

José Lerma



Painting from Site

Kristin Korolowicz

Born in Spain in 1971 and raised in Puerto Rico, artist José Lerma is best known for producing humorous and intricately rendered paintings that often depict history's forgotten bureaucrats and aristocrats. In recent years, Lerma has expanded his practice to include the repurposing of nontraditional materials such as reflective fabric and industrial carpet, and the incorporation of found objects. Earlier in his career, the artist felt torn between his desire to make "painterly" paintings and his attraction to conceptually driven, site-responsive projects that incorporate objects and materials from their surroundings.¹ His *BMO Harris Bank: Chicago Works* exhibition showcases the maturation of his various artistic concerns in a theatrical, even epic, exploration of painting's relationship to history.

Lerma recognizes painting as a medium that, historically, has often been a vehicle for commemorating status and power, second only perhaps to civic sculpture and coins. But Lerma doesn't polemicize against symbols of power and status. Rather, he finds insights in their idealized forms. His ongoing series of works that incorporate coins and his interest in currency as "civic portraits" has expanded to encompass those who work in finance: for instance, seventeenth-century French paintings of bankers were among the sources for *The Credentialist*, his 2012 exhibition at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh, North Carolina.

At the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Lerma has engaged portraiture directly. Upon noticing that the museum's third-floor Chicago Works galleries have a high concentration of donor plaques, the artist took the named patrons as inspirations for his show's portraits. Each of the three discrete areas in his exhibition thus showcases works loosely depicting or inspired by the corresponding patron or sponsor of the gallery, including two busts made out of crushed sheets of monochromatic photography backdrop paper, which playfully refer to the medium of photography and his other paintings. Based on loyal art patrons Marjorie Susman and Marianne Deson Herstein, the busts are installed in the lounges named after them that overlook the museum's main entrance on the second floor. The two works, entitled *Marjorie Looks at Marianne* and *Marianne Looks at Marjorie*, face each other across MCA Chicago's dramatic foyer. Lerma is interested, figuratively, in ideas of "real estate" in this context and the spatial relationships among the array of people involved with any institution (whether it be art or banking). He has explained:

Portraiture has traditionally been a way of depicting status. In the fifteenth and sixteenth century, for instance, it was meant to be seen only by a few people in someone's home or manor, obviously way before the mass dissemination

¹ Lerma attributes much of his early artistic development to studying with Michelle Grabner and T. L. Sollen at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. According to him, their different approaches to painting made them the perfect "art parents." José Lerma, personal communication with author, February 2, 2013. All subsequent statements by the artist are from this conversation.



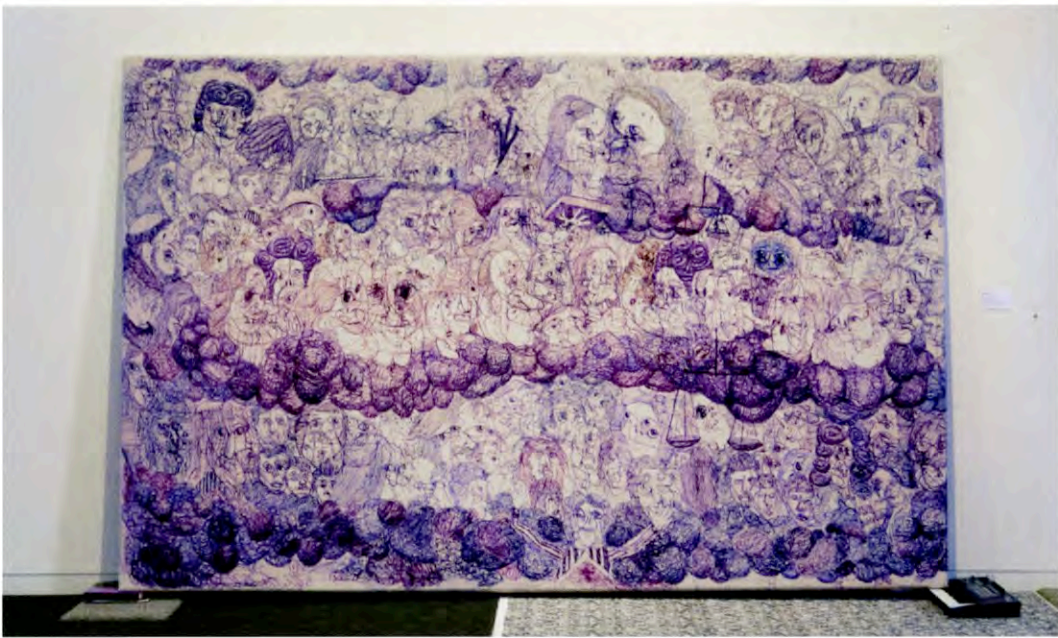
of images we know today. The pictures weren't about faithful likeness either. The portraits were idealized, even theatrical. When you looked at one you couldn't penetrate the picture plane. They were sort of intended to be seen from a certain distance, a certain reverence. They were instruments. Images serve that function.

Comparing the social history of portraiture with the economy of images we are all too familiar with today illuminates certain paradoxes that play out in this show. His thinking about the role of the artist, patron, public, and site, along with his use of likeness to evoke a certain distance between the viewer and work—developed from his earlier interests in painting and site-specificity, which were evident in the work he was making at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and in Puerto Rico after his graduation.

When Lerma moved back to Puerto Rico in 2001 after completing his MFA at UW-Madison, he found painting to be a stigmatized medium. He joined forces with a few artist friends who were organizing DIY-style public interventions all over the island.² Their projects tended to be situationist in spirit, ranging from the formal beauty of using cigarette butts to outline the cracks of an alley in Old San Juan, to painting an entire town green. Many were launched under the auspices of Michelle Marxuach, a local curator who oversaw the organization of M&M Proyectos, Fortaleza 302 (an artist studio and residency program), and a series of biennials (PR'00, PR'02, PR'04). Puerto Rico's small but internationally recognized (albeit briefly) art boom coincided with

² Among these artists were Chemi Rosado Seijo (b. 1973), Jesús "Bubu" Negrón (b. 1975), and Allora & Calzadilla (b.1974, b. 1971).

José Lerma and Hector Madera
The Countess, 2012
Photo backdrop paper and glue
Dimensions variable
Photo: Courtesy of the artist



the rise of global biennial culture in the late 1990s and early 2000s as well as Nicolas Bourriaud's then-popular notion of relational aesthetics.

In this context and in response to the long tradition of landscape painting in Puerto Rico, Lerma constructed one of his first major works commemorating a type of failure or tragedy. As part of PR'02, the artist constructed *Untitled (the gallery)*, a 16-by-32-by-8-foot, portable white cube gallery, out of foam blocks, and installed it at sites that were of personal significance to him. Creating a pun on landscape painting and "post-studio" practice, he literally placed an interpretive frame around part of the landscape. On the first day of the work's presentation at the biennial, Lerma wore a T-shirt with the address and telephone number of Francisco Oller (1833–1917), the most important Puerto Rican painter of the nineteenth century.³ One of the sites where Lerma chose to insert his gallery was a monument commemorating the island's first hot-air balloon, which crashed and burned on its first flight, killing its pilot. He also chose the site because it was behind his father's former office building. His father was a successful doctor who left medicine to pursue a string of businesses and died a couple of years prior to this piece. In reference to the memorial, Lerma explains: "It was a perfect metaphor for my dad's story. In my work, all of my characters have essentially been versions of my father in one way or another."

Unfortunate mistakes, especially ones committed by those who are or were successful, are recurring themes for the artist. For example, in his exhibition at the MCA, he presents a new parachute painting (of a spliced portrait of a middle-aged man in a suit) and

José Lerma
Parallelogram (after Tintoretto's Paradiso), 2012
 Acrylic on canvas, keyboard with speakers and book
 90 1/2 × 137 1/2 in. (229.9 × 349.3 cm)
 Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

³ The number belonged to Francisco Oller's distant relative, who was listed in the 2002 San Juan metro area telephone directory.

his gallery-size carpet "painting" of the founders and first presidents of the merged banks (Bank of Montréal and N. W. Harris & Co., the predecessor of Harris Bank) that now comprise BMO Harris Bank. Lerma's parachute painting refers to the 1981 *New Art Examiner* article "Harris Bank Facelift Raises Legal Questions." In 1977, Harris Bank commissioned a portrait of a former bank president from Chicago artist Martyl Langsdorf (American, 1917–2013). Initially well-received, Langsdorf's painting only became controversial when the bankers noticed that its colorful appearance made the other presidents' portraits look drab in comparison. According to the article, the artist's Harris Bank patrons asked her to "make the background more mellow," but she refused.⁴ Someone else made the requested changes, so that, as the authors of the article write, "not only had the background been sanded down and repainted a 'patent leather' black, but all marks of maturity and character in the face and hands had been crudely overpainted." The most poignant quote in the article comes from a banker who said, "What we wanted was a portrait, not a work of art." Lerma explores precisely such slippery distinctions in his work, and they inform his project at the MCA.

After spending more than a year in Puerto Rico, Lerma wanted to return to painting, but a painterly approach to the medium diverged from the direction of Fortaleza 302, and he was asked to leave the residency after the paintings he hid behind a curtain in his studio were discovered. He began dividing his time between New York and Chicago, where he admired the semi-grotesque, carefully crafted figurative paintings of the Hairy Who, as well as Tony Tasset's (American, b. 1960) puns on minimalist sculpture. In 2003, his first Chicago exhibition—a two-person show with Scott Roberts at the apartment gallery Seven Three Split—exemplified a similar sense of humor and marked a turning point in his practice. Lerma produced all of his works on site, using whatever he could find in the Pilsen gallery. In one work, for example, the artist duct-taped a pathetic-looking sock, soiled by his own semen to the gallery wall, anointing the tape with a single white paint stroke. The work refers to "Actionist art from Vienna and plenty of '60s body-fluid art, but it is really about being 14," Lerma wrote at the time. In a more understated and traditionally beautiful piece, *Paint Removed From Cabinet and Transferred to Wall*, Lerma took a found metal cabinet, removed the pale blue paint from a section of its surface, and applied the repurposed pigment in short, horizontal brush strokes over the entire gallery wall. He also chose to install the cabinet from which he had removed paint directly over the wall painting. It is important to note the artist's labored efforts to apply the paint from a three-dimensional object onto a two-dimensional surface. His impulse to strip away rather than add began with his MFA exhibition in 2002, in which he excavated layers of paint from the gallery walls, revealing paint colors from past MFA shows. As these works suggest, Lerma's work usually offers a mix of highbrow and lowbrow, at times with a dash of self-flagellation.

⁴ Donna and Stephen Toulimin, "Harris Bank Facelift Raises Legal Questions," *New Art Examiner*, October 1981, 12.

Shortly after his Seven Three Split show, a Brooklyn exhibition included Lerma's small, richly textured abstract portraits. These paintings explored a technique of dyeing industrial caulk with acrylic paint, creating an elegant matte surface, which the artist first experimented with as an MFA student. The figures in the paintings that Lerma was producing at the time pivot between figuration and abstraction and recall the cartoonlike elements of paintings by Philip Guston (American, b. Canada, 1913–1980) with a touch of the abject as found in the work of Sean Landers (American, b. 1962).

In 2005, after Lerma attended the CORE Residency Program at Houston's Glassell School of Art and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, he moved to New York. The recession of 2007–09 left him less tethered to market pressures and more inclined to experiment. Lerma's interests in long-forgotten historical figures, industrial materials, and quotidian objects influenced his painting, as one sees in his 2009 exhibition *El Pendejo* at Galerie Loock in Berlin, a presentation of carpet paintings inspired by King Charles II of Spain. The following year at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, he exhibited works that incorporated musical keyboards and retro-reflective fabrics, which anticipated his *BMO Harris Bank: Chicago Works* exhibition.

For the MCA, Lerma created new examples of his so-called keyboard paintings, which layer various types of marks over large-scale canvases, that often lean against the wall, propped up by electric keyboards. The characters in these epic works recall the cartoons of Agostino Carracci (Italian, 1557–1602), William Hogarth (English, 1697–1764), and Thomas Rowlandson (English, 1756–1827). Though the keyboard paintings come off as frenzied doodles—in part because Lerma's fine-point airbrush technique results in marks similar to those of a ballpoint pen—the artist's process is methodical and purposeful. The pressure of the canvas against the keyboard produces the note D minor, adding a soundtrack to the painting, and the depressed keyboard lets Lerma refer, tongue in cheek, to the metaphoric weight of painting's history on contemporary artists.

His historical research for this show began with an investigation of how the advent of the Salon in eighteenth-century Paris reshuffled the relationships among the public, artists, and patrons. The Salon was the first attempt at a populist exhibition, which brought a broad mix of classes together for the same leisure activity, and the public took the primary role in validating artists, superseding the once-direct relationship between artist and patron. The Salon's revival in 1737 was the responsibility of the French finance minister, who thought, according to art historian Thomas E. Crow, "the Salon, in his conception, would be like an annual public audit of artistic productivity."⁴ Through research at the Art Institute of Chicago, Lerma found an incomplete print of Pietro Antonio Martini's (1737–1797) iconic engraving *The Exhibition at the Salon du Louvre in 1787* (1787). It depicts public onlookers without any background or context. As a study for one of the keyboard paintings anchoring his MCA show, Lerma digitally compressed most of the figures in the Martini engraving, overlapping them into a physically impossible

5 Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985), 5–6.



arrangement to refer to the *parterre*—the open space in a theater where half the audience stood near the front of the stage. As Crow observed, spectators in the *parterre* could interrupt and intervene in the performances, creating chaos, and their opinions could make or break a production's success. Lerma's keyboard painting humorously depicts the audience and simultaneously creates its own droning claque. (A claque is a group of people hired to applaud or heckle a performer or public speaker.) Lerma's works thus present an unruly mass of fantastical characters (i.e. the public and patrons) that reflect the complex relationship between artist, patron, public, and site.

Combining cheeky self-reflexiveness and rigorous research, Lerma's work not only considers painting's contemporary art history, but also mulls over the medium's relationship to history with a capital "H." Neither critical nor celebratory, Lerma's matter-of-fact approach to his subject matter exposes paradoxes ranging from the site and context of his projects to the medium of painting itself.

Kristin Korolowicz is the Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Pietro Antoni Martini
The Exhibition at the Salon du Louvre in 1787, 1787
 Etching and engraving on ivory laid paper
 Image: 6 1/16 × 19 1/16 in. (15.4 × 48.5 cm); Plate: 15 1/16 × 20 9/16 in. (38.2 × 52.2 cm); Sheet: 15 3/4 × 22 in. (40 × 55.8 cm)
 The Art Institute of Chicago, the Amanda S. Johnson and Marion J. Livingston Endowment Fund, 2007.505

This booklet was published on the occasion of the exhibition *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: José Lerma*, presented from July 2 to December 3, 2013, in the Sternberg Family Gallery and Rabin Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and curated by Kristin Korolowicz, Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

Support for the *BMO Harris Bank Chicago Works: José Lerma* booklet is provided in part by Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago is a nonprofit, tax-exempt organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. MCA Chicago is generously supported by its Board of Trustees; individual and corporate members; private and corporate foundations; and government agencies, including the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency, and the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events.

Museum capital improvements are supported by a Public Museum Capital Grant from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources. MCA Chicago is a proud member of Museums in the Park and receives major support from the Chicago Park District.


Produced by the Design, Publishing, and New Media Department of the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Designed by Romain André, Designer; and Alfredo Ruiz, Senior Designer. Edited by Sarah Kramer, Lisa Meyerowitz, David Peak, and Lauren Weinberg.

Printed in the United States. Typeset in CMCA Schulbuch.

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Cover: José Lerma
Untitled, 2007
Oil on linen
20 × 16 inches (40.64 × 50.80 cm)
© José Lerma
Photo: Jessica Eckert,
courtesy of the artist and
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

José Lerma received his MFA in Painting at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and has held residencies at the CORE Residency Program; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, Maine. He has exhibited his work widely both nationally and internationally at Contemporary Art Museum Raleigh, North Carolina; Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain; Milwaukee Art Museum; Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; and Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens, Greece, among others. Lerma lives and works in Chicago and is Assistant Professor in the Department of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

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The Detroit News

June 4, 2014

José Lerma creates a fun, colorful version of the Art Basel at MOCAD

Michael H. Hodges

Detroit News Fine Arts Writer



A MOCAD installation Jose Lerma crafted from brick, cement and cotton fabric imitates a fountain. (MOCAD & Jose Lerma)

When planning his installation “La Bella Crisis” (“The Beautiful Crisis”) for the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, up through June 27, Puerto Rican artist Jose Lerma quickly decided he didn’t want a show that “said” something about Detroit.

“I didn’t want to come and just phone it in,” he says of the Motor City and its rich and tragic history.

Instead, Lerma — whose work mostly deals with history and art history — took the commercial nature of the one-time Dodge dealership MOCAD inhabits as a jumping off point, and then leaped in completely unexpected directions.

Living just a short hop over the Caribbean from Miami and its annual Art Basel extravaganza, Lerma imagined the fun he could have re-creating the feel of a commercial art fair in the center of an art museum.

“It’s a way of talking about and having an angle on Detroit,” Lerma says, “rather than having the temerity to think I could begin to understand its history.”

As for the art fair/art museum mash-up, he finds that amusing on the face of it, noting the condescending attitude curators usually cop towards art festivals, with their tacky booths and grubby commercialism. (Art elitists make an exception, however, for superstar venues like Art Basel, where stupefying prices lend a certain dignity to the proceedings.)

So Lerma’s set himself the task of building 30 festival booths in 30 days, which he then fills with stylized versions of works he saw at the most recent Art Basel. The artist expects to wind up production around June 12.

Indeed, if you visit in the next week, you’ll be able to see Lerma at work and chat with him.

“La Bella Crisis” riffs in hugely entertaining fashion on giants like Calder and Miro, as well as Americans such as Adolph Gottlieb and Alice Neer, the abstract expressionist and portrait painter, respectively.

“This show is the most fun thing I’ve done in ages,” Lerma says, who also teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. “I paint in a certain way with my own work, but this gives me insane freedom. I can be 20 artists in a week.”

It makes for a pretty dazzling assemblage. Lerma color-coordinated the work in the various booths, so hue plays off hue in often delightful fashion. (The Calders are purple, the Miro’s pink and red.)

“My ideal is to have people come in and find it’s a cool art fair, but creepy,” Lerma says, “because you’re like the only person in here.”

He laughs and admits he actually wanted animals wandering around, as if through some artsy ghost town, but figured that wasn’t particularly practical.

'La Bella Crisis'

Through July 27

Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, 4454 Woodward Ave., Detroit

11 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday; 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Thursday and Friday

(313) 832.4944

www.mocadetroit.org

ON JOSE LERMA'S "LA BELLA CRISIS"

June 11, 2014

The floor is covered with silver tarps and the entrance wall has the press release hand scrawled in acrylic paint. Partitions of white heavy plastic sheeting hanging from aluminum support beams create booths to mimic an art fair. This is Jose Lerma's own art fair, where the works are made on site while you watch. For a full month during gallery hours, the artist and his assistants utilize MoCAD's main exhibition space as an artist studio, transforming it into a one person art fair. Having opened May 16, the final display is this Friday, June 13, and will remain on display through July.



MoCAD's announcement image for Jose Lerma La Bella Crisis

sounds by flicking their cheeks incessantly, as if they are trying to create a language. The strobe is in the video as in the actual space, slowing down the video by de-emphasizing certain frames within. This visual doubling and redoubling is complemented by the mic'd sound of the cheek recital. It too seems doubled and redoubled to the point of not even recognizing it as human: getting within earshot it sounds like a fountain. It takes watching the video and seeing yourself in the space to realize that it is not.

In a video made by MoCAD to promote the exhibition, Lerma speaks about the materials and the resulting work's relationship to Detroit. He says: "I found a lot of these things on the street. And it's shocking that they make a suitable replacement for artworks at an art fair; just junk that I found and you put together in a day." Said so coyly, it seems like a dig, but I doubt to artists who work within the framework of detritus. Since he teaches at one of the nation's largest art schools, he probably sees more than his fair share, and from all sides, of work that re-makes polemical modernist art, both from his peers and fellow faculty still engaged with it, and young students trying to address it in their smirkingly angry way. Go to Basel and see that shit is in some horse stalls across

One of the strongest works on display is the monster made of U of M T-shirts and Spongebob's idiotic face hanging from reflective curtains. Walking past the work lights blaring directly onto the curtains, the fabric reacts to create a fantastic sunset effect, albeit unapologetically cheesy. A few hanging junk assemblages are painted a uniform bright yellow to match Spongebob Square Sun. Two slabs of brick ruins from an old brownstone "play" a keyboard set to a shimmering new age setting. The bricks find their final resting place on the keys, and a non-stop trance inducing drone fills the entire museum, aided by a small amplifier and the building's open floor plan. The whole effect is theatrical and sublime, allowing the materials to transcend their position as trash or generic objects of ennui.

To the right is a horizontal stripe painting and a wooden cube reacting to a strobe light overhead. The colors become animated in the lights, dancing to the keyboard drone and a disco beat locked somewhere in the colors and released by the artist's intervention. While this small section is playful, the strobe gets down to business in the next installation. In the west corner of the gallery, mirrors on both walls work their magic to turn a quarter circle of pastel painted bricks into a full circle. These surround a constructed podium adorned with triangles in every color and direction, ripped from a thrift store sweater (plus a background of Bird Shit White), housing plants and two tube TVs. The TVs play the same video: a few people in this very same environment making unintelligible

from the original LeWitts, Judds, etc., and you're likely to think you can never escape it. So while the fake minimalist crap in the northwest part of the gallery looks really boring, there are a range of artworks at an art fair. Winners and losers. At Basel, it's not just the works on display but the spectacle, the who's who of both sides. The only thing that changes is the number of works still available for purchase. At MoCAD, the number of works keeps increasing, each hour and each day, creating more potentials of dialogues within the works in the exhibition.

While the museum claims Lerma is addressing the history of the building as a former auto dealership, the only real connection is through class markets. As the dealership no longer exists, the market is no longer the people who make the product. Underlining this is the idea of transient economies, like an art fair. Keep reading the press release and no one talks of sale, just dismantling. With support from Andrea Rosen and Kava Gupta Chicago/Berlin, the works will likely go on sale after the exhibition in other economies. The slimy part of art which is on full view at art fairs gets pushed almost entirely out of sight here. Standard procedure, sure, and several of these works deserve a good home. With the DIA just a couple blocks north of MoCAD, one can't help but think of unspoken intentions when it comes to politicizing art speak. Since Lerma has never avoided history and politics in his work, I don't doubt he sees this as another relationship his work creates with Detroit.

Beautiful cacophony, the secret rhythms of color exposed and a perfect blending of light, sound and materials. I can't see him as this cynical, even though he is. Even at his most cynical, the resulting work is too beautiful to deny. It's like a predator perfectly stalking its prey, and that fragile creature who, in a moment of self absorption, or not being quick enough, or just dumb fucking luck – succumbs to the predator with such grace, that the whole event is nothing less than majestic. Everything that took place was exactly as it should, with nothing extra and no piece of carnage left out. The viewer is left staring, amazed. And as the drone seeps into your subconscious, the strobe lights screw with your sense of time and place, you start to understand the language created by the cheek recital.

José Lerma: La Bella Crisis is organized by MOCAD. It is curated by Elysia Borowy-Reeder, Executive Director of MOCAD and coordinated at MOCAD by Exhibitions Coordinator Zeb Smith. Exhibition runs from May 16 – July 27.

A Royal Court, Of Sorts, At José Lerma's “European Mixed Masters”

by Scott Indrisek May 13, 2014



José Lerma.
(© Kristine Larsen)

“It’s half a tennis match, and half a play,” said José Lerma of “[European Mixed Masters](#),” his show on view at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York through June 14. The painting-based installation has some interesting resonances with [Mika Rottenberg’s exhibition at Rosen’s main space across the street](#): namely, a restlessly inventive desire to pull together disparate themes and moments in time. For Lerma, the genesis of these works involves both the French Revolution and changes wrought by sporting technology within the professional tennis community in the 1980s.

On a superficial level, “European Mixed Masters” is a tableaux of colorful paintings: A massive airbrush-on-canvas depiction of a crowd, along with four mixed media-on-reflective-Mylar pieces that depict the silhouettes of tennis stars Steffi Graff, John McEnroe, Ivan Lendl, and Martina Navratilova, rendered with thick outlines that recall the promiscuous smears of Jonathan Lasker. The crowd painting is derived from Pietro Antonio Martini’s engraving “Exposition au Salon du Louvre en 1787” — Lerma has appropriated many of the personages from the original, adding extra eyes and noses here and there, and inserting a handful of his own acquaintances in with the group. In Lerma’s version, the mob of faces is akin to a crowd in a theater’s orchestra pit — and also a group of spectators watching the abstract tennis match taking place among the other four paintings. (In pre-Revolutionary France, Lerma noted, many indoor tennis courts used by the aristocracy were converted to theaters.) There are other referential touchstones — a 1790 play, “Critique de la Tragédie de Charles IX,” that was part of an ongoing dust-up among intellectuals of the time — but for the most part it’s clear that “European Mixed Masters” has less to do with historical fact, and more to do with the delight Lerma takes in toying with that raw material. “The story is in the service of the paintings,” he said. “You don’t have to know any of this stuff. But if you want to go into it and find out, it gets more perverse.”

The paintings’ color palette reflects the clash of cultures and eras that inspired them, Lerma explained. “The underpainting [on the Mylar works] is pastels, the kinds of colors you would’ve had in the *ancient regime*,” he said. “On top are the colors of late ’80s sports gear.” The airbrushed painting of the crowd deliberately nods to satirists like Hogarth and James Gillray, he said, with overlaid washes of pigment that reflect the hand-tinted political prints that acted as “the ‘Daily Show’ of their time.” (The rendering style, which resembles a line drawing with ballpoint pen, is what Lerma terms his “bureaucratic aesthetic — something you could make at a desk, but it’s gone incredibly out of scale.”)

Personal background is equally as important to understanding the installation. Lerma himself used to be a tennis aficionado, but said he lost interest once the “natural touch” of McEnroe was subsumed by the “power-based” attack of people like Lendl. The artist is a history buff (and, before beginning to pursue art at the age of 27, he was studying to be a lawyer). After years of slogging through critical and theoretical texts, he finally followed his own gut and made work about what he loved. “I would read a biography any day, and look at history documentaries constantly. I was like, ‘Why am I pushing against that?’” he said. “I found a lot of information

and aesthetics that were unexplored. It seemed much richer to me. And the research was a delight, the most enjoyable thing in the world.”

If this all sounds a bit heavy and dense, it’s not. Lerma describes the exhibition as “exuberant,” and delights in the vibrant colors and super-thick paint consistency on the Mylar works (the result of mixing acrylics with silicon and caulks). “Kids will love it,” he said. “It really is a great, infantile vehicle for introducing fucked up ideas.”

Slideshow: Jose Lerma: European Mixed Masters at Andrea Rosen Gallery

An installation view of Jose Lerma's "European Mixed Masters," May 7- June 14, 2014 at Andrea Rosen Gallery.

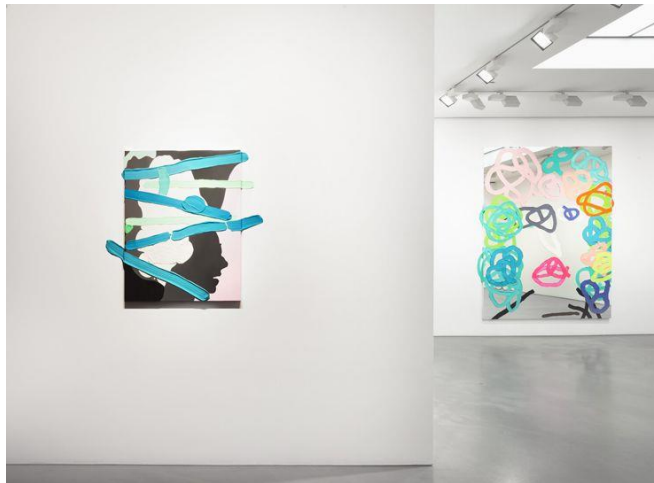


Photo by Lance Brewer/© Jose Lerma, Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



Photo by Lance Brewer/© Jose Lerma, Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York



Photo by Lance Brewer/© Jose Lerma, Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

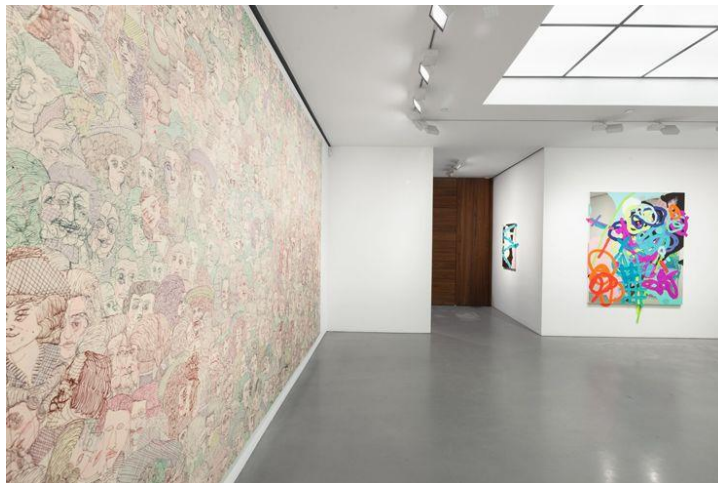


Photo by Lance Brewer/© Jose Lerma, Courtesy of Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

May 15-21, 2014

WHAT'S ON VIEW *at Chelsea galleries*



ADRIANA VAREJÃO

Brazil's history of miscegenation informs the paintings by this Carioca artist. Her various portraits of the same female sitter create a kind of human color chart of skin tones, and are based on a 1976 government survey on racial makeup. ▶ Lehmann Maupin; through June 21



MATTHEW MONAHAN

The 17 new sculptural works on view by this Los Angeles artist possess a splintered, fragmented and deconstructed quality of forms and styles that seems to aim for a sweet spot between the robotic and the ancient. ▶ Anton Kern Gallery; through June 21



JOSÉ LERMA

Lerma's work deals with what viewers demand of painting—to deliver visual rewards. His loopy, doodly abstractions painted with pigmented silicone caulk on reflective Mylar do appear to offer more than a few. ▶ Andrea Rosen Gallery; through June 14



KEN PRICE

Small ceramic objects come to mind when considering Ken Price (1935–2012). But he'd always intended to focus on large fired-clay sculptures. The examples here consist of nine such oversize works completed before his death. ▶ Matthew Marks Gallery; through June 28

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ART SEEN: CHICAGO

JOSÉ LERMA // GLORIOSA SUPERBA

by Stephanie Cristello



Fighting the War From Both Sides

Conspiracy is often faithfully followed by the term theory. It is a type of narrative that lends itself to the unknowable; founded on conjecture and speculation, on estimations of the factual that cannot be proven or disproven, existing forever in a state of both reality and fiction. Though, as a word that so often attaches itself to the indeterminable definition of theory, conspiracy is a term that perpetually surrenders its factual possibilities. The potential for truth is always eliminated at the sight of the word. But what if the fiction implied was not in opposition to truth? What if the conspiracy immediately admitted its own invention? In his current exhibition, *Gloriosa Superba* at Kavi Gupta, the conspiracy José Lerma depicts does not theorize, but imagines. There is a distinction in the texture, the affect, of these two systems; one travels toward truth from rumor, the other travels from truth into the unknown. Almost out of necessity, the collection of paintings on view confound the probability of falsehood onto the narrative at hand, embracing the fictive and deceptive nature within the task of representing lives of historical figures – specifically the infamous legacy of the wealth distribution in the Rothschild family.

Installation view: José Lerma, *Gloriosa Superba*, Kavi Gupta, 2014.

Like much of Lerma's past work, this new collection of paintings hinge on their decorative and ornamental elements; the image is often buried by its depiction, reduced to formal elements of color, pattern, and gesture. That being said, a representational likeness to the subject is never Lerma's goal. "The family has historically been careful to disclose as little as possible, so while they do convey the physical traits of their subjects, there is no psychology," says Lerma. "[The portraits] are instruments of exchange, of physical absorption and reflection...they are impersonal." The stylistic distance between the subject itself and the way it is painted is meant to disarm, to enchant, and eventually, to question the significance of the figures supposedly portrayed. The paintings, much like the subjects themselves, rely on the conceit that the deception within the descriptive liberties of the paint application is also part of their allure. Six paintings total hang on the walls of Kavi Gupta's Washington location; each features the silhouette of a portrait painted on mirror, done in a singular color palette that coordinates with the color wheel – indigo, violet, blue, green, yellow, etc., moving clockwise – met with various gestural marks of lines, scribbles, and hash tags on the layer nearest to the surface in brash, neon brushwork.



Installation view: José Lerma, *Gloriosa Superba*, Kavi Gupta, 2014.

We are told this collection of paintings represents the patriarchal members of the Rothschild family – *Amschel, Salomon, Nathan, Carl, James, and Mayer Amschel* – who were famed for their international banking dynasty, founded on what would now be considered insider trading. The title of the exhibition is also a reference to the namesake of the plant species named after the Rothschilds, the *Gloriosa Superba Rothschildia*, a genus of vine that climbs by attaching itself the flower that preceded it, similarly mimicking the distribution of money within the family. The main conceit of the installation cites two genres and trajectories on view – first, of the portrait, and second, of the still life or landscape painting tradition. Using the plant as a central metaphor, the installation is meant to elicit a type of contamination, or one could just as easily say germination, of the palette within the portraits by infecting the surface of the mirror with a different portion of the color wheel installed in the rectangular space. Yet, the inconsistencies are also scrawled on the surfaces of the paintings themselves – they contaminate their own color, just as they spread their own hues onto others' reflections; a treatment of color and form that is at once unwanted and welcomed – like ceremonial weeds.

An overtly cartooned depiction of a column resides on a pillar near the center rear of the gallery space. In a walkthrough of the space, Lerma recalls the alleged rumor that led to a large portion of the family's wealth. Positioned by the father, each of the sons took up posts around the world, globally connected with a number of Rothschild family agents to report the progress of opposing powers. One of the sons, Nathan, was known for standing against the "Rothschild Pillar" releasing "silent, motionless, implacable

cunning” at the London Stock Exchange. During the Battle of Waterloo, he made his speculations on the victor to win a fortune – posturing that Napoleon had won. He had in fact been crushed; Waterloo was lost. Stocks sold like wildfire. Seconds before the real news broke, Nathan bought a giant parcel for almost nothing, amassing an incredible amount of valuable stocks for cheap, immediately inflated by the actual victory. Years of savings and wealth were eliminated by the engineered panic, won instead by the family. The metaphor of everything at stake begins to spill over into Lerma’s line between representation and abstraction – using rumor as a method to picture fighting the war from both sides, but in painting. In Lerma’s words, the rumors that surround the Rothschilds “are morality tales after all, and the distraction is there for a reason.”



A Critical Analysis of Central Banks and Fractional- Reserve Banking from the Austrian School Perspective, 2014. Acrylic and pigmented silicone on wood, carpet, lights. 11' x 22' x 21' x 12'

An attitude of amusement abounds in the exhibition. This funhouse aesthetic, of mirrors, neon, black light, and illusionistic space, interacts with the viewer as much as it interacts with itself. However, the false representations and artificial reflections always betray their own illusion. In a purposefully pretentious titled installation, *A Critical Analysis of Central Banks and Fractional-Reserve Banking from the Austrian School Perspective*, a 10% slice of the built-out space is mirrored on either side, seamlessly appearing as a kaleidoscopic fountain in reproductions. The memorialization Lerma awards to this family, just as he represents painting’s trajectory from representation to formlessness, is instead remembered in the artificial real, a monument of deception and ruse you can look at and imagine, but never experience in the round.

“The work is about financiers and pie charts – with such un-sexy subject matter, I can be forgiven for embracing spectacle in some form,” says Lerma. “The fact that, as an audience, what we end up embracing are the illusionistic effects is indicative of how we got to this situation, in the first place.”

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José Lerma, *Gloriosa Superba*, runs at Kavi Gupta through May 17, 2014.

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March 11, 2014 | Filed under Art Seen: Chicago and tagged with Gloriosa Superba, José Lerma, Kavi Gupta.

Tags: Gloriosa Superba, José Lerma, Kavi Gupta



CHICAGO

JOSÉ LERMA

Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago

ON VIEW THROUGH DEC. 3, 2013

As has been evident in a string of successful exhibitions in Europe and the U.S., José Lerma—who splits his time between New York and Chicago, where he teaches at the School of the Art Institute—likes to work on a big scale, arranging his nontraditional paintings and objects in room-size installations with a conceptualist, site-specific thrust. For this exhibition, Kristin Korolowicz, a curator at the MCA Chicago, has tried to highlight the multiple directions in Lerma's work, but here she was perhaps overambitious. The artist, who clearly needs a generous area to display his work effectively, had just two small galleries and some subsidiary spaces at his disposal, and the show looks a little constricted as a result.

Wittily facing each other from small mezzanines on opposite sides of the museum's lobby, *Marjorie Looks at Marianne* and *Marianne Looks at Marjorie* (both 2013) animate what are



View of José Lerma's exhibition, showing (on floor) *Portrait of Norman and John*, 2013, acrylic on carpet, and (back wall) *Parterre*, 2013, acrylic on canvas; at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

usually lounge areas. Representing the two donors for whom the spaces were named, the 8-foot-tall, three-dimensional heads are made of the heavy colored paper used for backdrops in photo studios, loosely folded and shaped. They have a light-hearted, caricatural look, but they lack the playful dynamism of some of Lerma's earlier pieces in this vein, such as a group of oversize busts of historical figures (he calls them puppets) that he made in 2012 in collaboration with Héctor Madera, another Spanish-born artist who lives in the U.S.

Like much of Lerma's work, the busts of Marjorie Susman and Marianne Deson Herstein address the function of portraiture, past and present, and explore issues of power and display by examining the interrelationships among artists, institutions, viewers and patrons. He continues these investigations in a room containing three paintings, including *Portrait of Norman and John* (2013), depicting the founders of two banks that merged in the 1980s as BMO Harris Bank—one of the largest banks in the Midwest, and the sponsor of a series of exhibitions of which this show is a part. Lerma pairs the men's vaguely cubist faces in acrylic paint on a 27-by-24-foot rug that spills across the gallery floor onto an adjacent walkway. This is one of Lerma's well-honed gambits: creating oversize drawings and paintings that he places flat on the floor, Carl Andre-style. But this solitary work does not exert the same visual impact as the vibrant collision of images in his more expansive patchwork displays.

Dominating the rest of the gallery is *Parterre* (2013), an 18-by-10-foot canvas resting on two electric keyboards; the pressure creates an unending drone. Korolowicz states in an essay accompanying the show that this arrangement is intended as a metaphor for the weight of painting's history on contemporary art. Lerma often uses, as here, a fine-point airbrush technique, with an effect almost like ballpoint pen. Taken from *The Exhibition at the Salon du Louvre*, an 18th-century engraving by the Italian artist Pietro Antonio Martini, the painting's cartoony, loosely drawn faces are packed together in patternlike rows, forming a strikingly realized composition.

A second gallery is ringed on three sides by a curtain made of a shimmery silver fabric that reflects and distorts colored light cast onto it from two suspended projectors. Nearby are

another leaning keyboard painting and two smaller wall pieces Lerma conceived this room display, titled "Midissage," as both a kind of surround painting and an installation, but I found its conceptual aims perplexing. While Lerma clearly has much to say, he is not seen at his best in his first MCA Chicago show.

—Kyle MacMillan

José Lerma's parables of power failure at CAM Raleigh

by Amy White



José Lerma's "Charles II of Spain," 2012

Photo courtesy of CAM Raleigh

When you stand on the small white pedestal at the site of the king's third eye, the curtains along the gallery's back wall are set aglow, magically illuminated in an almost blinding wash of platinum light. Only one person at a time can stand upon the pedestal, a privileged position that allows the viewer to experience the ascendancy, pre-eminence and metaphoric luminosity associated with the state of being king.

This is the power spot at the symbolic center of *The Credentialist*, José Lerma's installation currently on view at the Contemporary Art Museum (CAM) in Raleigh.

The exhibition is anchored by an elaborate floor sculpture, layers of carefully stacked shapes of carpet that imbue the space with the quality of being an overwrought designer playroom. A posted sign warns of the uneven surface as one proceeds in museum-issue powder-blue shoe coverings. The modular components of cut-out carpet coalesce in a familiar image, set forth in a scale so large that its ideal viewing would be from a celestial vantage point. But instead of representing the persona of a woodland creature or popular cartoon character as one might expect in a kid's playroom, Lerma's carpet

frieze portrays the bewigged head of Charles II of Spain (1661–1700), the last ruler of the Hapsburg dynasty and the very embodiment of the ills, both political and genetic, that arise from a single family that attempts to inbreed with itself across generations in order to retain power.

The third eye, identified in esoteric circles as the sixth chakra, is said to be the locus of insight and awareness. Inasmuch as Charles II represents the epitome of the degradation and failure of absolute power, Lerma's use of this exalted node as a focal point for the work needs to be read as ironic in the extreme. Indeed, *The Credentialist* serves as a fluid critique, fluctuating through history, through a cornucopia of histories, applicable as much to the centuries-long Hapsburg reign as to the painfully recent presidential dynasties of both Bushes, whose policies of corporate privilege have come home to roost in our present moment. As a result, Lerma's work is infused with a sense of real-time urgency despite its visual referents to a distant past.

Lerma's obsession with the trappings, signs and signals of antiquated royalty invokes all manner of tangents, trivialities and patent absurdities, especially because his references to the heads of long-dead monarchs and former VIPs of Western civilization have more in common with cartoon characters and coloring book silhouettes than with High Art. Often rendered without faces, the portraits function more readily as logos or conceptual design statements than the portraiture he mimics, originally rendered in immortalizing oils rather than in the crude swatches of cheap institutional carpeting favored by the artist.

Propped up against the gallery walls are three large-scale canvases. At first glance the works look like blow-ups of doodles, behemoth pages filled by the idle hand of one whose mind has wandered elsewhere. Upon inspection, the works evolve and bubble forth with embedded imagery and encrypted meanings. We make out aristocratic heads, swarms of eyes and overt symbols, such as, in the case of "Madre Perla V-11" (2011), crosses, haloes and an open book held aloft in a manner that suggests it is not just any book but, indeed, the Good Book. The work is done in two variants of ballpoint-pen blue that make us think about blue as an idea, the purple-blue of royalty and a dark Bic indigo that suggests "blue blood." According to CAM's executive director and exhibition curator, Elysia Borowy-Reeder, each of the three paintings on view (yes, they are referred to as "paintings") deals with themes of religion, war and sex. However, beyond the overarching themes of these works is their facture, that is, their sense of the personal, compulsive and unconscious impulses that drive us to make marks without thinking. By approaching epic Baroque themes through the medium of the doodle, Lerma implicates us all as cultural filters, and posits high culture as personal, compulsive, neurotic.

Another phantom head that haunts *The Credentialist* is that of John Law (1671–1729), the so-called inventor of modern finance, whose wrongheaded policies led to the collapse of France's Banque Generale and forced him to leave the American state of Louisiana in disgrace, in disguise and in drag. Perhaps this odd fact is at least partially the reason for Lerma's incorporation of pink parachutes of British military vintage in the Law-centric works on view. Heads recur throughout Lerma's body of work, functioning to some extent in the way heads are imprinted on currency, a financial theme borne out in his references to Law and in his whimsical prints of reinterpreted coin faces. Lerma forces the association between figure heads and money, raising consciousness about the heads we carry around with us in our wallets and about the consensual hallucination, the big head trip, that is our world economy.

When you visit CAM, be sure to head downstairs and vibe with Andy Hall's *Form Special: Solar Projects and Site Collages*, a delightful mélange of works that includes chairs designed and built by the artist in single one-hour performances, a sound piece that literally rocks out and the opportunity to grab a live mike and belt out karaoke tunes on the topic of sunshine.

This article appeared in print with the headline "Heads you lose."

The Herald-Sun

In exhibit, chaos comes together

05.25.12



José Lerma's "Charles II of Spain" is now on view at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh.



José Lerma's "Charles II of Spain" is now on view at the Contemporary Art Museum in Raleigh.

*"José Lerma: The Credentialist,"
Contemporary Art Museum, 409 W.
Martin St., Raleigh, through Sept. 2.*

At first glance the gallery seems to be in a state of disarray. The floor is covered with odds and ends of commercial carpet and the paintings lean against the wall propped up by electronic keyboards; a curtain, made from 3M reflective material, covers the back wall. With all that in the background, the sound of one electronic tone drones quietly through the air as you approach each picture. The gallery guide and a bit of patience will help and what appears to be chaos turns into a giant stage where the bits of rugs on the floor become an abstract portrait of the Spanish King George II (1661-1700). The paintings look like doodles which have been culled from French political cartoons and vintage graffiti; the pen and ink beginnings get magnified by the artist whose use of acrylic spray paint allows him to reproduce the sketch-like quality of the drawings.

This exhibit, although it seems outrageous, is about painting, about history and how art fits into that history. José Lerma is a trained artist and art historian and, in another life, was a lawyer. His carpet painting of George II feeds off the French baroque portraits of the 17th century, and his paintings of oil, acrylic, pen and pencil use ideas found in 19th century literature and recall the

overall technique of the 1950s abstract expressionists. The music is a 21st century touch and speaks to today's ubiquitous sounds.

At the press preview the artist was putting the last touches to the floor patterns and waiting on one of the paintings which was due any minute. His ideas spilled out so fast it was hard to keep up, but it was obvious he was having a good time.

Lerma looks for the B parts to history and highlights them. For instance, he focuses on 18th century bankers and state leaders who came to power by accident. The doodles could be marks the bureaucrat makes on paper during a dull meeting and the neon colored carpet reminds him of gambling houses. He puts all this together in a show titled "The Credentialist"

with a sub-title, "the ups and downs of life in general as seen through some of history's lesser characters." He quotes art history constantly, borrowing from Tintoretto in one painting, a pressed paper image of a coin honoring Maximilian, the puppet Emperor of Mexico (1832-1867), in another and then uses transparent parachute material to cover earlier paintings and explains the material as an evocation of the moth that rises up toward the light and often does not escape.

"The Glib Decade," 2010, is an earlier painting where text in Spanish and English are part of the surface. A small, even older painting is attached at the top. Lerma explained it as another way to pull together history and art history texts.

Visitors must walk across the carpet portrait. In fact, the visitor cannot get across the room without stepping on the face of Charles II and that is exactly what Lerma wants. In the gallery guide, he says, "I like the thought of people walking over my ideas ... examining and stepping over an intimate space while simultaneously feeling small." At one point he said he considered letting the wear and tear of visitors add to the process of disintegration, but decided against it, so each day staff members will inspect the carpet and paste down any area that is coming up.

In the forward gallery at CAM, the one that looks on the street, two enormous structures, made of photographic backdrop paper, were taking shape. They are a collaboration between Lerma and Hector Madera and are called, "The Countess and the Godmother." While Lerma was talking to us, Madera was busy covering balloons with the colored paper. He stopped working and told us Lerma had been his teacher and now they are showing together. The huge balls will change shapes gradually as the balloons lose air, but will settle against each other and stay in place. The title is taken from popular Spanish puppet figures and, if your imagination is working, you can probably hear their conversation.

Lerma migrated from Spain to Puerto Rico to Chicago and Brooklyn, N.Y. He has an art history and law degree and when I asked him what led him away from the law, he said, "I was in the final semester of law school and my girlfriend suggested I take an art class as diversion and just to relax and it changed my life." The art was freeing, especially from the formality of the law. Today he teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and prepares work for special exhibitions.

He said the carpet will be thrown out when the show is over, so anyone who wants a piece of it or a lot of it should come by the day the show closes and help themselves. This is his first solo museum exhibition and he seems totally delighted with the space and the opportunity to fill it with his idiosyncratic ideas.

While you might wonder, this show is all about painting, but painting that puts together the non-traditional materials of mill ends and carpet rejects. The large traditionally created paintings do not hang on the wall but sit on electronic keyboards making music. It pulls on art's most traditional names and themes, but changes them in unique ways. This is painting come alive. I believe you will love it.

Blue Greenberg's column appears each week in Entertainment and More. She can be reached at blueg@bellsouth.net or by writing her in c/o The Herald-Sun, P.O. Box 2092, Durham, NC 27702.

Canvases come unhinged at Raleigh exhibit

PUBLISHED SAT, JUN 16, 2012 08:00 PM



JLEONARD@NEWSOBSERVER.COM - JULI LEONARD

The centerpiece of The Credentialist at CAM is Jose Lerma's room-sized portrait of Charles II, the 17th-century Bewitched King of Spain, where a viewer (as demonstrated by gallery and exhibitions manager Kate Thompson Shafer) stands on a small raised platform below a spotlight to view an unearthly glow on a reflective curtain. This image was taken from a 12-foot ladder.

BY DAVID MENCONI - DMENCONI@NEWSOBSERVER.COM

For most people, the definition of "painting" is pretty straightforward – paint on a surface. But you might change your impression of that after seeing Jose Lerma's "The Credentialist," an exhibit playing through the summer at Raleigh's Contemporary Art Museum.

There is little actual paint involved in most of the 17 works in "The Credentialist." Instead, Lerma uses carpet, dye, reflective plastic, parachute fabric, various types of paper and even keyboard sounds, among many other media.

"Jose really expands the notion of painting with this," said CAM executive director Elysia Borowy-Reeder, who commissioned "The Credentialist" for the museum. "He uses prints, puppets, carpets – all very accessible materials. But it's the imagination that transforms them."

Lerma, a Spanish-born artist who grew up in Puerto Rico, lives primarily in Brooklyn. He's been making provocative multimedia art for years. And the way he sees it, all of his works are paintings.

"Painting is pigment on a surface with a binder, but a lot of things qualify under that very minimal definition," Lerma said. "I try to fit other things within that. And a lot of works in the show you might not consider paintings, they're about paintings, in a way."

The centerpiece of "The Credentialist" is a room-sized portrait of Charles II, the 17th-century "Bewitched King" of Spain whose numerous physical and intellectual disabilities (reputedly the result of generations of inbreeding) made his reign nothing short of catastrophic. Lerma's portrait takes up the entire floor of the main gallery, and it's made of cut carpet samples, which start to look ever stranger the longer you gaze at them. That fits the subject.

"Charles II is a figure who embodies both extreme power and weakness in very overt ways," Lerma said. "There was a lot of solemnity to what he had to do, taking part in the rituals of a king at that time. But there was also something freakish about his appearance and how he acted. He was one of the most powerful monarchs in the world, and also the weakest person in the room."

Right between the portrait's eyes is a small raised platform, just below a spotlight you might use to illuminate a patio. The light is pointed at a curtain, made of Scotchlite reflective material. Viewed from the platform, the curtain gives off an unearthly glow that seems like what you might imagine seeing at the moment of death.

Standing on that platform is also the best vantage point for listening to the exhibit's audio component. Four works consist of large canvases along the walls, festooned with airbrushed images that look like ink doodles suggesting life, death and power. These canvases "play" keyboards, in that they're propped up on the keys – with the notes, tones and keys changing from one day to the next, according to Lerma's instructions. The keyboards emit low electronic hums, which blend together in different ways, rising and falling. Depending on where you happen to be in the room, that mix of sounds is either hypnotic or unsettling (or both), working in conjunction with the surrounding visuals.

"The show was conceived with a triangulation element, both the sights and the sounds," Lerma said. "It alludes to politics, plus the act of moving around to see and hear things as they become beautiful or dull. It's a lot of meandering. Proximity to power is something I try to use in a poetic way."

Power remains a recurrent theme for Lerma, who earned a political science degree and studied law before taking a hard left turn to pursue contemporary high-concept art. Much of his work deals with history, along the lines of this exhibit's Charles II portrait.

Some of that history is fairly contemporary, however. "The Credentialist" also includes "The Countess and the Godmother," two 15-foot-high puppets made of photographic paper. They were inspired by the Puerto Rican talk show "SuperXclusivo," which Lerma watched while growing up in the 1980s.

"It's basically a gossip show," Lerma said. "Something like a political Perez Hilton, with these cranky puppets doing interviews. But it's an essential platform for a certain kind of star there, in politics or show business. Political careers are constantly ruined there, sometimes in fascinating ways. There's a hotline and people call in: 'I saw such and such politician or star in such and such place, and they were drunk – or high, starting a fight.'"

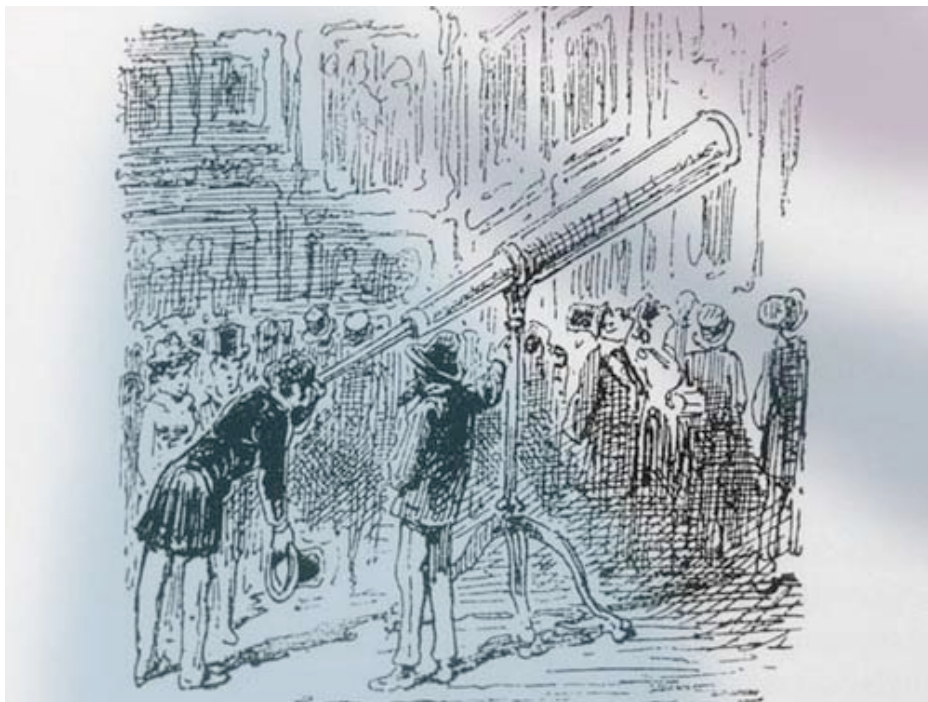
Here, Lerma paused to laugh.

"It's a little like the Triumph the Insult Comic Dog, a puppet that's all about taking people down," he said. "I find it incredible that a puppet is one of the most powerful figures in Puerto Rico."

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Read more here: <http://www.newsobserver.com/2012/06/16/2139585/canvases-unhinged-at-cam.html#storylink=cpy>

5/9/11



The Lightweight

José Lerma

Western Exhibitions

119 N Peoria St, #2A, Chicago, IL 60607

April 8, 2011 - May 14, 2011

The Heavyweight

by Steve Ruiz

The language surrounding José Lerma's practice rolls out like the first chapter of a starter book on fine art: Lerma's work is about memory and painting, exhibition and childhood, media and the power of a visual experience, and truing the personal and the historical. The artist himself describes his work even more openly, as about "other art and his parents," referencing context and history but not specifying why or where. While overly-broad, the conceptual structure the artist uses is far more traditional than ironic, and its lack of specificity makes a good explanation for why "The Lightweight" feels so familiar despite the unusual gestures employed.

The second and smaller gallery at Western Exhibitions is among the best venues in Chicago for artists looking to fully transform a space. Lerma's installations often involve a degree of handholding and forced interaction, but the second gallery allowed Lerma to immerse audiences in his installation. Reflective curtains and parachute fabric are stitched along the walls, edging around and covering canvases hung behind, making a tripped-out disaster parody of a French salon exhibition.



Canvases hidden behind the parachute fabric make up Lerma's *Rampant Mid-Careerism*, their scattered relative heights bringing together the implicit critical structure of installation at the French salon (where the worst works were hung the highest up) and the shaky valleys of value for works by artists not yet dead. One painting rests on the keys of an electronic keyboard, a standby atmospheric gesture for the artist, haunting the space with sounds from a glass harmonium at low volume.

For the show's centerpiece, the eponymous installation work *The Lightweight*, Lerma screen-printed a *Le Charivari* comic, published in 1880, showing an unfortunate artist encouraging guests to view his poorly placed paintings through a telescope. Printed in varnish on the reflective curtain, the cartoon is barely visible—except when one is standing in just the right spot, on a provided milk-crate, where two spotlights reveal it against a direct blaze.

Though Lerma's signature personal-historical portraiture is represented in this exhibition by three graphite-on-paper drawings, "The Lightweight" is less concerned with the artist's history than his present, reaching into history to establish an uncomfortable continuity with other painters. This too is a deceptively traditional gesture, despite the cool materials and execution, but Lerma's contextual awareness is part of what make him a favorite among other artists, and why "The Lightweight" feels so confident in its nervous newness.

-Steve Ruiz, Contributing ArtSlant Writer

Installation view of *Rampant Mid-Careerism* in "The Lightweight" at Western Exhibitions. Image courtesy of Western Exhibitions.



José Lerma. *The Lightweight*. Mixed media. Image courtesy of Western Exhibitions.

Art

José Lerma, “I am sorry I am Perry”

Lerma’s works are as delightful as they are opaque. *By Joseph R. Wolin*



★★★★☆
Critic's Rating

[Andrea Rosen Gallery](#),
through Sat 22

Samuel Bernard

Photographs: Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery

In José Lerma’s compact exhibition, squiggly blue lines that look like ballpoint-pen doodles form twin columns of piled spirals, rising up on either side of John Law, a large unprimed canvas on beveled stretchers. The spirals resemble stacked cinnamon buns or the curly locks of a Louis XIV–style wig, like the one worn by the 18th-century Scottish economist of the painting’s title. Yet, instead of a face, swaths and blobs of thick paint—actually colored caulk—occupy the center of the image, making it abstract—an antilikeness that shares something of David Dupuis’s graphic obsessiveness, as well as Carrol Dunham’s cartoonish representation.

In *The Glib Decade*, the artist attaches a similar image on a small canvas to a larger, all-over, Twomblyesque composition of blue and pink scribbles punctuated by a few impasto daubs. Each of the bottom corners of the latter rest on the keys of an electronic keyboard, producing continuous pulsating tones that fill the gallery. A painting that makes its own disembodied music, droning though it may be, feels sweetly goofy, and also rather sublime.

How that gesture relates to a historical figure like Law, however, remains unclear, as does his connection to *De la Nada Muerte a la Nada Vida*, a hanging curtain made of the reflective fabric used for safety stripes on bicycling gear. The piece changes from dull gray to an iridescent, almost immaterial shimmer, depending on the viewer’s position in the room. Like the curtain, Lerma’s intentions may be opaque, but their effects produce delight.

Featured Artist: José Lerma

by [Amanda Schmitt](#) on January 5th, 2011



De la Nada Muerte A la Nada Vida, 2010



Lush and tactile, the canvases heavy with paint, José Lerma is known for his texturally seductive, semi-abstract paintings that allude to the idea of a formal portrait. Recognized for his abstract, expressively personal paintings, Lerma ventures off the canvas to a conceptual, almost sculptural practice in his latest show, “*I am Sorry I am Perry*” at Andrea Rosen Gallery. In three parts, the bankers, the curtain, and the keyboards, Lerma references both personal and historical narratives, yet encourages the viewer to create their own.

José Lerma (b. Spain, raised in Puerto Rico) lives and works in New York and Chicago, where he is on faculty at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Currently, he has a solo show at Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, NY. "I am sorry I am Perry" is on view through January 22, 2011. Additionally, "A Person of Color/A Mostly Orange Exhibition" – a group show curated by Lerma, opens at Green Gallery, Milwaukee, WI, on January 22, 2011.

Amanda Schmitt: Rather than just a showing of new paintings, "I am sorry I am Perry" seems to me to be a very thoughtful exhibition with clear formal and conceptual intentions. Are you both the artist and the curator?

José Lerma: I planned this exhibition around 3 elements that I had worked with in the past. Curating is a good way of putting it. Even before I started making art, I loved Marsden Hartley's paintings of Von Freyburg. I like the idea of a collection of objects and stories collapsing on each other and becoming, in effect, a portrait. In that sense, all my shows are a kind of curated self-portrait. However I didn't want it to feel like discreet parts that were there to be decoded instead I wanted the viewer to arrive at kind of "fourth reading"; I love when clarity devolves into babble and facts become aesthetics. What I mean is that what matters to me is the effect that the parts have on each other and not their individual meanings.



John Law, 2010

AS: Reading the press release for "The Golden Sea" at Andrea Rosen Gallery back in 2006, the focus of your work seems to have shifted: it is no longer as self-referential, and now seems to more so reference other artists and other histories. You also seem to be less focused on your intimate contact with the paint, and more focused on the conceptual-weight of the materials (the 3M curtains, keyboards, etc). How do the works in this show depart from your previous work?

JL: My work has always been either painting, or works about painting. Initially, I was attracted to it because it was a very

direct way of exploring personal mythology. I knew early on that I wanted to make autobiographical painterly works but I was also attracted to painting because it was the least popular medium among my friends, particularly in Puerto Rico, most of which were at the time emulating artists like Gabriel Orozco, Francis Alÿs, or just working on new media.

What I really loved early on about painting was its immediacy, and the fact that it was ideal for dealing with certain events from my youth. I could convey the awkwardness of being thirteen by painting an oversize pink polo shirt and a skinny neck. I didn't need actors, an audience, or even much space. Plus it enabled me to work very fast. If anything, this feels like a synthesis between my early post-studio work and the paintings of the last 5 years. It feels very natural and complete to have all these bodies of work in a space.



OLL KORRECT, 2010

AS: Although you reference specific historical figures, your portraits are often left without a face. Why this anonymity? Are these people specific to you, or were they meant to be unspecific to everyone?

JL: My previous paintings (paint portraits, 2006–2009) were abstract references to portraiture but without likeness. In this new body of work, I am not interested in psychological portraiture. Instead I am more interested in the trappings of power, the visual cues, the posture, the wigs. I guess there are classic regal and patrician features, certain noses and lips for instance. The figures I choose are not usually well known enough that it would matter if I had included their face. There are other bankers throughout history who are far more recognizable – Salomon Chase, some of the Rothschilds, Medicis, and of course a lot of contemporary money managers – but I wasn't interested in directly addressing current events.

The only face whose features I have consistently drawn was that of Charles II of Spain. He had the proportions of a caricature due to many generations of inbreeding among his predecessors. He was truly a tragic figure: at once one of the most powerful and one of the weakest men in the world.



Jac Fugger, 2010

AS: Your work is dense with allusion. Did you study a lot of art history? Or history in general?

JL: I mostly read history. I had a good background in social sciences and was also getting my J.D. when I decided to study art. Maybe for that reason I was drawn to a lot social satire from the 18th and 19th century especially James Gillray, Daumier and Hogarth. My earliest series were portraits of historical figures as children. Early on, I spent a very productive summer at the UW-Madison library. That summer I made no art, and spent every day at the library. I built a huge catalogue of contemporary images and strategies, which I proceeded to cannibalize for the next year. Only later did I stop looking over my shoulder and began to steal more from myself, from the things that honestly had interested me in the past.

AS: Tell me about the curtains in this exhibition. How long have you been using this material and where did you find it? What sort of formal or conceptual role does it play within the exhibition?

JL: This is the fourth and largest version of a reflective curtain that I have made so far. The fabric is a reflective material made by 3M, mainly used as a safety precaution at night. On one hand, I like that the curtain, when in the gallery, can almost become a light emitting object. However, I am mostly entertained by how the curtain acts in relation to the keyboard pieces. It flattens as you approach one keyboard or it becomes dull as you approach another.

I think all the elements together give a very subtle cinematic illusion. You can arrive at certain effects and somewhat change the read of a painting by a kind of triangulation between the relative positions of light sources and sounds.



The Glib Decade, 2010

AS: To me, your work is very humorous. Between your MFA exhibition at UW-Madison (in which Lerma power-sanded a hole deep into the wall of the MFA gallery, revealing layers upon layers of past installations and wall-painting from decades of students' past work) and the "*Saddest Chord in the World*," (which consisted of a Yamaha DX7 keyboard leaning vertically against a wall, with the D, F and A keys held down by means of masking tape, creating a D minor chord, playing throughout the course of the exhibition) it seems to me like you're poking fun at everyone else around you: critics, professors, curators, and other artists. Do you find your own work funny?

JL: Most art is never really that funny to me. Some exceptions are Sean Landers, Scott Reeder, Peter Land, Mike Smith and William Wegman. I guess ideally I would love to make works that are heartbreaking. Instead, in reality, most of my works deal with the tension between the heroic and the pathetic.

I am interested in tragic figures. The ascent to power and then an abrupt plummet are a favorite theme of mine. One of my favorite scenes is from the movie *Ridicule* by Patrice Leconte where the character played by Bernard Giraudeau is defending the existence of god in front of the king with amazing showmanship, and in an act of hubris goes from the most sublime moment of his life to the lowest in a matter of seconds. How we chose to fuck everything up is always fascinating.

ARTFORUM

José Lerma

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY
525 West 24th Street
December 11–January 22

Relegated to this gallery's smaller rear room, José Lerma's latest exhibition, "I am sorry I am Perry," would have benefited from the larger main space. His show is brimming with ideas, which deserve the additional real estate.

The show's title is sourced from a Spanish joke that reflects on the limits of language. Lerma conceived of the included paintings as portraits of bankers produced by a bureaucrat using office tools that might be at hand, such as Bic pens and pink highlighters. Keyboards playing ambient music act as supports for some of the paintings—the result is something like Chris Ofili's dung balls replaced with Korgs. (The music resembles the kind characteristically used on the sound tracks of art documentaries, which might well be a wry joke on the artist's part.)

The inspiration for many of these works seems to be Philip Guston's late figuration; the pieces play off this source material without feeling pretentious. In looking at *John Law*, 2010 (possibly based on Alexis Simon Belle's depiction of the Scottish economist, which hangs in London's National Portrait Gallery), viewers could lose themselves tracing the intricate faux-Bic swirls (created with a doctored airbrush) of the figure's wig; these whorls threaten to take over the whole painting. One is then entirely sideswiped by the seeming reverse of this formal approach: wide pressings of paint in wasabi greens, light grays, and slightly creamy whites. A hanging reflective curtain feels disconnected from the other works until one notices how it continually changes the light in the room, splits the viewer's shadow into three, and extends the experimentation further.

— *Matthew Israel*



View of "I am sorry I am Perry," 2010. From left: *Samuel Bernard*, 2010; *De la Nada Muerte a la Nada Vida* (From the nothing death to the nothing life), 2010.

FECAL FACE DOT COM

Jose Lerma Interview

Written by Ryan Christian
Tuesday, 22 June 2010, 4:13pm



Tell us a bit about yourself Jose?

I was born in Spain, grew up in Puerto Rico in the hospital grounds where my parents worked. Moved to New Orleans for college and then Law School at UW-Madison. At 27 I took a class with TL Solien (who was an amazing teacher, and a mentor) freaked out completely, dropped out of law school during my last year and decided to study art.

How would you describe your work to someone who has never seen it? What are some of the driving inspirations behind your work. What has influenced you in big ways?

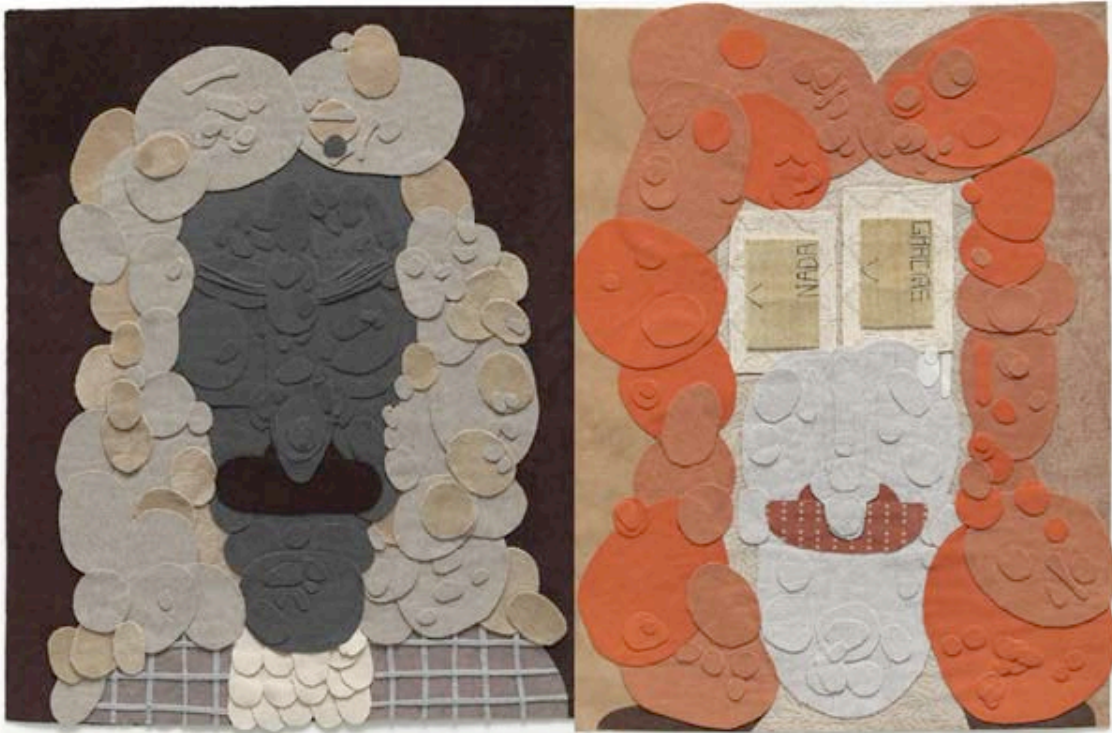
I make paintings and works about painting. I try my best to collapse the personal with the art historical and to fit both within a single frame. This is something many artists do, but I just wanted to make it central to my practice. Although the works and paintings change dramatically in terms of material, the common thread is some story I heard my mom say, for instance, or some ugly piece of furniture in their living room or some dorky thing I did in my youth. Then I try to fuse this with some historical event, person or artistic style. This sounds cheesy, but I always say that all art is about other art and about your parents.

As far as artistic influences I like late Picasso, Morandi, Sean Landers, Piero della Francesca, William Anastassi, Phillip Guston, Carl Ostendorp, James Hyde, Bruce Nauman, George Condo, Paul Thek, R. Crumb.

The towel pieces really intrigues me. You do some work on shirts and other non traditional painting surfaces as of late too, if I'm not mistaken. Could you talk a little bit about what prompted this experiment?

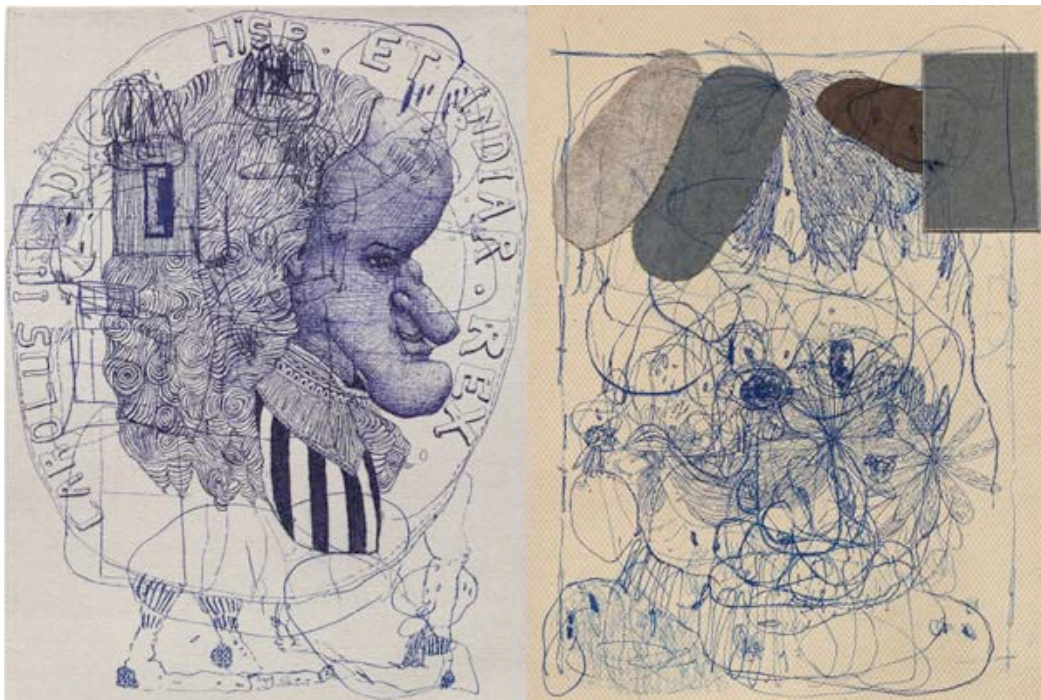
I think the whole thing is self generating. I was making paintings by removing the paint from an object by applying a solvent or paint stripper. Then I would paint an open flat form of that object, similar to the way a bear rug suggest the open shape the animal. This idea

of removing the "skin" of an object, of seeing objects as painting minus sculpture, was reversed by using towels, which wrap around skin and for a moment suggest the object. So from there I began making the Carlos II portraits which were made with office carpets and were an attempt at enlarging the feel of the towel portraits.



In my own practice, I am very interested in finding balances between figuration and abstraction. This is something you have been investigating for awhile now with your portrait-esque works. How do you approach this balance?

It's simple really. I make something that looks like a portrait but has no likeness. They are small and done very fast, but they are also goopy and thick...a portrait of paint. Then I spend weeks enlarging every aspect of it, and make it maybe 9 feet tall. So it becomes about scale too, a big painting that feels very small. The carpet thing was about walking on a sketch...of a disfigured Spanish king, but it was about being in it.



The way you use your materials is really engaging to me. I see lots of mixed media work and something about how you combine them really stands out to me. What is your process like? How do you approach a blank surface? Do you have an exact idea of what you want or is it more responsive? How do you determine that a piece is finished?

I finish a show when I run out of time, just like when I took test as a kid. I am not an organized person. As far as the individual pieces I often paint and compose on a very large un-stretched canvas without stepping back and mostly considering the surface. I like surfaces that look great from a foot away. Then I step back and crop the best parts and run with what they suggest. Often a very large canvas yields a small painting. Other times things are set up ahead of time like doing a painting with only whatever is around, some dirt, cardboard or the paint dissolved from objects, usually cabinets or magazines.

I like that there seems to be no hierarchy of medium in your work. The drawings and paintings seems to be one in the same and equally substantial. Do you agree with this. How do you view your drawing and painting relations?



I never see them as separate practices. My paintings often start with a very busy layer of drawings. Most of those come straight from idea notebooks that I still keep for sculpture and installation work...so nothing is thrown away. If I can't afford to execute an idea, I can at least include it in a painting so it can exist. For me there is an arc and if you start getting too skilled it's always good to introduce another thing or medium so it's interesting.

You bide your time between New York, Puerto Rico and Chicago, to you, what are the pros and cons of the respective places?



Puerto Rico has very interesting scene and I have seen it grow in the past 10 years. The scene there produced the duo Allora and Calzadilla, the painter Enoc Perez and the brilliant Jesus Bubu Negron. Sadly, I don't spend too much time there anymore, but when I lived there in 01-03 the art scene was really exciting and intense and many international curators were stopping by the island. It was a little crazy I think they were trying to find in PR what they saw in Mexico city in the early 90s. Most of the work was post studio then. I think there are more painters now. I also think the curatorial infatuation with PR only lasted about 2 year then they moved on which sucks for some of the younger artists there.

Most people I know in NY are artists... that also makes it a bit boring. I like Chicago, especially how affordable it is, a lot but I am mostly teaching here and have little time to make work. I find that artists in Chicago wear many hats (often curating, running apartment galleries or starting small publications) and spread themselves a bit thin. I don't see that as much in NY.

Being faculty at one of the largest art institutions in the US (SAIC) what are your thoughts/experiences with art and academia?

I feel very lucky to be working with colleagues whose work I admire. SAIC's atmosphere is quite relaxed and conducive to experimentation. I have very bright and ambitious students and that really makes teaching fun. I like to teach by brainstorming with the students, though sometimes my suggestions are simply moronic. But I try my best to come up with a series of possibilities, and then let the student decide if any of them are worth pursuing. Those were the teachers I enjoyed as a student. I find the back and forth helpful to my practice as well. Making art is pretty solitary and teaching gets you out of your solipsism and neurosis.

What's in store for you in the 2010? Any exciting projects or anything coming up?

I have two solo shows coming up this year. One is in Madrid at Galeria Marta Cervera in September and the other one is a small show at Andrea Rosen In NY. I'm teaching at Ox-Bow in the summer. That should be fun. Also I may be curating an exhibition in New York for SAIC painting grads.

<http://www.fecalface.com/SF/index.php/features-mainmenu-102/1876-jose-lerma-interview>

BEAUTIFUL/DECAY

BOOK 2:

WHAT A MESS! 2009



JOSÉ LERMA

**ARTICLE BY
ALLISON GIBSON**

**IMAGES COURTESY
OF ANDREA ROSEN
GALLERY,
NEW YORK**

THE PAINTINGS OF SPANISH-BORN, BROOKLYN-BASED JOSÉ LERMA SUGGEST THE TRADITION OF PORTRAITURE, THOUGH IT IS UNCERTAIN WHETHER THE SUBJECT OF THE PORTRAIT IS THE SITTER OR THE ARTIST'S CHOSEN MEDIUM ITSELF. DENSE LAYERS THAT SEEM TO BE MELTING ONTO THE SURFACE CREATE GATHERINGS WHERE COLOR AND TEXTURE MINGLE TOGETHER COYLY UNDERNEATH A CEILING OF FINAL, SPLATTERED BLOBS. THE PAINTINGS ARE AT ONCE MISCHIEVOUS AND WRYLY UPFRONT, FINDING THEMSELVES IN A UNIQUE NICHE SOMEWHERE BETWEEN 17TH CENTURY NOBLE PORTRAITURE AND WILD ABSTRACTIONISM.

WITH ACADEMIC FORAYS INTO POLITICAL SCIENCE AND LAW, AND AN MFA IN PAINTING, LERMA IS AN INTERNATIONALLY EXHIBITING ARTIST WITH AN UPCOMING SOLO SHOW IN BERLIN, PAST SOLO PRESENTATIONS IN KOREA, NEW YORK, BELGIUM, AND ITALY, AND RESIDENCIES IN PUERTO RICO, WITH NEW YORK'S SKOWHEGAN PROGRAM, AND AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON.

I RECENTLY LISTENED, OVER A SYMPHONY OF NEW YORK TRAFFIC BUZZING BY IN THE BACKGROUND ON HIS END, AS JOSÉ LERMA THOUGHTFULLY, HONESTLY, AND PLAYFULLY DESCRIBED HIS ART HISTORICAL INSPIRATIONS, HIS FEELINGS ABOUT INTERPRETATION, AND HIS QUIETLY REBELLIOUS SPIRIT TO CREATE PAINTINGS THAT HIGHLIGHT THE VERY NATURE OF THE MEDIUM—EVEN WHEN IT WAS AT TIMES “UNCOOL” TO ATTEMPT ANYTHING SO OUTRAGEOUS AS TO SIMPLY *PAINT*.

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Your paintings suggest portraiture, yet they lack those explicit characteristics usually found in portraits—namely, facial features. Some of them evoke Louis XIV-era characterizations, with vague impressions of long curled wigs and ruffled collars. What are these pieces about?

I'm always stealing from other work that I've done before, or from things that I liked before I was a painter. I shot a lot of pictures in the early 90's of busts of bankers at The Met. One day [after I became a painter], I was looking through the pictures again, and there were about thirty of these busts, and they looked great. I tend not to question; if I pick something up at one point, it must be good enough to be included [in my art]. So I started painting these judges—really, they're bankers from the 17th century. I call them "abstract portraits—they carry all the signs of a portrait, with format and a kind of figure in there, but they don't have likeness, which is the essence.

I read that some time ago, you immersed yourself in the study of Abstract Expressionism and that (according to Andrea Rosen Gallery) you disputed the widely held assumption that abstraction is inherently aggressive because of a supposed frenzied activity, and wagered that abstracting actually derives from extremely quiet and slow painting. Since we're exploring what it means to be a "messy" artist, I would note that your work has a tactile messiness, yet it seems that your process of working is conversely subtle. So, would you consider your work messy?

LEFT
"UNTITLED," 2007
OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS.
80" X 68"

OPPOSITE
"UNTITLED," 2006
OIL ON CANVAS.
24" X 20"

WHAT A MESS!





ABOVE
"UNTITLED," 2006
OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS.
76" X 64" X 2"

OPPOSITE
"UNTITLED #1," 2007
LITHOGRAPHY, WOODCUT ON RIVES BFK
AND HANDMADE PAPER. 44" X 38"
EDITION 1 OF 12.

That's actually the description that I give people. Whenever someone asks about my work, and I know they don't have, maybe, an art reference, I just say "messy." It's like this old Willem de Kooning thing where he painted like a madman for a TV crew once, but in reality, he painted very slowly. He just sort of sat there and kind of passed the brush. That's really very boring to watch; people wanted to see the trace of the brush being related to a frenzied activity.

People want to imagine that you wail on the canvas like Pollock did?

Exactly, and I also want to tie it into these sort of subtle shifts and permutations of the pastel colors, so that the paintings have a very quick, tactile read and also a really slowed-down read in terms of colorship.

Can you talk a little more about your process? How did you begin working with that thick application and in those layers?

I remember it all starting in school, where I was a multimedia artist, and I just decided that I was going to make a painting. At that point, there was so much emphasis at the school [University of Wisconsin-Madison] of medium specificity. They seemed to be like, "Why are you making a painting?" Like it was really uncool to paint at that point. There had to be a lot of explanation; like you had to make some kind of abstraction that was codified in some other way and then that would stand in for a painting. But at some point, I decided I was going to make a painting and it was just going to be about paint—about things that only paint could do very well. So I just started applying it very thick.

It's also about working from memory, having no actual reference. I decided to go just straight from my mind to my hand and into the work. It's a very simple way of going about it. Everyone else seemed to be stuck in this sort of simulation thing, and for me, it was liberating to do these very dumb images, but painted in a somewhat sophisticated way, but I still just laid it on thick. You couldn't get too precious with it or it was going to go nowhere.

What other artists' work are you interested in, or perhaps inspired by?

I guess not anymore, but for a while I liked Phillip Guston; that was pretty obvious at the beginning. So I had to work on getting rid of that influence. But I still like Morandi quite a bit. I still like artists like Piero Della Francesca. I will always like that work; that work is amazing. Mostly, I like conceptual artists. I grew up really liking Bruce Nauman's work much more than anything else. I just like the freedom that they had.

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What else outside of the realm of art history or contemporary art inspires your work?

Pretty much anything, really. I make works that are paintings, but I also make these works that are about paintings. For a while, I was framing spaces that had some significance to me. Almost anything that happens to you where you can determine the aesthetics of it is good enough to be either art or a painting—wherever your first kiss was, for instance. Those are the elements that you should look at, build a painting around—not necessarily what happened, but what it looked like. You have to force yourself constantly to use parts of your life to make a painting that you haven't seen before. Other people do it very differently or it comes very naturally to them, but I was a real painting nerd [when I began]. I had real worship things with some painters, so I had to force myself to go in my own direction.

Since you're drawing on personal narrative, how do you feel about interpretation? Is it out of your hands at a certain point, or do you ever feel protective of your vision?

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I find that some critics say things that are amazing, and I go, "Wow, I never thought of that," and then some people say things that are just exactly what I thought that I definitely didn't want to be the interpretation. But then I remember that one guy said something about a piece once that was so beautiful, I kept using it after that. So, it's a bit transformative. But most of the time, I have no control. I try not to title the pieces for that reason. If I do, I try to make

them as ambiguous as possible. But one rule I've always had is this idea of tying in the personal with art historical references. I think that tends to anchor it in for the viewer, but also brings in an idiosyncratic voice.

What are you working on now?

I am making some paintings with towels right now, and rugs. Again, it's mostly about the same subjects and stealing from the same ideas, but now done with different materials. Also, I was painting on cardboard with mud—the cheapest paintings I could make. So I think the next show is going to be varied—some airbrush paintings on rugs, mud on cardboard paintings, towel and washcloth paintings, and probably some cabinets that I've done before with very thick paint on them.

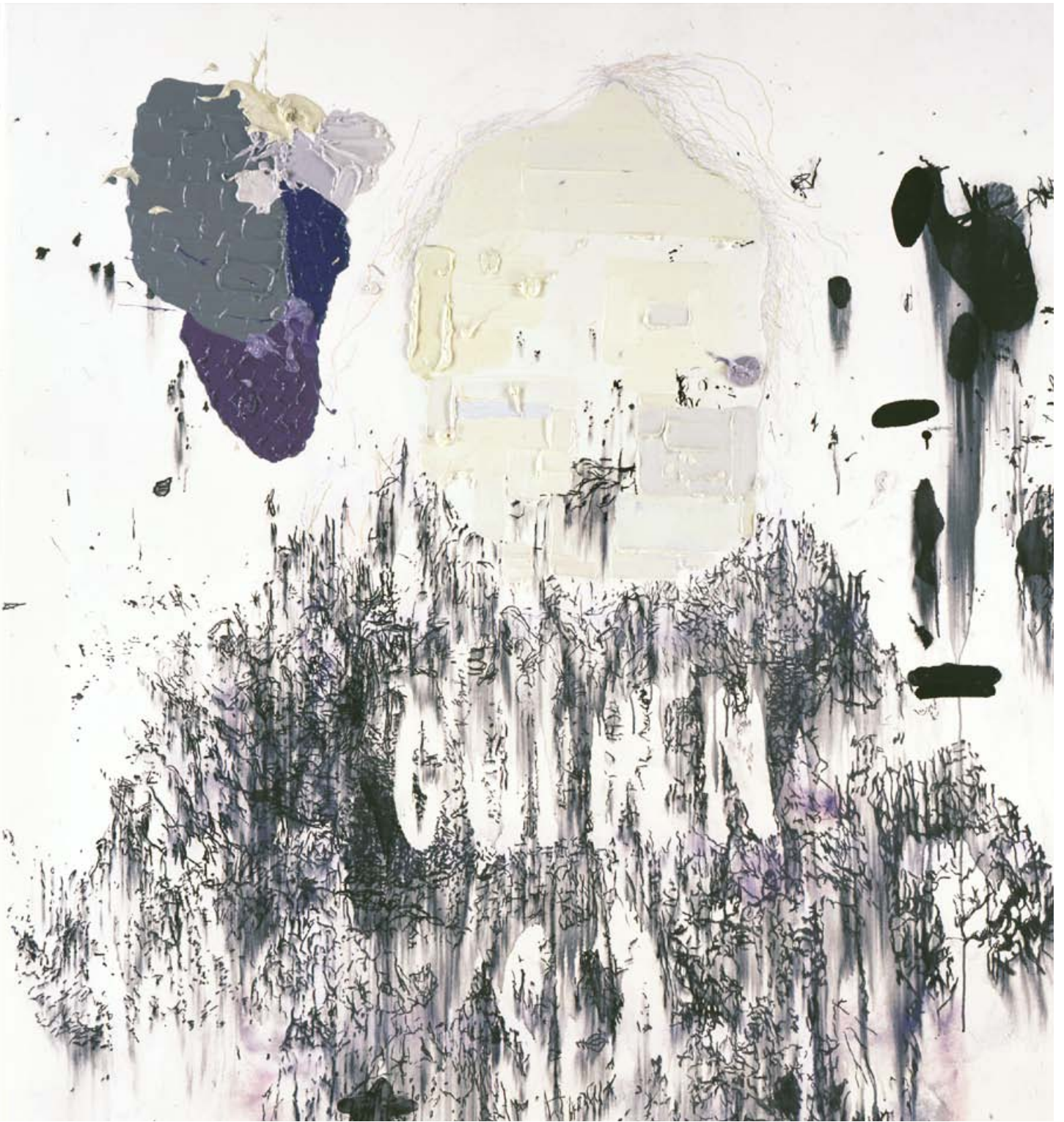
There's this idea that you can take any object and apply a solvent to it, take off the paint from it, and create another painting. I did that for a long time, so I wanted a sort of reverse version of that. It gets sort of complicated, but I started using the towel because I thought it had sort of this inductive relationship to the body and it would wrap around the body or an object and carry something, and I thought that was kind of beautiful.

But I was never making abstractions, just kind of goofy stuff. I don't know how to make a serious painting. Once it starts becoming too much about ideas, I tend to sabotage it so that it's not about ideas explicitly in the content. So I make it overly cartoonish. I think that's just my nature.



LEFT
"UNTITLED." 2007
OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS.
96" X 72"

WHAT A MESS!



ABOVE
"THE GOLDEN SEA," 2006
OIL, CHARCOAL, PEN, AND PENCIL ON CANVAS.
80" X 72"

TANDEM | press

SPRING 2007

A SELF-SUPPORTING PRINTMAKING STUDIO
affiliated with the Department of Art in the School of Education at UW–Madison

José Lerma: Art About Other Things



José Lerma's first visit to Tandem Press represented a form of homecoming. While attending the University of Wisconsin Madison at the turn of the century, he made a life-changing decision to switch from the study of law to pursue a degree in art. It was the culmination of a serendipitous passage toward deciding what he wanted to do with his life.

Born in Spain, Lerma grew up in Puerto Rico. "Bored" as a teenager, he went through a period of "wandering around." He maintains that "biography isn't that important except in the esthetic way it points." The trajectory of his life began to emerge when he studied political science at Tulane University before coming to Madison. He now divides his time between his home in Puerto Rico and a studio he maintains in Brooklyn, New York. But this is not the extent of his travels. In recent years his work has been featured in solo and group exhibitions in such cities as:

Brussels, Belgium; Venice, Italy; Athens, Greece; Houston, Texas; Miami, Florida; and San Francisco, California.

While completing both an MA and MFA degree at the UW-Madison and attending the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine, Lerma eventually decided to concentrate primarily on painting following an earlier involvement in creating installations and doing video and photography.

He discovered that the tactile manipulation of paint and the strokes it requires provided him with the greatest artistic satisfaction. His initial efforts contained "goopy" applications of paint which turned out to be



“too loaded, too heavy.’ As a result, Lerma wants his paintings to be “slow” in dimension and density.

Before he starts a painting, he usually makes a series of drawings. He recalls that in his childhood he made paintings of various people. Now, however, the paintings “feel like portraits but are not representational, not of anyone in particular.’ Because his paintings ultimately deal with his life and memories, the drawings “begin to look like something as the memory kicks in. Sometimes they take longer than the paintings because of the amount of information they contain.’ Lerma found that because of the time he spends on the exploratory drawings “most of the paintings become almost automatic and they almost always have some kind of cartoonish element.’ The drawing and painting aspects of his work are distinctively reflected in the prints he created during his visit to Tandem Press.

As he continues to pursue his career, Lerma has concluded that, “At some point, all art is about other things-and your parents.’ (A.H.)

Jose Lerma’s residency was made possible with a grant from the Anonymous Fund.



ART PAPERS

International Reviews

March/April 2004, p. 58

SAN JUAN, PUERTO RICO

By Pedro Velez

A testimony more than an exhibition, "as if accepting defeat" (*Galeria Comercial, December 11—31, 2003*) reveals **JOSE LERMA's** farewell to innocence, teenage rebellion and the pursuit of happiness inside the big great capitalist machine we call the system. The exhibition is also a visual soundtrack that, just like all good pop music, triumphs in the use of generic and simple poetry to induce pleasure in sadness.

The first painting the viewer encounters in the gallery is probably the happiest and the most hopeful of the bunch. Reminiscent of a Degas dancer, it features a headless feminine figure seen from the back and wearing a pink tutu, and is composed in bright pastel colors (mainly pinks and pale blues) applied in thick milky strokes—like waves scrawling across the canvas. The dancer seems to be a fairy or guardian angel, floating in thin mist, as if trying to escape the helpless situation the viewer is about to encounter.

Clichéd though it may sound, every painting in the show is a page from the artist's diary. The most obvious is *Big Pink Polo* (all works in the show are 2003), which Lerma told me references the moment when he decided to quit law school to become an artist. In Lerma's psyche the Polo brand and logo represent a lifestyle that makes him uncomfortable and against which he felt compelled to rebel. To tell his story the artist uses a faceless character wearing a pink Polo shirt, with elongated neck and arms that spring out of it. Obviously uncomfortable, the stretched figure has a refined cartoon-like style reminiscent of Phillip Guston or John Currin.

The show starts to go sour once the viewer encounters *Bauhaus Fan*, a painting that touches a pathetic note by exposing the intuitive frailty in a young

man's life. The kid is yet another faceless and desperate character, partially visible, who masturbates and ejaculates in the direction of



Jose Lerma, *Dancer*, 2003, (courtesy galeria comercial).

the viewer, creating a messy yellow blob of paint in the bottom right corner of the canvas. Wearing a black T-shirt that sports the word *Bauhaus* (not the German school of design but the eighties New Wave band), the kid is Lerma's scapegoat for an irreverent commentary to the fanatic and unproductive adoration of superstars in popular culture.

Melancholy also plays an important role as demonstrated with *Eskimo Kiss*. Grayish and cold, *Kiss* reveals sadness derived from complacency, with a close up portrait of an unknown character wearing white and black make up modeled after the legendary rock band Kiss. Closer inspection reveals a teardrop messing up the loser's mask, just like one of those generic kitsch images of a sad clown. The character displays a sad posture of defeat and resignation rather than a glorious rock 'n roll attitude, as if giving up some adolescent fantasy.

With his luscious paintings Lerma has transformed the teenage slacker imagery, attitude and style, so in vogue these days, by addressing the issues with a grown up perspective: a characteristic trademark of the artist that makes the viewer feel guilty of looking at a loser's diary with such pleasure.

ART IN REVIEW

Ellen Takata and José Lerma

Published: April 11, 2003, Friday

Southfirst

6 North Sixth Street

Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Through April 20

Both of these young artists are working with portraiture, imaginative if not necessarily fictional. Ellen Takata, who is in her mid-20's, takes as her subject an eclectic array of historical figures. One of them, Lord Alfred Douglas, lover of Oscar Wilde, may be familiar to most viewers. His brother, Francis, is probably not but should be if he at all resembled Ms. Takata's magnetically lurid depiction.

Other sitters include Mei Lan-Fang, a Beijing Opera leading man who specialized in female roles; Saijo Eriko, a Japanese actress who played male parts; and Elizabeth Mutsch, the artist's grandmother. In a sense, everyone in this private, not to say cultish pantheon feels like family, and they all equally share in the benefits of Ms. Takata's deft, detailed, slightly distracted brushwork and her attitude of witty, unsentimental earnestness.

The cartoonish young man with a startling nose in José Lerma's paintings is, by contrast, fantastic and sardonic. He belongs to the lineage of uncouth, freakish beings revealed by Philip Guston, Peter Saul and Carroll Dunham, though minus truly sinister overtones. This Everyman is less an elemental monster than a teenager going through a super-bad phase.

Mr. Lerma, who was born in Spain in 1971, studied in the United States and recently moved to Puerto Rico. He lived in New York for a while -- all the pictures in the show were done here -- and I hope he keeps sending new work. He's very good. *HOLLAND COTTER*

Chicago Reader

Section One

March 7, 2003 p.26

art

SCOTT ROBERTS AND JOSE LERMA
at Seven Three Split, through
March 22

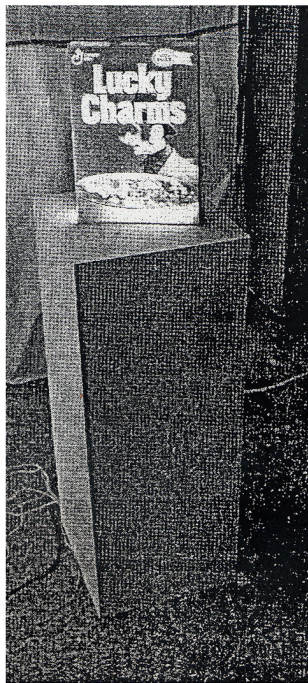
By Fred Camper

INSPIRATION ON A BUDGET

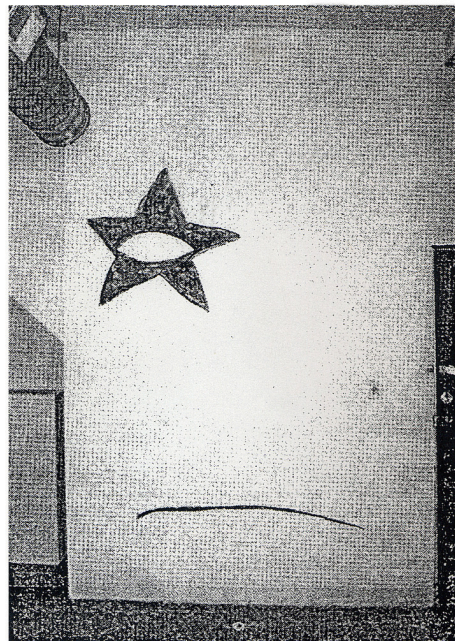
A stained sock is affixed to a wall with duct tape. An electronic keyboard with headphones attached sits up against another wall. A video projection shows a cartoon cat endlessly circling in the corner of one room. In alternative galleries, art can consist of borrowings from pop culture and casually installed found objects, like these pieces at Seven Three Split. Started in 2000 by three art students and a boyfriend, its name was conceived one night while two of them were bowling; it's now run by one of the founders, Tim Fleming, who lives upstairs. Paying the rent from his income as a Web designer, he doesn't have to sell anything to stay in business, the place is open only on Saturdays, and he doesn't necessarily have shows year-round. The artists are often recent art-school graduates; Scott Roberts and Jose Lerma, who are friends, both received MFAs in 2000 from the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Lerma was born in Spain in 1971 and grew up in Puerto Rico, where he lives today. He writes that his *Sock With Cum Stain* refers to "Aktionist art from Vienna and plenty of 60s body-fluid art, but it is really about being 14." It's also obnoxiously confrontational, though I enjoyed the apparent macho joke in the checklist that identifies it as one of an "edition of 5." (Lerma described an earlier piece, documented in a book at the gallery, as "a sock that can stand erect using my own sperm as a binder.") If *Sock With Cum Stain* were characteristic of this show of six works by Lerma and five by Roberts, it might justify a rant against narcissistic art students. Fortunately, most of Lerma's other pieces are engaging (though an outdoor installation of snow dyed yellow has melted), and two of Roberts's three video installations are superb.

Lerma's *D Minor Chord* is a good example of how the alternative-gallery antiaesthetic can prove interesting. Six keys on the keyboard against the wall have been fastened down with duct tape, so that two D-minor triads are playing continuously. You can hear the single pulsating chord only on the headphones. This piece flirts with a Cagcan boundary between art and nonart: the assertive drone references trance music, while the casual look of the piece suggests that art can be found in everyday objects. Lerma's wall drawing, *Wanted to Be Ace but They*



"LUCKY" BY SCOTT ROBERTS



"WANTED TO BE ACE BUT THEY MADE ME BE PAUL STANLEY" BY JOSE LERMA

Made Me Be Paul Stanley, consists of a dark gray star with an eyelike white shape in the middle, drawn using mud found in a gutter across the street; beneath it, near the floor, is a single curvy line of red lipstick. Using "nonartistic" materials, the artist nevertheless creates a dynamic composition.

Lerma's *Paint Removed From Cabinet and Transferred to Wall* is unexpectedly lovely, combining a battered metal cabinet of Fleming's with a large wall painting. The back of the cabinet, from which Lerma removed the paint, faces the viewer; the entire wall behind it displays pale blue, almost ghostly horizontal brush strokes with paint dripping down, hinting at a brick surface as rough as the cabinet. The piece makes a statement about working with minimal, easily accessible materials and mixes assertiveness—the weighty cabinet, the large wall painting—with transience: the painting is not only impermanent by definition but looks temporary. Using inexpensive or free materials—the keyboard in *D Minor Chord* is on loan—Lerma makes a social statement as well as an aesthetic one.

Scott Roberts's three video installa-

tions reference pop culture without either smug irony or excessive worshipfulness. In *Devil Cat*, a black-and-white character modeled on Felix the Cat repeatedly tromps in a circle in a gallery corner, his image projected so that it's divided between the floor and two walls. Roberts created the cat using 3-D modeling software—and when you view it from near the projector, it's undistorted and fully three-dimensional. No one would mistake this for a real cat, but the way it turns about in space gives it an almost transcendent realism.

Roberts, who lives in Evanston, was born in Milwaukee in 1965. As a child he loved cartoons and comics, and in grad school the films of Andy Warhol made him aware of the medium's nonnarrative possibilities; of these pieces he says, "Nothing happens, but there is time in them." *Limbo* shows four pairs of cartoon eyes in a dark room, shifting or blinking slightly at different times and in different ways. Creating a total environment and focusing attention on tiny but captivating movements, *Limbo* is at once goofy and spooky.

The best of the three is *Lucky*, a

stunning replica of a Lucky Charms cereal box created through video projection on a blank cardboard form. The projector sits on one pedestal and the box on another; Roberts used 3-D software to create undistorted pictures and texts on the three sides of the box facing the projector. (Like Liza Lou, who constructs consumer objects—even an entire kitchen—out of colored beads, Roberts redeems the ordinary through the luminosity of his materials.) The image on Roberts's box also moves: a spoon repeatedly scoops cereal out of a bowl, and a leprechaun eats right out of a box. Roberts shot both sequences (playing the leprechaun himself), while the product information comes from scans of an actual box.

Not surprisingly, Roberts identifies animated cereal commercials, in which the product's mascot comes to life, as an artistic influence. Here the piece's sculptural presence, its repeating, "timeless" moving images, and Roberts's manipulation of them to make the perspective of each surface look normal give his cereal box a hyperreal, almost eternal quality. That consumer products have become the icons of our age is a commonplace, but Roberts gives this idea a disturbing resonance. ■