

HOLLIS TAGGART

Hollis Taggart to Present Solo Show of Works by Self-Taught Puerto Rican Artist Franz Diaz Escalet

Frank Diaz Escalet: Leather "Paintings" On View March 5 to April 11, 2026
Opening Reception on Friday, March 20, 6-8PM

February 12, 2026 – Hollis Taggart is pleased to present an exhibition of works by the self-taught Puerto Rican artist Frank Diaz Escalet (1930-2012), most known for his distinctive inlaid leather works depicting scenes of everyday life in New York City in the mid-twentieth century. Following a successful career as a master leather craftsman, Escalet developed a unique visual language fusing a flat, stylized sense of space with a folk art sensibility using stained and cut leather. *Frank Diaz Escalet: Leather "Paintings"* will feature ten signature leather inlay works as well as several paintings from the late 1970s and early 1980s. The exhibition will be on view on the second floor of Hollis Taggart's flagship location in Chelsea from March 5th through April 11th, with an opening reception from 6 to 8PM on Friday, March 20th. There will also be a small, focused presentation of Escalet's works, curated by Stavroula Coulianidis, at the Outsider Art Fair from March 19th through 22nd.

Escalet was born in Ponce, Puerto Rico, in 1930. His family moved to New York City when he was just four years old, and Escalet grew up in immigrant communities in both Spanish Harlem and Greenwich Village. Escalet dropped out of school in eighth grade to help support his family by working at factories, marking the beginning of his tremendous work ethic and remarkable perseverance. After serving in the United States Air Force in England, Escalet returned to New York City in the 1950s and became a silversmith and jeweler. In 1958, he pivoted to leatherwork and became a very successful master leather craftsman with his own business, "The House of Escalet," which, at its height, employed a staff of five and created custom-made leather outfits for celebrities including the Rolling Stones and Aretha Franklin. Following the birth of his son, Escalet and his family moved to Maine, where they were confronted by an unwelcoming community and a lack of business interest in the artist's leather designs. It was at this time that Escalet began to experiment with the leather inlaid compositions for which he is now known.

While in Maine, Escalet reflected on the cultural richness of the immigrant experience in New York City, depicting scenes from the everyday life of working-class Latinos and Black Americans. Drawing on his expertise from seventeen years as a master leather craftsman, Escalet transformed his skillful handling of leather into visual art, inlaying leather onto canvases that possess textured surfaces very different from those created by traditional mediums like paint. Among others, Escalet's works depict dancing in jazz clubs, commuting to work on the subway, and bar scenes from Greenwich Village, capturing the energy and cultural milieu of New Yorkers in the mid-twentieth century. Throughout his oeuvre, Escalet toyed with perspectives, angles, and framing, focusing on feet on a dance floor or the interior of a subway car as seen from the perspective of a straphanger, for example.

In 1998, the arts writer Sylvia M. Purcupile compared Escalet to Norman Rockwell, writing in *Manhattan Arts International*: "Like Rockwell he [Escalet] depicts his neighbors, friends, and associates. Like Rockwell, he portrays the poignancy of their hopes, dreams, and sorrows with compassionate insight. There the similarity ends, for Escalet is a Latino *cantadora*: his tales, therefore, colorful as they are, are laced with the bitter taste of poverty and enslavement." Though his leather designs were worn by celebrities, Escalet's visual art was underrecognized during his lifetime, with few of his works exhibited outside of university art museums and aside from one international solo show which traveled in Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The artist's radical

HOLLIS TAGGART

innovation depicting the lives of New Yorkers is now getting more recognition, with a couple of gallery shows in New York City since his death. His work is also in a few museum collections including the Farnsworth Art Museum, Maine; the Museum of the City of New York, New York; and El Museo del Barrio, New York.

About Hollis Taggart

Founded in 1979, Hollis Taggart presents significant works of American art, showcasing the trajectory of American art movements from the Hudson River School to American Modernism and the Post-War and Contemporary eras. Its program is characterized by a deep commitment to scholarship and bringing to the fore the work of under-recognized artists. The gallery has sponsored several catalogue raisonné projects, most recently for the American Surrealist artist Kay Sage, and has been instrumental in advancing knowledge of such artists as Alfred Maurer, Arthur B. Carles, and more recently, Theodoros Stamos, Marjorie Strider, and Michael (Corinne) West. In the summer of 2019, the gallery announced the formal expansion of its primary market business and focus on the presentation of contemporary work. It continues to expand its roster of contemporary artists, focusing on emerging and mid-career talents. With more than 40 years of experience, Hollis Taggart is widely recognized by collectors and curators for its leadership, expertise, and openness, on matters of art history, market trends and opportunities.

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