

When Benjamin Muñoz was a small child, the circus came to town. Not a three-ring, name-brand Barnum and Bailey operation, but a small, family-owned, operated circus. All the performers were related underneath the canopy inside the one hot tent pitched in the South Texas sun. Twelve-year-old trapeze artists flew from above while clowns tumbled on the dirt floor. Outside barkers called out to entice passers-by into the sideshow, undoubtedly one of the last operating in the country. “See Billy, the two-headed baby!” they cried. The young Muñoz was enthralled.

As if by divine providence, his seat number was called through the microphone inside the big top when they needed an audience member to participate. As he worked his way down to the show floor, the clowns set up the act he was to perform: spinning plates on thin sticks. But how could this be possible? How could a young boy be expected to do this on the spot? Once Muñoz arrived and saw the setup, he understood at once. The sticks had pointed tops and the plates had matching holes making it almost impossible to fail at the task. This gimmick was invisible to the audience members in the stands. It was all smoke and mirrors. The Greatest Show on Earth was, of course, just a show.

Decades on, now a father himself of young children, Muñoz creates and deconstructs spectacles, promises, and hypemen. His printmaking practice, grand in scale and content, looks at how the particularities of his family’s intergenerational immigration story stand witness to the smoke and mirrors of the American Dream.

Beginning with his series *The Endless Endeavor*, Muñoz developed a visual language in lavish 8-foot woodblocks. He told the story of his grandfather arriving undocumented in the US and starting his own business. The family’s fortunes were built on the back of these actions, and Muñoz stack icons of this story teetering in the air like acrobats. The imagery in this series has been mechanistically piled up to the heavens and printed in black and white.

Muñoz continued this storytelling metaphor in *Familia*, another series of large-scale woodcuts printed in Chiaroscuro at Flatbed Press in Austin. In this series, the dimensionality shifts, creating precarious balancing acts. Words are obscured by the shifting of objects, and the spectacle grows with marquee lights illuminating the viewer’s visual path. In this new light, we can start to see the hollowness of the promises of the American Dream. In *Heed*, at the feet of the “Welcome to America” sign, “Don’t Come Back” sticks out just over the rooftop, speaking to the push and pull immigrants to the United States experience. The promise of a better life and the inscription on the Statue of Liberty splinter against the realities of border politics and systemic racism.

The hope for a better life for their children that so many immigrants carry with them continues three generations on in Muñoz series *Las Hermanas*. The sisters are the artist’s daughters, *Florence*, *Jane*, and *Daphne*. In *Florence* and *Jane*, Muñoz balances his hopes for the future of his girls on what he knows to be true of them at the young ages of two and four. *Daphne* tells the story of his stillborn daughter, born during the powerful winter storms of February 2021. The paramedics’ footprints are left in the snow of their front yard and the vessel in the center,

ornately decorated, is the hope the family had for the young girl. The beauty of the potential of her life untouched by the fact that she never got to live it. Muñoz will be adding the series when their youngest daughter, Luna, born this year, turns four.

The metaphor of *The Greatest Show on Earth* and the immigrant experience is most sharply drawn into focus in *El Orto Lado* or “The Other Side,” the phrase people in Mexico use in conversation when referencing the United States. In the woodcut, you can see figures in traditional hats lining up at the ticket booth, drawn in by the signs but seemed to have missed the “closed until further notice” caveat.

When Muñoz’s grandfathers crossed the Rio Grande, there was something to be said for the American spectacle. The egalitarian nature of the United States at the time meant that they had a better chance of success there than in Mexico. They succeeded in building a better life for themselves and their children than what he could have hoped for back home. In only a few decades, however, as social safety nets unravel, economic disparity skyrockets, housing costs make homeownership out of reach for the middle class, and politicians with openly racist immigration policies hold high offices, we seem to be seeing the little man behind the curtain.

The American Dream is an advertisement for something that is no longer for sale. Muñoz prints are stories of hope in the face of smoke and mirrors. It is Barnum’s “real fake.” While the promise of glitter and glitz is a lie, the shine can plant seeds of hope that grow into something that is real. In the end, the *Greatest Show on Earth* isn’t the rigged spinning plates; it is what we do with our lives and what we pass on to our children. In the wonder of Muñoz’s massive woodcuts, the teetering objects, and the shining lights, we see both the illusions and the hope they offer.