Painter Guillermo Muñoz Vera Remasters Time at Forum Gallery

↱ 0   💬 0   🔖 Save

"Temple of Millions of Years," 2012, by Guillermo Muñoz Vera, oil on canvas mounted on panel

A↕   🖨 Print

By Christine Lin
5/7/2014   Updated: 5/7/2014

NEW YORK—Chilean-born painter Guillermo Muñoz Vera somehow manages to distill centuries of human events into an everlasting present moment. The Niña, Pinta, and Santa María are forever nearing the white sands of the New World. Two men conversing in an Egyptian temple today were also doing the same yesterday, and all the yesterdays before it. The moon waxes and wanes.

Fifteen of Vera's recent works of grace Forum Gallery this May.

The first paintings in the exhibition uproot us with Near Eastern objects and scenery—colorful tile, painted ceramics, and verdant Moorish pavilions.

Surrounded by mathematically perfect architecture, an artist could cast his gaze anywhere between Turkey and Mali and find a worthy subject ready-made. At least that's how Vera makes it seem.

Vera is calculated in his juxtapositions between the geometric forms of turrets and the organic forms of clouds. He interrupts the flatness of Egyptian bas-relief using cavernous doorways and deep perspective.

In "The Doorway to the Throne Room," he plays with the duality between solid forms and illusions formed by light. An unseen archway casts a crisp shadow on a section of wall, creating depth where none was before, and extending the painting's presence to a space behind the viewer.

We are wowed by Vera's use of the minutest texture to mimic our eyes' reaction to fluctuating light. But time and place will soon be bent against the paintings' apparent realism.

Disorient, Reorient

Though reminiscent of the 19th century Orientalism, Vera's work is not so much about exoticism and otherness, but the idea that modern day is a continuation of antiquity, not divorced from it. "Back then" is "right now."

A large lunar portrait hung in the middle of the gallery signals a shift into conjured lands.

In the next painting, we are confronted with an Assyrian winged bull-man—a Lamassu—towering over desert ruins. The crescent moon reappears, this time with a star. Together they form the ancient symbol of the Near East. A pastel sunset casts purple shadows over everything. A dreamscape.

Next, we meet caryatids whose gaze sweep across the bluest of blue waters and toward the distant skyline … of Lower Manhattan! The Statue of Liberty is reduced to a mint-colored blip the size of a coin. Our beloved icon of democracy becomes a mere youngster looking to her wiser sisters.

Realities

The paintings in this exhibition contain Vera's more fanciful works. In previous projects he has reimagined the lives of seafaring explorers, painted the landscapes of his native South America, even the everyday scenes of 1980s Madrid.

The people depicted in the present exhibit have a specific function in Vera's time-warp experiment.

The figures wear traditional turbans and robes, which haven't changed for hundreds of years. They rarely look at the viewer, interacting instead with their surroundings, which likewise have survived the battery of time.

In one such painting, a mother, child, and baby are seen on the windswept coast of Mauritania. We can't follow the mother's gaze because it is aimed at something outside the frame. The baby girl strapped to her back is attracted by something in the other direction. An older child, a boy naked but for his shoes, is sprawled on the wet sand, spying ships that crowd the horizon.

We have no idea what is passing through their minds, but we know that multitudes of slaves have passed through this very beach on their ill-fated journeys over the Atlantic. Ships bring hope and doom, as they always have. Perhaps these three are each thinking of the past, present, and future simultaneously.

Guillermo Muñoz Vera: Light of the Alhambra
May 1–June 7

Forum Gallery
730 Fifth Ave., 2nd Floor
212-355-4545
forumgallery.com

If you found this article interesting, please consider

supporting traditional journalism