

Guillermo Muñoz Vera's exhibition at Forum Gallery in New York City offered evidence of the perennial vitality of Spanish realism, a tradition of straightforward, technically accomplished illusionism grounded in respect for the dignity of the subject. Born in Chile in 1956, Muñoz Vera settled in Madrid in 1979. His substantial body of work includes still lifes and contemporary street scenes, and he created a series of landscapes for Santiago's La Moneda metro station. In "Terra Australis Incognita: The Undiscovered World," he tackles history painting, a genre that scares off even the most talented of contemporary American realists. These paintings (all works 2010) are meditations on the Age of Discovery, especially the Iberian expansion into Latin America. Muñoz Vera does not directly depict the conquistadors, however. His figures are more likely to be cowed monks or cartographers for whom the New World is a scholarly abstraction. The artist avoids both the historical pageant illustrations of the typical children's picture book and the postmodern condemnation of the very real sins of imperialist exploitation. Instead, he tries to recapture the sense of wonder that accompanied the remapping of the known world.

The sense of adventure is most obvious in several rather old-fashioned marine subjects, images of sailing ships such as *Cape Horn*, which shows the vessel, with billowing sails, plowing through stormy seas, and *Mont Sarmiento*, a more off-center composition. *Mont Sarmiento* is a close-up view in which the cropped, triangular sails echo the tiny white wedge of island on the horizon. The crisp white of the sails makes strong surface shapes against the intense ultramarine field of sky and sea. Some of the most striking works are interiors with figures. In *1625, Annus Mirabilis*, Muñoz Vera refers to art history, specifically the candlelight picture as practiced by Georges de La Tour and Dutch Caravaggisti such as Gerard van Honthorst. The shadow-filled rooms depicted by these artists, where a candle or lamp is the only source of illumination, were particularly suited to scenes of contemplative intimacy—Nativities or the prayers of penitent saints. Muñoz Vera's title pays homage to a triumphant year in Spanish history, when the far-flung empire enjoyed victories in Genoa, the Low Countries, Cadiz, Puerto Rico and Bahia, Brazil. In *1625, Annus Mirabilis*, a white-robed monk stands with his back to the viewer, almost reverently tracing a path on the world map mounted on the wall.

A series of still lifes does away with the figure altogether, evoking the complexities of the era through a few carefully selected and beautifully rendered artifacts. *Colonial Still Life in Araucania* juxtaposes physical objects that illustrate the cultural encounter between Old World and New World: a conquistador's helmet, a brightly colored, striped textile, a simply decorated Indian bowl. This cultural-hybrid still-life genre has its own art historical pedigree, from the seventeenth-century Spaniard Luis Meléndez, who added Mexican pottery and recently imported delicacies such as tomatoes and chocolate to his courtly displays, to the eclectic arrangements of twentieth-century Mexican painters Frida Kahlo and Maria Izquierdo. The most formally elegant of Muñoz Vera's still lifes focus on the science underlying exploration. *The Erdapfel of Behaim and Astrolabe* balances a rounded globe and a flat, brass astrolabe against a deep night-sky-blue field. The *erdapfel* (German, literally, earth apple) is the earliest surviving terrestrial globe, created by Martin Behaim in the significant year 1492 and not yet showing the Americas. The more familiar astrolabe was used to calculate the altitude of a star but would be replaced by the sex-



Guillermo Muñoz Vera, *Sidereus Nucleus*, 2010
COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

tant. Knowing the history of these antique instruments adds to the cultural resonance of the viewer's experience, but their intrinsic beauty and the spare poise of Muñoz Vera's 35-inch-square composition are the painting's formal *raison d'être*. Another square painting (35 $\frac{3}{8}$ -by-35 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches), *Sidereus Nucleus*, takes its title from Galileo's 1610 treatise, the first based on observations using a telescope. Sidereal instruments measure the apparent motion of fixed stars; a sidereal day is calculated by noting the interval between transits of a star over the meridian. The title of Galileo's book is sometimes translated as "starry messenger," and the combination of science and poetry—taken for granted in the time of Metaphysical poet John Donne—seems appropriate in describing Muñoz Vera's still life. A round brass disk hangs suspended against a black backdrop reminiscent of Zubáran. On the rough wood desk below lie a mounted open-work globe and a smaller model, tilted like Earth on its axis. One book lies open, with four more stacked behind. The artist's feel for old paper, hand-cut edges and leather bindings is sensuous, conveying with austere beauty the pleasures of the life of the mind. It's a reminder that all navigation—terrestrial or celestial—begins with a journey of the imagination.

The exhibition is on view April 14–May 28, 2011, at Forum Gallery, 730 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10019. Telephone (212) 355-4545. On the web at www.forumgallery.com