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SUNDAY, JULY 22, 2012

Michael Cesarczyk

Golden Trap by Rafael Lopez-Ramos MICHAEL CESARCZYK

Sex and Awe at 17 Frost

Jul 12, 2012

by Michael Cesarczyk

Within a whirlpool of national symbols, corporate logos, plastic containers and voluptuous women stood Rafael Lopez-Ramos – calm, friendly and attentive. On Saturday, July 7th, the Cuban expatriate unveiled his first New York exhibit, Wonderland, at 17 Frost Theatre of the Arts. The provocative show interweaves American iconography with consumer goods to critique the growing decadence of a globalized world.

Born in 1962 and raised in Havana, Lopez-Ramos showed both considerable artistic talent and a rebellious streak early on. At the age of 16, after receiving a set of oils from a family friend, he promptly produced two canvasses, one of which was a copy of a still life by French Impressionist Henri Fantin-Latour. “My cousin, Berta, who encouraged me a lot, claimed it was even better than the original,” chuckled Lopez-Ramos.

Honey, Ceci N' est pas du Miel by Rafael Lopez-Ramos / Photo: Michael Cesarczyk

His road to becoming a professional artist, however, was fueled by darker events. One afternoon in 1980, while studying at San Alejandro, the oldest and most prestigious fine arts school in Cuba, he and his classmates were summoned to the courtyard where professors burned the work of a student who had fled the country during the Mariel Boatlift. “It was a warning, and a barbaric, medieval act,” recalled Lopez-Ramos. “After that I quit the school. I told my dad I knew I wanted to work as an artist, but I didn’t want to go back to that place.” He later obtained a day job and took art classes at night school. By December of that year, he had his first show at a local community center. During the late 80s, he attended the Instituto Superior de Arte, Cuba’s highest school for the arts.

In 1997, Lopez-Ramos left for Vancouver, Canada. He has never returned to Cuba, and harbors mixed feelings about its system. “On the one hand, it gave me a free, solid education and health care,” he admitted. “But there were limits to expression. You could not play around with the flag, an image of Castro or other icons of the Cuban Revolution. You could not travel freely. If you played the game, you could be a successful and happy artist, but I never wanted to pay that price.” The world became his home, which Lopez-Ramos

Sex and Awe at 17 Frost

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Lopez-Ramos landed in Miami, from up North, in 2006. Living in that city has exposed him to new ideas and helped advance his art career, but the veteran raconteur has not mellowed with age. Recent world events have made him, if anything, an even sharper social critic, especially of Western media and commerce.

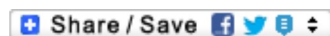
Rafael Lopez-Ramos and 17 Frost Creative Director Javier Hernandez-Miyares / Photo: Michael Cesarczyk

In Wonderland, Lopez-Ramos attacks the global financial system with its own weapon – advertising. Using collages of pornographic cut outs of women tacked with consumer objects and brand logos in The POLYsexyGONS Suite, he decries the commoditization of the female body and banal corporate attempts to associate goods with the promise of sex. And that’s only the beginning of a much larger metaphor. “It’s a critique of our whole way of life,” explained Lopez-Ramos. “People live in the present, not caring about the future. We are witnessing obscene acts in everyday life: the financial crisis; CEOs and politicians cheating and playing the world like a vast video game.” In the show’s most popular painting, Golden Trap, a perturbed Mickey Mouse gawks at a million dollar bill caught in a mousetrap lying on the Seal of the Federal Reserve. In another, Red flowers bursting below us..., hulking fighter jets wrestle for space with exploding foliage and a bottle opener.

In addition to musical performances by Lenna Pierce and Roberto Poveda, the opening featured a live painting collaboration between Lopez-Ramos and New York street-artists Poster Boy, Royce Bannon, and Jason Mamarella, as well as multimedia auteur Alex Itin, each of whom has exhibited at 17 Frost. Lopez-Ramos is intrigued by the North Brooklyn scene, and the street artists likewise related to the edgy topicality of Wonderland. For 17 Frost Creative Director Javier Hernandez-Miyares, a fellow Cuban émigré who curated the event, the connection between the fellow iconoclasts was natural. “They all challenge prevailing systems. Rafael uses iconography and objects to subvert the propaganda they were intended for. He is a rebel, and his work is vital.”

Wonderland runs until August 28th, and the gallery will be open every Saturday 7-11pm. For appointments contact (718) 902-5714 or 17frost@gmail.com.

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Thank you Michael, you did an awesome work!

Best,

— [Rafael Lopez-Ramos](#) · Jul 15, 11:32 AM · #

wonderful article in detail and prose. thanks to you and the paper for chronicling the cultural events in billyburg and environs.

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