

## Coming Home: 2283 Crane Street

runner

An interview with Peter Bernal

April 28, 2025

Peter Bernal is a Detroit-based painter known for his narrative compositions that occupy a space between real and surreal. His practice spans medium: oil on canvas, ink on paper, paint on brick wall, but no matter the method, the figure and the ground work in harmony to share a story. His mural, *Coming Home*, is featured on the cover of Runner Magazine's Issue 5. Below we present an interview with the artist about his work and his experience living in Detroit.

**Runner Magazine:** You have been living in Detroit for a decade or so, before that you grew up in Houston and lived in Kansas City and Germany, where you were trained in painting, printing-making and drawing. What brought you to Detroit?

**Peter Bernal:** My wife and I, as creative people in the arts, were obliged to follow jobs and various contracts to keep food on the table. The Detroit Institute of Arts offered a position to Ellen, and we took the chance together to find a place to permanently call home. As I am a visual artist, I can work anywhere and Detroit called our names...

**RM:** What keeps you in Detroit?

**PB:** Detroiters are my kind of people and I love it here for that reason. There are a few other things that keep me here: the need to grow roots and work freely as an artist. It's hard to establish a meaningful portfolio if I'm obligated to stop working and pack up every 2 to 5 years. Detroit, compared to any other major American city, has a relatively affordable cost of living and is fertile ground for creative people. Also, I really enjoy the food here.



*Abfahrt (Departure)*, Oil on Board, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist.  
<https://www.peterdanielbernal.com/>



*In Defense of the Americas*, Oil on Panel, 2017. Image courtesy of Aaron Steele.



*Both Immigrant and Not: Arrival*, 2020, Exterior latex on primed masonry. Image courtesy of Aaron Steele

**RM:** Narrative seems to be a focal point of your work, with each composition representing a scene from a story that sways between conscious and subconscious realms. Is storytelling something that you carry from your lineage as a Chicano Mestizo?

**PB:** I believe it is, Mexican Surrealism is in my blood. I paint figuratively and narratively for critical reasons. There are a lot of things I want to understand and study about human nature and the figurative language is essential for me to accomplish that. I am very serious about the act of making art, and narrative art embraces humanity especially since my focus is sociological in nature.

**RM:** What artists or movements inspire your work the most? Historical or contemporary...

**PB:** I consider myself a Postmodernist by training (which is kind of a paradox). My particular language of painting is a kind of reverse appropriation of the Catholic Baroque, like Jusepe Ribera, Guido Reni and Caravaggio. I absolutely love artists with a spirit of courage, especially Mexican surrealism, like Remedios Varo, Frida and the muralists (Diego, Orozco and Siqueiros). German art by Max Beckmann and East German art give me strength as well. I appreciate art from everywhere but I always come back to Vincent Van Gogh.





*Flying Black Queen*, 2019, Exterior latex on primed masonry. Image courtesy of @harlirave. <https://findmasa.com/artist/peter-bernal>

**RM:** Your mural titled, *Coming Home*, located at 2283 Crane Street in East Village, Detroit, is a central feature on the cover of our fifth book. We chose this image because we feel that the mural, as well as the building it is on and its surrounding overgrowth, represents Detroit's unique position as a post-industrial, yet future poised, city. Can you provide some insight into the mural? What was the story behind this piece?

**PB:** Public art is always a challenge, to meld community input with my own vision. I wanted to express my need of finding a permanent home and growing roots, with what the neighborhood envisioned. The building used to belong to the Thomas family, and for years it was a store where neighborhood children would buy snacks and candy. In the mural I depicted the children after coming back from the store with a small sack of groceries in tow.



# MAY 2024 - APRIL 2025 DETROIT MICHIGAN USA



The cover of Runner Magazine Issue 5, featuring Peter Bernal's mural *Coming Home*, located at 2283 Crane Street, Detroit.  
Image by Ashley Cook, 2024

While I was painting, neighbors would approach and share great anecdotes and memories, which touched me deeply. It reminded me of going to the corner with my own grandfather to get ice cream when I was little. It is a sweet memory, but also a vision of the future. As a coincidence, I was able to represent the Thomas family with the boy wearing an Isaiah Thomas jersey of the Detroit Pistons (no relation, as far as I know).

**RM:** Who commissioned the mural? What year was it painted?

**PB:** This mural was commissioned by CityWalls in 2019, I believe? Time goes by so fast!

**RM:** There is a fluid transition between the various mediums and processes you use, proving that you have a strong command over each to relay the message you are aiming to communicate, but do you have a preferred creative medium or process?

**PB:** I strongly prefer oil painting. I enjoy the thickness and texture of the colors, and I aimed to translate that to a large wall using a brush instead of spray. On canvas my paints are very thick, almost like frosting on a cake, but since I can't practically do that on a building I morph it into exaggerated brushstrokes, I use outdoor acrylic paints instead of oils on the wall. I use up a lot of brushes!

**RM:** The drawing style, use of color and presence of storytelling are consistent throughout your practice. Can you elaborate on where these visions come from, that eventually end up in your work?

**PB:** To directly answer the question, a lot of my vision is to understand why people are the way they are - for better or worse. I often bend the rules of nature to make a statement that I believe is important. I am a philosophical realist, a

pragmatist, but art is the domain of the imagination so I use surrealist elements to say things without words. My dreams are a place of inspiration for me.

To me, storytelling is the most direct way to convey an idea that uses human nature as the central thesis. My work is relatively political and social in nature so I use people in my painting, like in a theater play. It is why my art is mostly figurative and not really abstract. True progress in our country and society should be humanistic in nature, not only technological. I don't think the future in art is about finding the next artistic innovation like it was in the 20th Century. I believe the future in art is asserting our humanity right here. It seems to be denied in corporate thinking everywhere, and painting children just sitting and enjoying the day is an act of resistance.

<https://www.peterdanielbernal.com/>

Stay tuned for news about the launch of Runner Magazine Issue 5, coming soon!

*runner*