

NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

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Lyle Zimskind, "Robert Nava VS. Monsters at Night Gallery, August 8, 2019

LA WEEKLY



Robert Nava, "Is That Your Brother?" 2019 (Night Gallery)

ROBERT NAVA VS. MONSTERS AT NIGHT GALLERY

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Robert Nava, "TLC1" (Night Gallery)

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Sometimes a monster is just a monster. Even when it emerges from the intention of a creative mind, the image of an unreal behemoth might not be an allegory, symbol, statement, warning or rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem to be born. In each of Robert Nava's paintings currently on display at the [Night Gallery](#) downtown, the artist suggests that the phantasmagorical, sometimes fearsome creature portrayed is not part of any greater narrative timeline or philosophical demonstration. What is it, then? "It just is," he gently affirms.

Consider the playfully menacing freak of nature in Nava's "Is That Your Brother?" painting, which he identifies as a good introduction to his new work and says "gets a little bit at everything I'm trying to create" in this show. This snarling two-headed hybrid — half bear, half tiger — is an original mythical creature without the kind of surrounding mythology that defines our understanding of, say, a gryphon or a minotaur. It doesn't even have a name. Its context is characterized, rather, by the piece's distinctive brush- and spray-painted "marks," or "scribbles" as he often calls them, that "encapsulate the energy" of this invention.

Nava has named his show at Night Gallery *Vs.* because "in the studio," as he describes it, "the paintings collide, sit across the room from each other or sometimes side by side. Some of them feel stronger than others, and it's difficult to gauge the good or evil in the beings and spirits that are in them. But there's an energy between them, between those beings and spirits, and between the work and me. *Vs.* describes what's often like a battle between all these forces pitted against one another."

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Robert Nava, "Two Heads Monster" 2019 (Night Gallery)

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This sense of competition, even rivalry, between Nava's paintings is most obvious in a pair of contrasting "angel" representations hanging adjacently on the Night Gallery walls. The figures in both "Fire and Bone Angel" and "Time Angel" look more like malevolent demons than classic angels. One is all flame and destruction, its counterpart all apocalyptic cold steel and frost. Both of them appear to be armed to the teeth and eager to inflict a violent destruction onto the other one across the boundaries of their separate canvases.

Vs. is Nava's first solo exhibition in Los Angeles, though the 34 year-old Yale-trained, Brooklyn-based artist has previously had his own shows in New York and Brussels. Two of the paintings here were composed at the beginning of 2019, but the rest were all put to canvas within in the last two months or so. In addition to the identifiable beasts and supernatural beings that populate these works, some of his invented creatures merge organic forms with contemporary technological icons, such as airplanes, Transformers, vehicles and electrical currents.

The one thing Nava sheepishly describes as the "hardest part" of his creative process is titling his pieces. "I suck at titles," he says. The aforementioned "Is That Your Brother?" is a joking catchphrase he was bandying about the studio around the time he was painting the tiger-bear and unrelated to the work. Some other names are kind of blatantly on the nose. "Two Heads Monster" is indeed a cartoonish double-headed, four-armed angry green figure. When his friends saw it, Nava says, they described it as "Gumby on acid"—which is exactly what it looks like. "That name really is perfect," Nava muses. "Do you think it's too late to change it?"
