

A Visit with VinZula Kara



VinZula with his work. Photo by Cynthia Alex.

Raw

I didn't know where the L.A. art scene rabbit hole would take me when I opened Rico Gallery in 1989. The space in downtown Los Angeles was raw and foreboding. It was dark and sooty with white chipped paint on the frames around the hazy windows. A dead fly always found its final resting spot at the bottom of the windowpanes. It was cold at night and hot during the day. While sleeping, a small space heater placed under the bed kept us warm.

At the time, Downtown L.A., or more precisely the area just northeast of DTLA that would be designated the Arts District in the early 21st century, had a critical mass of artists. Rents were low, gentrification was a generation away, traffic was scarce, there was room to maneuver: a landscape where creatives might thrive.

I remember seeing VinZula in my newly opened gallery (I think the show was *Scandel des Artistes*). He was standing near the entrance with his long dreads, African hat perched on top of his head, and his strong expressive hands whizzed about as he spoke to other artists in the space.

Fast forward 30 years: I see VinZula standing in the ticket line at Zebulons for the SunRa concert in Frog Town.

Between meeting VinZula at my first art gallery and talking with him in line, a lot happened during my tumble down the rabbit hole. For example, I discovered that artists are a mixed bag of personalities. They are lovers, givers, kind-hearted egalitarians, libertines, bohemians, liberals, conservatives, corporate-minded megalomaniacs, egomaniacs, politicians, passionate entrepreneurs, intellectual elitists, workers, head in the clouds thinkers and people who could easily stab you in the back without blinking an eye. This is not an exhaustive list, and it applies to art dealers too.

The bohemians are the artists that have fascinated me the most. The formal definition of a bohemian is "A socially unconventional person, especially one who is involved in the arts." (Oxford English Dictionary)



VinZula, *Pure Magic*, mixed media, 11.75 x 11.75 inches.

Bohemian VinZula

The difference between bohemians and other artists has to do with authenticity and purity of purpose. Bohemians are like pure, clean water. Just as water can get polluted in any number of ways, artists can too. Bohemians remain pure in heart. They have tapped into their own very personal form of creativity and found a river flowing with their ideas. They live their way. Expectations of a higher plane here on earth are a part of the Bohemian mindset. Money is not as important to them as their loyalty and friends. VinZula is a Bohemian.

A Visit to VinZula

As I sat down with VinZula in his cozy home in Leimert Park, he told me about his family life growing up and his paintings.

"Basically, my father was a painter. I come from an artistic family. My mother was a major in art, and my father played the clarinet, and my mother plays the piano. My father was someone I admired, and he hated what I was doing with my expressive paintings. It hurt me."

Our visit took me on an imaginative ride of lyrical poetry. We talked about his art's imaginary worlds. Suddenly we were in Croatan, referring to the book *Gone to Croatan* that illustrates an imagined philosophy that brought enslaved and indigenous peoples together. The book propelled VinZula to create his own breed of people in his artwork called the IZZ.

"The IZZ can do anything. They cannot harm anything, and nothing can harm them. They are omnipotent. They are spiritual influences over the fear of death. The People of IZZ are benevolent beings that can morph into anything that they want to become. For example, if they want to, they can change into a tree, a cloud or a car, etc."



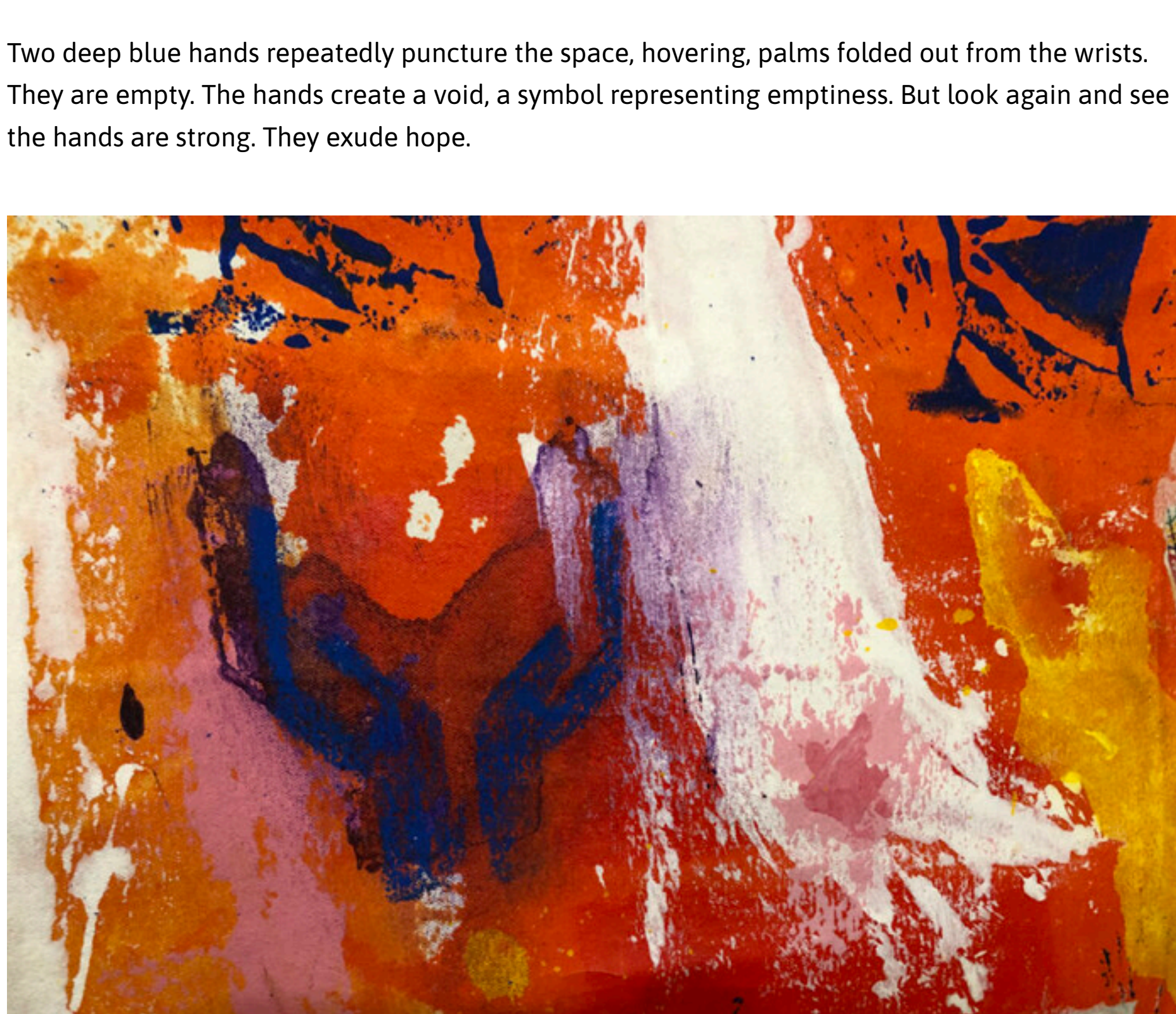
VinZula, *The Affirmation of the IZZ*, mixed media, 60 x 60 inches.

The Affirmation of the IZZ

The symbolism in his lipstick red, California orange and deep-sea blue painting *The Affirmation of the IZZ* deeply saddened me. It is filled with people cut in half. Its sporadic voids seem like escape portals. There is a recurring blue figure in bondage representing people that want to be liberated if they get to Croatan.

In Croatan, and in the painting, the enslaved people are given a chance to have control over their lives. Here the Indians and the enslaved escape their fate of hard labor or certain early death. The reality was that during the 18th and 19th centuries, few African Americans or Indians in the United States had their freedom.

Two deep blue hands repeatedly puncture the space, hovering, palms folded out from the wrists. They are empty. The hands create a void, a symbol representing emptiness. But look again and see the hands are strong. They exude hope.



Detail of *The Affirmation of the IZZ*.

The IZZ Awakens as VinZula Kara

At 11 years old, VinZula went through a spiritual awakening of sorts. He passed out, then went into a dream state of mind.

"I saw two directions: the past and the future. It was perhaps a look at a continuum. I could see myself driving a car, and I almost hit a car, but I put on the brakes. I saw newspapers where war was happening. I was in another state of mind. I was in the netherworld."

Perhaps this experience was VinZula's brief glimpse at an alternate reality. Maybe this experience opened a door into his creative psyche. Later, thinking about the impact that experience may have had on him, VinZula eagerly pointed out that although everyone has their own IZZ, ("everyone has their own inner and outer influences.") he is interested in the universal IZZ, the factors that bring us together and that we share as a human species.

Transcendence

Getting bogged down in petty daily injustices from unenlightened haters is a constant for me as a brown woman in America. It is only through experiencing art, that I can transcend this anxiety. Artists provide color, ideas, and sometimes a ray of hope that the world can be different.



VinZula with his work. Photo by Cynthia Alex.

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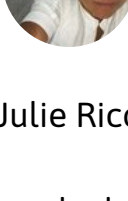
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Julie Rico

Julie Rico is originally from Detroit, Michigan where she worked on the assembly line and then at the World Headquarters of General Motors in Public Relations. She came to Los Angeles with her BA in Journalism to show weird artists' work. She now works at being a sailor, a Getty docent, a writer, a baker, and a producer for non-profit events. Ms. Rico was once an acclaimed art gallery owner in the Los Angeles and Santa Monica areas. She has sat on the boards of the Bilingual Foundation of the Arts and the Laguna Art Museum, conceptualized and managed the Mean Art Tent of the 1995 US Lollapalooza Tour, and curated a traveling exhibition of "Lowbrow" and graffiti art that went to 30 cities.

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