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# Arena

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IN THE STUDIO

## From Painting To Making Mezcal

While many artists can claim that their work is multidisciplinary, Eduardo Sarabia's practice includes painting, sculpture, mezcal-making and even treasure-hunting. "There's a lot of fantasy and imagination involved in my work," he says, seated in his studio, on the first floor of a 1950s industrial building in the Zapopan district of Guadalajara, Mexico. He shows me the blue-and-white Talavera-style ceramic tiles he's produced for a coming solo exhibition in Antwerp. In place of the typical Talavera motifs of flora and fauna, one piece is adorned with crossed swords and floating pills, the other reads Mas Oro (More Gold). "Everything comes from a real place," he says, "that's why I love what I do. I get to share these stories — my stories."

Mr. Sarabia grew up in East Los Angeles, when it was a hub for the Chicano art movement. Both of his parents had migrated to California from the Mexican state of Sinaloa in the early 1970s: His father, the eldest of 14, was promised a job at a Safeway warehouse; his mother joined soon after, crossing the border in Tijuana. (Both are now American citizens.) "As marginalized, low-income, project kids, you had to dream," Mr. Sarabia says. "It was such a big part of succeeding in the American life." Making art was what got him "out of the neighborhood and gangs and that kind of world," he says. When a primary school teacher noticed his unusual drawing abilities, she encouraged his parents to take him to the Saturday conservatory art course at California State University in Los Angeles. There, he met another prodigy: a

young Kehinde Wiley. "We were the inner-city kids paraded around, doing contests and having our photo taken with the mayor," Mr. Sarabia jokes. After graduating from Otis College of Art and Design, and a stint in film production, he caught the attention of the New York art dealer Paul Judelson. His I-20 Gallery gave Mr. Sarabia

his first solo exhibition, in 2001.

But his story as an artist really begins with his grandfather Felipe Sarabia. In 1950, a teenage Felipe was recruited by prospectors who hoped to unearth a long-lost stash of gold. According to legend, the 14 million ounces, in coins and bars, had been buried by missionaries near La Noria,

where Felipe lived. The expedition team found no treasure and moved on, but Felipe continued the search until his death — an effort that has shaped the younger Sarabia's work. When his grandfather died, he remembered thinking, "I'm going to go to Sinaloa and pick up all this stuff," referring to Felipe's papers. *BENOÎT LOISEAU*

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