scrawled and diffuse. In each piece too, bits of ground peek out amid thinner scribbled lines remaining from earlier works on these canvases that Murillo repurposed for this series. The size, density, and frantic energy of each painting's field of black makes it sufficiently commanding that it could serve as a compositional core against which other forms' qualities and locations might be calibrated. Instead, the blacks zig and zag and mass throughout each work with a disregard for the forms they're layered on or moving among, which in turn take shape discretely, without relation, like a bunch of radios playing different stations simultaneously. The marks thus seem at once crowded and isolated, resulting in a stylistic aloofness at odds with the individual gestures' inarguable physical directness.

A representative black mark in one "manifestation" begins in the upper right corner atop a field of dull red, and falls down the edge of the canvas over sections of nearly blank ground, scribbles, screen-printed floral forms, and close-set blocks of color. It doesn't respond in its shape or thrust to those elements, but is simply laid over them. True, a simple laying on of paint is an important part of what vivifies Murillo's "word" paintings; but the "manifestation" works fail to convey that sense of engagement, the embattlement and responsiveness of elements, that could make the overwhelming *there*ness of the paint add up to Murillo's larger artistic program of protest.

In one "manifestation," the word *power* in large block letters is almost entirely covered up by thick black strokes, its power to signify literally rather than metaphorically sapped by its placement on the canvas. The paradox here is that the paintings, in their failed jab at form, end up being extraordinarily hyperformal—they become nothing more than shapes and lines juxtaposed and overlapping on a flat surface.

Just one "manifestation" on view avoids this problem, Murillo allowing his marks there to act out a conflict against each other: each gesture seems to vie with the others to get to the front of the picture

plane. A vibrant ball of orange, the painting's nexus, overpowers a red splotch that recedes into a dense darker region. Some bald bits of canvas, showing through from behind, look exhaustedly thin, as though the support they're providing the scene could easily give way. It's in this sort of interaction that Murillo's painterly mark-making finally rises to the level of genuine agon.