



CLEARING

**Javier Barrios**  
***Offerings to the Nocturnal Hours***  
September 7 — October 21, 2023

CLEARING is pleased to present *Offerings to the Nocturnal Hours*, Mexican artist Javier Barrios' first solo exhibition with the gallery, and in Europe which includes a selection of drawings, watercolours, oil paintings, and sculptures.

The unique anatomy of the orchid allows it to use pollinators from a wider range of insects than any other plant, resulting in an endless possibility of hybridizations. It is of little surprise then that Javier Barrios has adopted this particular genus as a fertile ground for his constantly evolving body of works.

*Offerings to the Nocturnal Hours* sees Barrios combine his personal approach to storytelling through drawing with research embracing the spheres of botany, mysticism, geography, colonial narratives, and myths of creation.

The orchid is a ripe element for broaching the subject of botanical colonialism, having been trafficked across the world by imperial powers as early as the 1600s. While particularly sought after, their biology was misunderstood; colonial ideology framed them as beautifully fragile, requiring protection and appreciation supposedly lacking in their native lands. Their frenetic extraction (known as orchid fever) led paradoxically to the damage of landscapes and ecosystems where the plants had thrived.

In his drawings belonging to the ongoing series "Buddhist Visions from Hell" created using pastel, watercolour and oil paint, Barrios revisits the illustrated plates of botanical study books, yet through an anthropomorphic twist, stages the orchids as sentient beings and reinstates their agency.

His hallucinatory and unsettling scenes emerge from a background of influences straddling Japanese *Ukiyo-é* drawings, Hokusai's "Hyaku monogatari" (One Hundred Ghost Stories), demons and goblins drawn by Kawanabe Kyosai, and flame-laden 12th-century Buddhist "Jigoku Zoshi" hell scrolls. Folding in an admiration borne in childhood for the Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco's take on social realism, the drawings depicting several endangered orchid species from his native Mexico act as a parable on colonial botany and extractivism where historical references are sampled, displaced, crossbred.

A second series of drawings and watercolours on paper, "Danza de Huichilobos", is influenced by personal readings of Mexican conquest chronicles, and sees the artist dress and adorn these new iterations of his orchids with elements that refer to iconographies of pre-Hispanic Mexico. Flint and obsidian knives or *tecpatl*—used in Aztec rituals and as key elements in origin stories—appear alongside creatures presenting their red, skinless skulls, recalling flaying practices.

Habitually drawing at night time, Barrios surrenders to the orchid-induced delirium, channelling onto paper a carnival of oneiric creatures and cosmic shark-like monsters, bedecked in masks, headdresses, beads, and feathers.

This fascination for hybridization and evolutionary theories unfurls in Barrios' new paintings. The flayed skulls once again appear, with beehives or chrysalis grafted onto their heads in a symbolic gesture towards time passing and transformation. Jade green stone—related to the divine in Aztec cultures—is repurposed as prayer beads in the form of miniature skulls. Barrios draws parallels between syncretic religious practices and the hybridisation of families from the animal kingdom.

These scientific exquisite corpses find inspiration in Ernst Haeckel's *Kunstformen der Natur* (Art forms of Nature) of 1904, where the zoologist lavishly illustrated listings of creatures and sought to sketch out the similarities in forms across many very different and very diverse species, and so challenged dominant theological aesthetics of the Christian West at the time.

Flint knives also seem to sprout from the demon's orifices: expressing multiple meanings that carry a complex view of the world, the *tecpatl* are not only closely associated with sacrifice and death but also with the notions of origin and creation (as they retain the potential to make fire), and fertility (as its teeth represent seeds). Thus, the act of taking life is one and the same motion as creating it.

Towards the front of the gallery space hang a series of watercolour paintings depicting almond and cherry blossoms, interspersed with the faces of demons and monstrous animals. Inspired by a Buddhist representation of hell where souls must infinitely repeat certain practices and punishments, Barrios picks up the cyclical motion once more and has painted a scenario where people are condemned to blossom, wilt, and bloom again for eternity until they lose their minds.

Glass-and-wood boxes invented by the English physician Nathaniel Ward in 1842 called "Wardian cases" were used in Victorian times to transport exotic plants across Empires, from South America and Asia to Europe. The invention in turn allowed the first mass, commercial exports of plants across the globe, which continues to this day.

At the rear of the gallery stand two iterations of what Barrios calls "haunted houses". Reclaiming the Wardian case, these works hark back to the colonial trade of plants, and the ghosts such destructive acts have created. Trading glass panes for backlit Japanese paper, the works feature watercolour drawings that recall traditional botanical illustrations, yet upon closer inspection depict anthropomorphized flowers peering at us, beady eyed and ready to take revenge for the wrongdoings experienced. Barrios uses the Wardian case to rewrite the interrupted histories of orchids—freeing the plants from their glass and wood prisons and allowing them to live an alternate, imagined future. The artist stages a counter-narrative, where the plants have humans at their mercy, and flowers appear as dark deities occupying a speculative position of power that was never assigned to them.

One of the cases hosts orchids playfully dancing, suspended in what appears to be a blue sky. Are they no longer ghouls, but angels freed from the loop of history and reincarnation? Barrios' personal cosmogony reminds us that this realm is not heaven at all, but in fact the celestial vault of an inescapable hell whose sublime horror and ambivalence we must surrender to and be wilfully reborn into.

**Javier Barrios** (b. 1989, Guadalajara, Mexico) lives and works in Mexico City.

He has presented solo exhibitions at the Art and Culture Center, Hollywood; Fundación Calosa, Mexico City; LADRÓN Galería, Mexico City; and Pequod Co., Mexico City.

His work has also been included in exhibitions at The Drawing Center, New York; Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City; Fundación Casa Wabi, Oaxaca; Casa da Cultura, Comporta; N.A.S.A.L., Mexico City; Salón Silicón, Mexico City; Aoyama Meguro, Tokyo; CLEARING, Brussels, among others.