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‘Contemporary Bodegones’ and ‘Monomythology’ Reviews: Yesterday’s Subjects, Today’s Artists

Exhibitions at Ruiz-Healy Art and The Hole Tribeca show how contemporary artists are inspired by and reinterpret traditional Spanish still lifes, religion and myth.

By Brian P. Kelly

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Eva Marengo Sanchez’s ‘Otw. Text me your order.’ PHOTO: RUIZ-HEALY ART

New York

Artists of all stripes love rummaging through the drawers of history, searching for subject matter on which to put their own contemporary spin. Whether it be the courtly-meets-quirky “Bridgerton,” the budget- and fact-bending

“Napoleon” or the ever-expanding library of musical covers, artists have been driven to take up the style and substance of the past to deliver a modern message. Visual artists are no exception, as is evident in a pair of gallery shows currently on view here.

On the Upper East Side, Ruiz-Healy Art—a space that focuses on “Latinx, Latin America, & Texas Contemporary Art”—has staged “**Contemporary Bodegones.**” The *bodegón* was an often-symbolic still life that mainly depicted food and meals. It rose to prominence in Spain in the late 16th century and held a place of pride there. While in other European countries still lifes were largely dismissed as less meritorious than other styles of painting, bodegones were executed by such greats as Francisco de Zurbarán, Felipe Ramírez, Diego Velázquez and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo.

The five artists on view here tap into that tradition with varying degrees of success. Pedro Diego Alvarado-Rivera’s “Reflejos de Zapotes” is the most straightforward interpretation of a classic bodegón. Nearly photorealistic, it is an unabashedly proud vision of Mr. Alvarado-Rivera’s native Mexico. The painter (the grandson of the famed muralist Diego Rivera) shows fruit common to the region but little known outside of it spilling from a gleaming silver bowl, putting the natural riches of his homeland on equal footing with the more readily recognized value of precious metals.



Diego Alvarado-Rivera’s ‘Relejos de Zapotes.’ PHOTO: RUIZHEALY ART

Chuck Ramirez’s photographic triptych shows three views of a coconut: intact, split in half, and scooped out. The repeated circle with minor variations frame-to-frame turns the tropical fruit into a geometric composition and prods us to consider the way we exoticize other cultures’ culinary traditions. Vick Quezada’s hand-pressed ceramic cafeteria trays also recontextualize a familiar object, this one mass produced and used in institutional settings, into something caringly crafted and unique.

Yvette Mayorga’s piped-acrylic and collage works are jarringly out of place here, Pepto Bismol and neon pink canvases that look like they were decorated by Barbie after having flunked out of pastry school. But Eva Marengo Sanchez’s “Otw. Text me your order” (2024) is the star of the show. Viewed from above and spread across a brightly patterned tablecloth, breakfast is the centerpiece, with aluminum-wrapped tacos pouring out of a takeout bag. Cups of salsa verde tumble out as well, with drinks scattered about. Keys, sunglasses, bills and a to-do list—unexciting items like grocery shopping, dish washing—fill out this universal yet highly individual still life, one charged with narrative and personality yet devoid of people. *Es un bodegón más deliciosa.*



‘The Inspiration of St. Matthew (After Caravaggio),’ by Brittney Leeanne Williams.

PHOTO: THE HOLE

Downtown, at The Hole Tribeca, “Monomythology,” organized by guest curators Thomas and Tania Asbæk, sees artists tackling the perennial subjects of religion and myth through a 21st-century lens. In “The Inspiration of St. Matthew (After Caravaggio)” (2023), Brittney Leeanne Williams tweaks the Baroque master’s work, inserting herself as the titular saint and replacing the overhead angel with a swirling bolt of cloth, suggesting that even though society has become more individualized and less

dogmatically religious, spirituality still touches artists’ hearts.

Chris Oh re-creates a scene from Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" in his "Fountain" (2024), which eschews traditional painting surfaces for an anatomical model of a human head. Placing a masterpiece containing the spectrum of mankind's moral experience—from Edenic purity to hellish agony—inside a scientific tool throws the rational and the faith-based into instant, if not irreconcilable, conflict and urges us to ponder larger questions about solipsism, the seat of the soul and the nature of God.



Chris Oh's 'Fountain.' PHOTO: THE HOLE

As at Ruiz-Healy, the weakest work here is most disconnected from the ideas the curators are trying to explore. Maria Rubinke's bronze sculptures seem to spring from an unpublished edition of "Alice in Wonderland"—a bird pulls a worm out of a girl's hair, a dejected hare mopes in a corner, a child seems to doze in a fish's mouth—but while fictionally inventive they have little to say about grander mythmaking or religiosity.



*** ONE-TIME USE *** PHOTO: THE HOLE

By contrast, Cathrine Raben Davidsen’s work gets right to the heart of those weighty subjects. Her “Pietà” paintings are emotionally fraught digressions from the traditionally Christian scene. Her pale, pained-looking subjects are wrapped in sheets or clothing, but are alone in their frames, no caring Virgin Mary to hold them in their hardship. Their faces, pleading yet lifeless, speak of abandonment, isolation, and a deep desire for love gone unfulfilled. They are chilling yet powerful examples of the ways artists can still find creative inspiration in age-old subjects.

Contemporary Bodegones

Ruiz-Healy Art, through Sept. 6

Monomythology

The Hole Tribeca, through Aug. 24

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