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Artist delves into 'Belly of the Beast'

Pictures that overwhelm, tell a story

By **Elda Silva**, Staff Writer

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Ricky Armendariz was a graduate student in painting at the University of Colorado at Boulder when he arrived at the way he would make his mark — with a power tool.

Since then, he has routinely taken a router to the roiling, portentous skies he conjures in oils on smooth plywood panels, carving totemic images rooted in Southwestern iconography and made-up Spanglish lyrics into the surface.

“It’s a violation, really, of the painting,” said the artist, 45, a tall, wiry figure with tattoo-covered forearms and long graying hair that frames his face in smoke-colored wisps. “It’s a physical act, but I love how that can also be a beautiful thing.”

Over the years, the physicality of Armendariz’s work has prompted more than one hopeful printmaker to approach him.

“Printmakers come up to my paintings and go, ‘I can print that,’” he said.

But he had resisted committing his work to paper until recently. While doing a three-month residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin through the Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum, Armendariz had access to a nearly 200-year-old printing press that allowed him to create prints on the scale of his paintings.



“Lo Siento Pretty Darlin Nah Just Kidding” is one of several works inspired by paintings of the Biblical tale of Judith and Holofernes.

William Luther, Sta / San Antonio Express-News

“And I was hooked. I was like, 'This is what I want to do,’” he said.

“In the Belly of the Beast,” an exhibit of new work by Armendariz at [Ruiz-Healy Art](#), features new paintings and, yes, prints — really big ones.

“These look like, not like paintings, but they have the presence of painting,” he said. “They kind of overwhelm you.”

No doubt, Armendariz’s work can do that.

An El Paso native who has studied Mexican folk healing, Armendariz currently teaches art at the University of Texas at San Antonio. In previous work, he has dealt with the frequently tragic and violent reality of life on the border. “In the Belly of the Beast,” however, finds the artist wrestling with the intangible in paintings and prints that draw on both American Indian stories and Greek and Roman mythology.

“He has developed his own special narrative,” said gallerist Patricia Ruiz-Healy. “I like the mixing of the borderland language with the Southwest and then the universal/mythological themes that he brings. I think it’s a very strong combination.”

The title of the show alludes to “Saturn Devouring His Son,” a painting by Francisco Goya that depicts the crazed Titan eating his offspring to forestall a prophecy of his overthrow.

“It all revolves around issues of power — how power is distributed in the family, how power is distributed culturally, how our society distributes and gives power or takes away power,” Armendariz said.

In “Zeus dreams of himself,” the god is depicted in the form of a bull locking horns with his mirror image, while in “Mala pero I like it” — roughly “Wicked but I like it” — a lioness sinks her teeth and claws into the flank of a fallen stallion.

In other works, such as the diptych “Tlazolteotl as a Horse (Aztec Deity of Midwives), ” the metaphor in the title becomes literal. In Aztec belief, the goddess ingested filth to protect mothers from illness, but in Armendariz’s painting she has swallowed instruments of war instead. In horse form, the goddess traverses a moody landscape, a military helicopter nestled in her abdomen like a fetus.

“I was thinking about border politics,” he said. “I’m from El Paso, and security is always an issue on everybody’s mind, and so that’s really where this piece came from — thinking about that and my indigenous background and how important storytelling is to our culture.”

For his prints, Armendariz created original narratives that mix and merge indigenous stories.

“All the prints are a product of me researching stories that I already knew and stories that I didn’t know and then trying to make an original story that would fill in the dots between the two stories,” he said.

“Crow Helps Whale to the Sea, or How Bear Lost Fire,” depicts a stranded whale with a still hibernating bear slumbering in its belly. A flock of crows is attempting to tow the enormous creature back to the water with spaghetti-thin strands of string tied around its fins, tail and nose.

The question of power has a personal resonance. The artist, who once tongue-in-cheekily titled an exhibition “Yah Me Voy a Therapy” — roughly “Now I Go to Therapy”

— is currently going to therapy for help navigating some of the trickier dynamics of marriage and fatherhood.

“If we’re not fighting the external, we’re fighting the internal. How much do we give away? How much do we reveal of ourselves in therapy or not?” he said. “I think it’s fascinating. Whatever subject I want to bring up, it’s like fair game. It’s well worth the co-pay.”

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Elda Silva is an arts writer who joined the staff of the Express-News in 1994. She writes primarily about visual arts. She began her journalism career at the San Antonio Light in 1990 after graduating from Trinity University with a degree in English and communications. In 1998 she was awarded a nine-month fellowship to Colombia University through the National Arts Journalism Program.