

Williams Carmona: Jump! It's Shallow

Jump! It's Shallow, the title for this exhibition of Williams Carmona's latest works, is both a seductive invitation and a betrayal. For, like the mirage of an oasis in the desert, his paintings glisten and fascinate, but no, the waters are not shallow at all. Their facile and smooth surfaces, absent of visible brush strokes, make the deceptive depths of these works all the more treacherous. Using his familiar cast of characters and props as elements of a visual language, Carmona creates enigmatic narratives that speak of Caribbean histories and the experience of exile. Clever and conversant with the history of art, this highly strategic artist continues to juxtapose the detailed with the abstract and the lyrical with the grotesque in a postmodern mix that suggests the absurd but poignantly intimates universal struggles and existential anxieties.

Rendering the irrational with precision, Carmona is clearly indebted to Surrealism, particularly to Dali and, topographically, to Tanguy. In fact, he has dubbed his own idiosyncratic version of it as "Tropical Surrealism." But beyond that, there is a cynicism and darkness in regards to human behavior and destiny that speaks more of Goya's *Los Caprichos*, while his strange, diminutive figures busily, even frantically engaged in hermetic activities call to mind those of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*. Yet, for all their pedigree influences, it is the pathetic tone and references to the abject that mark these works as contemporary. Carmona's caricatural figures are trapped in a web of interconnected spectral lines and pipes, which, reminiscent of Rube Goldberg's crazy machines, humorously comment on life's complexity. *Our Love is Dying and I Am Left Alone in My Bed* is set in one of Carmona's signature barren and lonely landscapes, made especially melancholic by its setting at night, lit by a supernatural glow. Multiple realms of being appear to coexist: the miraculous, the terrestrial, the spectral, and the world of shadows. As in an ex-voto painting, an apparition of Cuba's patroness the Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre hovers over a small lake containing a floating and possibly deceased nude woman. Held between a monk and an old woman, a ghostly figure bends down to kiss her. Feminine archetypes abound: the beautiful young lover, the protective Virgin of Carmona's native land, and his grandmother, a wise crone depicted here with somewhat loving humor. Radiating from this center is a host of spectral beings which serve as both psychic twins or mirrors to the main characters of the scene, but which also have lives of their own, including their own shadows as well.

Although portrayed with the ephemeral delicacy of ghosts, ethereal vapors, or ectoplasmic extrusions, these pale figures weave a web throughout the composition, ultimately reinforcing the psychic connection between all of the protagonists. Intimations of love lost, nostalgia, and both cultural connection and isolation permeate this work like a contemporary depiction of the hermit St. Anthony ruminating in the desert.

In the monumental painting, *The Camel of Malibar*, the landscape has been reduced to two flat horizontal planes of color, iconic like a Mark Rothko abstraction. As in the previous work, activity spirals out from the center in which we find located a bus overflowing with passengers in ecclesiastic garb. The vehicle appears to be moving ominously toward what could be its destination or doom: a large sinkhole or lake, a common trope in Carmona's oeuvre. These comically portrayed clergy, like a slapstick circus act or cargo in an overcrowded rural bus, extend their arms in protective and solemn gestures, brandishing a variety of implements that simultaneously rein in and repel the activity surrounding them. Up ahead, a blackened cavity emanates steam and reveals several pipes emptying red, yellow and brown liquids, perhaps alluding to bodily fluids, industrial waste, or paint. At its edge, a semi-clothed female figure has ensnared one of Carmona's signature spectral forms, though here, the form grows out of the woman's own shadow, or reflection. Perhaps this activity suggests the perpetual quest for self-knowledge, the relentlessness of time, like the image of the Mobius strip or the uroboros, the frustration of a closed system or an impossible dilemma. Labyrinthine in complexity, everywhere are speeding figures flying through the air like wisps of smoke, while on the periphery odd occurrences take place, such as a monk pumping water from a lake into a hose, a gesturing holy man riding a bicycle, or two men struggling in a hole. Ultimately, we are left uneasy and uncertain as to the nature of the relationships toward which Carmona directs our gaze. Points of connection, morphing identities, are these chosen or imposed? Are the characters building a community or merely caught in a complex spider's web of associations? Is their frantic activity child's play or in fact a deeply conflicted moral struggle?

Caribbean See-saw, Free for All, although quite enigmatic, is a more overtly political painting. Set within a neutral seascape, a yellow drooping form is held precariously on stilts with wheels, like one of Dali's melting clocks, and is being dry-docked to shore like a ship, or ship wreck. Representing the island of Puerto Rico, the adopted home of this Cuban artist, it casts a flimsy shadow upon the sand, which like many of the figures previously discussed, has a physical dimension, a separate presence of its own.

The unstable landmass hangs like a hammock and holds a variety of figures and architectural structures. A Bishop, monks, nuns, and other figures with various headdresses, semi-clad soldiers, little red men and white spirits interact amongst and between a lighthouse, a state building, and a church. Carmona's ironic title perhaps refers to Puerto Rico's turbulent politics, as this work metaphorically suggests the tension between statehood and independence, chaos and liberation, like a teetering see-saw of opposing views and unresolved conflict.

The poetic title, *Three Spirits for One Soul to Share* suggests the multi-dimensionality of Carmona's figures, the notion that a cast of characters resides within each person, and that we all have multiple identities, allegiances, and desires. In this work, the elongated figures, vegetation, and spatial relationships are stylistically reminiscent of the Mexican Surrealists Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington. A monk perches on a fish atop a large tree. As he appears to water a living cloud, monks below are poised with a saw and ready to chop the tree down. Shadows and spirits, one in a flowing white gown, determinedly try to prevent this apparent catastrophe from taking place. Santeria beliefs, pervasive throughout the Caribbean, picture nature as inhabited and animated by spirits and energies. Thus an otherwise prosaic scene is transformed into an epic battle between good and evil, nature and culture, the seen and the unseen forces of life.

The Future's Remedy II, 1996, is an example of Carmona's earlier pictorial style. As in a Baroque painting, huge stage curtains are parted to reveal a dwarfed tabletop draped in white cloth. Like actors on a stage or performers in a circus, characters are engaged in isolated activities that obfuscate a possible narrative. An old woman in black, known to be Carmona's grandmother, holds out a pan of frying eggs that gives off clouds of steam and smoke. A female spirit balances on one foot atop an elephant, while a monk extends a collection basket off the table's ledge toward a bird with a human face. Like words in a poem or pieces in a puzzle, these fantastical figures resist conventional narration and are open to more allegorical interpretations.

Williams Carmona will undoubtedly continue to expand and distill his repertoire of symbols and narrative elements, allowing him to speak to ever-widening universal concerns and the social and psychological realms of relationships and communication, alienation versus allegiance, internal quests and the external pressures that affect them. In this exhibition, *Jump! It's Shallow*, the artist, with the sly encouragement one gives to the timid, invites us to explore the depths of his vision.

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