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'Cultural Cannibalism': Coachella Valley Art Center exhibition takes on appropriation



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Coachella Valley Art Center Executive Director Bill Schinsky isn't a fan of what he calls "pretty picture" exhibitions. He doesn't censor and allows artists to create messages that make people feel uncomfortable, but said "it has to have meaning."

"It has to say something positive," Schinsky said. "Somebody may find it offensive, but if what you're doing is a positive statement for what you do, that's ok with me."

A new exhibition, "Cultural Cannibalism," which features six artists presenting work on the subject of cultural appropriation and other narratives, speaks to that mission. The exhibition will run April 8 through May 28 at the art center in Indio.

The title of the exhibition references the 1922 Brazilian art festival Semana de Arte Moderna (Modern Art Week) and renowned artist Tarsila do Amaral's surrealist painting "Abaporu" (The man who eats people) that followed six years later, which was a gift to her husband, poet and writer Oswald de Andrade.

The concept of that artwork inspired his Manifesto Antropófago (The Cannibal Manifesto), which argued Brazilian artists shouldn't rely on other countries for cultural guidance and would take in outside ideas to create their own narratives. This manifesto led to the development of the Tropicália art movement, bossa nova music and neo-concrete art.

The artists taking part in the "Cultural Cannibalism" exhibition are Cito Gonzales ("Dragons"), Adriana Lopez-Ospina ("Discounted and Disconnected"), Kim Manfredi ("Made Out of the Ordinary")*, Flávia Lima do Rêgo Monteiro ("Como Você"), Joyce Rooks ("Jim Crow A-Go-Go") and Hector Salas ("Entre")*.

During the 2021 Desert Open Studios, Schinsky played bossa nova music and Monteiro, who is originally from Brazil, talked about its significance and its connection to "cultural cannibalism," which inspired the show.

“This idea of cannibalism has been in my work for a while,” Monteiro said. “Since I moved to the U.S., I think that idea as an outsider at the other end, it’s a way to transform the feeling of being ‘the other.’”

During a recent visit, rubbery looking snakes were hanging from tree branches in one area of the gallery, and a large dragon head was mounted on a base made of tree branches, along with other provocative artworks.

Manfredi’s work is an example of her Italian relatives immigrating to the U.S. and becoming “Italian-Americans” who hid their identities to fit into American society.

Rooks is displaying historical anti-Black art and artifacts that are considered shocking today, but her presentation speaks on the historical narrative that they were considered accurate and humorous as some art and advertising is today. It asks the questions of when it's right to portray culture with humor and how caricature can be damaging.

Lopez-Ospina's artwork of wool being fed into a machine references her Colombian homeland, where the handcrafts of the Wayuu people are copied to be sold as Americanized versions. The message is the effect of a culture being assimilated and sold for profit.

Curator Susan Myrland said there’s a theme around the show about a “cycle of absorption.”

“I think we’ve all learned it’s not good for the culture that’s being appropriated,” Myrland said. “Nobody wants to be on the receiving end of being eaten, but, you have cultures like Brazil getting stronger because they absorb ideas, digest them and make them their own.”

'The major subject is the painting itself'

Upon viewing Monteiro’s “Como Você,” it’s easy to confuse the flat and wide snakes hanging from the branches for rubber or vinyl; they’re actually made of peeled acrylic paint dried on plastic. This process was created during a previous project where she constructed skin-like material as symbols of sensibility, containment and significance.



Artist Flávia Lima do Rêgo Monteiro talks about her work "Como Você" which is on display at the Coachella Valley Art Center in Indio, Calif., March 25, 2022. Her work is part of the exhibit "Cultural Cannibalism." *Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun*

She paints one layer of paint on plastic, lets it dry, adds more layers until there's enough of a body to peel it off and then continues "painting on the paint." It usually takes 10 days to finish a piece.

"For me, it's interesting to think about painting," Monteiro said. "You always have a surface or something that is attached to the paint, and I'm just attaching that. Although there's a lot of subject and change, the major subject is the painting itself."

Snakes fit into this narrative of the show — they can change their skin and consume large animals that are twice their own size.

"Snakes are connected in mythology to the beginning of the world," Monteiro said. "I have a lot of references to the indigenous (on the snakes) and how they paint on their own bodies and (their) animal designs."

Monteiro also included some of her paintings, which she describes as "organic." There are various shapes and figures connecting with objects such as fruit and rocks. The work also features the science of gravity, as each of the shapes or figures appears to be sliding or drooping.

While studying for her Master of Fine Arts at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, she was laughed at after introducing herself as "a painter" without a focus or art discipline.

"That makes you think, 'What is painting? What is the material I'm using and how does the material connect to the culture and society I'm living in now?'" Monteiro said. "I like to use elements of my background and mix in some local material, and that was my response (to her classmates)."

Dragons made of 'found objects'

In a space nearby Gonzales, a Chicano artist, was preparing to hang some of his dragons made of acorns, jaw bones of various animals, shark's teeth, crab claws and rattlesnakes. The dragons are female and act as guardians of the earth.

He learned the craft of constructing dragons from a Lakota friend who made drums while living off the grid for 26 years in Tuolumne, California before moving to Lancaster.

"I grew my own food and me and my dogs would just go out in the forest and find the

materials," Gonzales said. "The mountain lions and bobcats would come visit because I had about 40 goats, a couple of donkeys and chickens."

The dragon "flesh" is made of palm dates and he had to find a solution to keep ants, bees and other critters away from the dates. Constructing the flesh and painting it is one way to preserve it and there's creative control in that process.

While examining the dragons, it's easy to spot the incorporation of various found items, the importance of ecology and the environment, and the impact culture and civilizations have on the planet whether it's in rural areas or city settings.

"I stood in front of a clear cut (in the forest) and it tore my heart out," Gonzales said. "The rivers and creeks are being sucked dry, and the water trucks are emptying the water springs out of the mountains. So much is being taken from the land and nothing is being given back. I hope people take away something about caretaking and the preservation of our home planet."

The center has hosted other 'thought-provoking' exhibitions

CVAC, which is located in the historic downtown district of Indio, was once the CV Printing Company and later an upholstery shop. In 2011, the organization began renovations on the building to house a gallery and exhibition space, and studios for various art mediums.

The organization supports artists of all levels from students and beginners to professional and established.

Schinsky said "I try to do what other people don't" by hosting thought-provoking exhibitions and tries not to repeat the same artists.

CVAC has presented exhibitions featuring military veterans, such as "Ways of Remembering" in 2017 in collaboration with the Coachella Valley History Museum and three veterans from World War II, Korean War and Vietnam War. They also organized the 2019 show "Artists Who Served" with artworks by four veterans.

The 2019 sculptural exhibition "149 –Contemporary Thoughts on the Lynching of Mexicans in California 1848-1859," which was a collaboration between Schinsky and artist

Marnie L. Navarro, included 149 suspended objects representing each of the 149 Mexicans who were lynched — victims of mob violence — from Northern to Southern California between 1848 and 1859.

When asked how he feels about "Cultural Cannibalism" and previous exhibitions, Schinsky said "I'm very pleased."

"Everyone has taken on a different tact and it's become a personal show," Schinsky said. "It's dealing with personal levels of reactions, actions and how people's lives have been affected. Each artist has been affected on a very personal level and that's going to last, and I think that's a great outcome of this project. They're going to walk away feeling and thinking differently, and I that's a positive thing."

If you go

What: Cultural Cannibalism

When: April 8 to May 28

Where: Coachella Valley Art Center, 45-140 Towne Street, Indio

How much: Free

More information: coachellavalleyartcenter.org

UPDATE: Curator Susan Myrland informed The Desert Sun that the titles of Kim Manfredi's piece and Hector Salas' "Passive Income" piece were later changed. The titles have been updated for both artists' artworks.

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