

EXHIBITIONS (/MUSEUM/)

Troubling Beauty: Myth and Metaphor in Contemporary Costume Drama

Drew Tal, Arranged Marriage, 2013. Digital photographic diptych.



Menu

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Playing dress-up has become common practice among artists who are interested in exploring contemporary conditions through the lens of the past. Beginning in the 1980s, celebrated American artist Cindy Sherman cast herself in a range of archetypal female roles—from housewife to movie star to art history’s iconic saints, and more, inspiring many artists of the new millennium to incorporate the imagery and accouterments of the stage or film into recent investigations of the forces shaping identity today.

Multi-media artist Carlos Gamez de Francisco invokes Sherman’s work in his recent staging of models in wigs and costumes, enacting cinematic mise-en-scenes that reference colonial European culture within both contemporary urban conditions and a pastoral utopia. Shot on location during a 2014 trip to his native Cuba, Gamez de Francisco’s photographs quote both liberally and literally from the art and fashion of the 18th century, evoking nostalgia, desire, and critique. A pieta reimagined with an all-female cast, a pair of angular, adolescent Cupid and Psyche characters, pouting and playful actors in too-bright make up and clothing and wigs slightly askew, the figures emerge from myth and allegory to reveal the artist’s vision of “lo cubano” (“what’s Cuban”) today. “A strong European cultural influence is still prevalent in 21st century Cuba,” says Gamez de Francisco. Appropriating the wardrobe of the French Bourbon monarchy and the period aesthetics of paintings by Watteau and Fragonard, Gamez de Francisco adapts a historical visual language of frivolity and decadence to articulate a morality tale aligning the decay, decadence, and corruption of the French monarchy in the 18th century with the post-revolutionary Cuban regime. Some of these sensual and enigmatic figures,

dressed in lace and silk and canvas gowns—some handpainted by the artist—pose incongruously among abandoned buildings. “I wanted to play with perfection in imperfect but real settings,” explains the artist, “such that the human figure gets lost amongst solid brick walls that were never fully built, long corridors of Corinthian-style columns decayed by time and oblivion, large accumulations of waste, objects, and useless spaces so common in 21st-century Cuba.”

In Cuban architecture, the future is indeed decaying alongside the past: buildings constructed or renovated during Fidel Castro’s early years – with infusions of Soviet support – were never finished or dedicated to their original intent; decades later, intention crumbles with infrastructure. Caught in a world where the expected future never arrived, Gamez de Francisco’s characters exist in a mythic time combining past and present that mirrors a real-life aspect of “lo cubano.” The two costumed figures in the video that accompanies this photographic series actually float in a watery limbo filled with fish and fruit that symbolize potential fertility. Filmed in the cramped quarters of a small bathroom, the man and woman are seen from above in a tub, their faces at times submerged underwater; they are side by side, but never touch. Water is a defining condition of Cuban life, alternately delivering creation and destruction, hope and despair, escape and return, isolation and connection to the island residents and to their friends and family dispersed across the Florida Strait.

Contemporary costume dramas and historical allusions also narrate metaphors and meanings in works by Erwin Olaf, Alain Pino, Rene Pena, Jill Frank, Annie Kevans, Oleg Dou, and Drew Tal, currently on view in Proof on Main. Period clothing, props, and makeup—both real and digital—create alluring and allusive images that illuminate issues ranging from racism and politics to social rituals and romance. The seductive surfaces of these artworks alternately utilize and disturb the definition and function of beauty today.

In *Dusk and Dawn*, Erwin Olaf demonstrates two strikingly different portraits of a single person, highlighting the ability for us to become what we imagine ourselves to be, and the layers of fantasy in between projection and embodiment. The two figures, dressed, coiffed and lit to evoke elegant turn of the twentieth century men—one white, one black—are the same model.

Hidden or hiding? Preserved or constrained? These mysterious figures encased in clear plastic may be enacting a dream-like fantasy or aspects of their lived experiences. While recent increases in tourist capital support some Cubans, many remain like Humberto Díaz’s wrapped figures, bound in cocoon-like forms in anticipation of opportunity to release their own potential.

Captured from above and below, Jill Frank’s photographs of young women dressed in formal partywear (for a prom and a wedding) offer unexpected perspectives on her subjects, and on the expectations that often accompany or define the social rituals in which they are participating.

Rene Pena’s photographs explore relationships of objects to the formation and recognition of individual identity. In each photograph, small items such as a cigarette, shoes, or a wig give sufficient information about each subject that the viewer may begin to make assumptions or associations on their personality, status, or role in society, though their true identity remains hidden. The censure and surveillance that remain pervasive in Cuba drives many citizens—artists and others—towards disguise, though costumes and make up may equally reveal or conceal who they are or wish to become.

Alan Pino Hernandez’s subject sports Fidel Castro’s full beard, created by shaving cream. At once humorous and poignant, the image acknowledges the impulse to disguise oneself from the omnipresent surveillance of the government while creating a caricature of the leader of the Cuban revolution.

Rendered in soft palettes punctuated by bright red lips, the faces in French painter Annie Kevans’s oil-on-paper portraits appear dreamy, with heads sometimes leaning to the side, and eyes gazing into a undefined distance. *All the Presidents’ Girls* are not portraits of power or privilege; these are the artist’s envisioning of the women (and a man) who purportedly were the lovers of US heads of state. “My paintings reflect my interests in power, manipulations, and the role of the

individual in inherited belief systems," says Kevans, "It is important for me to examine the duality of truth and falsehood through my work, which I do by creating 'portraits' which may or may not be based on real documentation." Like gossip, Kevans's portraits combine the known with the imagined, highlighting the manipulation of truth in the recording of history, while excavating, with imagination, those marginalized.

Oleg Dou transforms photographic images of human faces, manipulating them with computer software to produce stylized features and airbrushed skin. When Dou's parents, a painter and dress designer, gave him a copy of Photoshop at age 13, he began to alter images of his school friends' and teachers' faces. Initially inspired by a 19th-century tradition of capturing child funeral portraits, for which the body would be dressed in costume and prepared in intricate detail, Dou is interested in producing images that are both alluring and unsettling. "I am looking for something bordering between the beautiful and the repulsive, living and dead," he has said. "I want to attain the feeling of presence one can get when walking by a plastic manikin..."

These eerie, ethereal, colorized images are from Dou's recent *Mushroom Kingdom* series, in which portraits of children living in Brazilian favelas are digitally enhanced and manipulated to create his signature, hybridized faces.

Focusing on faces and dramatic close-up portraits, Drew Tal's poses his models as religious figures, angels and demons, and couples costumed for wedding ceremonies. Tal considers himself a "cross-cultural messenger" whose seductive and dramatic portraits reference a wide range of ethnic and aesthetic sources—here, an Indian couple whose genders are not immediately discernable, though their shared, seamless, radiance is powerfully evocative. "My art," says Tal, "is a personal investigation across cultural bounds into the underlying human themes and common spiritual threads found in religious, mythological and sexual expression."




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