

Carlos Rolón Remembers the Division Street Riots at 65Grand

Rolón's solo exhibition explores the lasting impact of the Division Street Riots in 1966.

BY SAMUEL SCHWINDT | MARCH 26, 2026



Carlos Rolón, "Riot and Remembrance I," 2026, dye sublimation on aluminum, 16.25" × 13.5"/Photo: 65Grand

"As the uneasy truce settled over the community, the game of who to blame started," wrote Bill Van Alstine in the *Chicago Defender*, June 29, 1966, in reference to the differing opinions of the catastrophic events of June 12, 1966. The *Defender* and *Chicago Tribune* prolifically covered the Division Street riots with complicated (euphemism) editorializing. Protests erupted after the fatal shooting of twenty-year-old Arcelis Cruz, one day following Humboldt Park's first Puerto Rican Day Parade. Political and social upheaval unfolded. Division Street should've been called Disorder Street in the days and weeks—years—following these protests.

It's a disappointing time-jump to today. Police brutality couples the failures of the state in protecting its citizens—sixty years later. With the gritty gaze of Carlos Rolón's solo exhibition "The Division Street Riots" at 65Grand, some amelioration occurs. The artworks act as retributive memorials.



Carlos Rolón, "Yo No Me Quito (Man With Flag, After Frank Espada)," 2024–2026, charcoal on Legion paper mounted on Dibond with custom frame and brass plaque, 44.5" × 62.5"/Photo: 65Grand

Percolating prints stomp on the left side of the gallery; they're, trickily, plastic films suctioned to aluminum. It's a print in pointillism style, snapshots of cops and unidentified attendees of the riots. All from 2026, their titles are sequential: "Riot and Remembrance," one, two, three. Think of photocopying a photocopy; the ontological image diffuses into clones that slowly lose their Walter Benjamin-esque "aura." The fashion catapults me: helmets in the first print, to a "sixties" sleeve with a grunting grip of a canister in the next, to a baton-gripping cop, and then to some skip-stepping trousers once more. I, the viewer, am officially in attendance. Next, "Yo No Me Quito, (Man With Flag, After Frank Espada)" is an astounding charcoal memorialization on the center gallery wall. Its stark realism in charcoal is baffling and sublime, reminiscent of a refined chiaroscuro. Its dramatic value dances with dramatic subject matter. Graphite drawings slumber to the right ("Rebellion I" and "Rebellion II" respectively). Graphite is now smoke, not-value. The cop car smolders in one, the streets are coughing smog in the other. These penultimate artworks in charcoal and graphite indulge my sense of image-versus-surface in the exhibition. Which, of course, can relate to the diffusion of facsimile in Rolón's investigation of the Division Street Riots. I pedal away from these events on the found-object bike sculpture that's softly playing tunes to the right. It's the realist object here, but it's ready to cart me away.



Carlos Rolón, installation view of "The Division Street Riots," 2026, at 65Grand/Photo: 65Grand

Perhaps under the glare from coverage of the Whitney Biennial as of late, I'm brewing over one of their most controversial editions in comparison to Rolón's exhibition. Dana Schutz, a white artist, depicted the disfigured face and body of Black American teenager Emmett Till, who was lynched in 1955. The differences in subject position are of paramount importance of course: the site specificity of Rolón's autobiographical history and the site-specificity of the exhibition in Humboldt compared to Schutz. But Rolón is also not taking advantage, and is not dubious in aesthetic decisions. If you take a look at Schutz's work, the artist has an infatuation, resoundingly, with the grotesque. Thus, Schutz made Till into a misshapen spectacle aligned with their aesthetic values. In contrast, but with similar political sources, Rolón is actually so incredibly protective of the Division Street Riots' narrative, visually and conceptually. The artist is acting as a caresser and preservationist. He isn't basking in the spectacle; just the afterglow.

Rolón knows who to blame, though, after the "uneasy truce settled" as the *Chicago Defender* talked about in 1966. Do you?

"Carlos Rolón: *The Division Street Riots*" is on view at 65Grand, 3252 West North, through April 12.