



American Stories: Re-membering History, Re-imagining Mythos Li Sumpter

If past is prologue and pattern is truth, ***Speak Out! The Historical Self*** offers somewhat of an art oracle – a creative reading of the signs of these uncertain times that speak inconvenient truths to power. Together, the featured works of Carlos Nuñez and Mikel Elam not only speak to the state of the world around us, but also to the internal dialogue of each citizen of this country and across the planet living through global history in-the-making. In these moments of isolation and introspection, many of us have turned inward to revisit the unfinished business of our own individuation – what Swiss psychologist Carl Jung calls the process of developing the Self. Many have reclaimed this time for self-care and returned to healing wounds long neglected. In that loud silence of pandemic-imposed solitude, many have found unexpected courage facing dark corners of the mind and old shadows of our nation’s past. A symptom of this courage is the

emergence of the proverbial “voice” to speak out, to champion and challenge one’s self and one’s place in the world as it shifts with the rising tides of a new reality.

What is undeniably evident in this dual exhibition of paintings by Nuñez and Elam is the intent to speak out and the use of a common language to do so. Both painters employ a vibrant visual vernacular of archetype and symbol, color and texture deeply rooted in the history and the mythos of America. The works of these two artists also seem to be in conversation with each other exploring topics and issues familiar to Nuñez and Elam’s respective life stories while also reflecting a certain socio-cultural collective experience. This may have been the initial impetus of Pink Noise curator, Daniel Oliva – to simply bring these dynamic painters together in the same room and let the vocal art between them speak for itself.

What might their paintings say when hung side by side on the white walls of an intimate exhibition space like Pink Noise Projects? Where might their personal histories and creative paths collide, align and intersect in common nodes of color and vision?

Nuñez was born in Ecuador and raised in the United States. Elam, born in the U.S., is African American and traces his family lineage back to Haiti. Both live and work in Philly. As summarized by Oliva, Elam’s work directly addresses “the enslavement of Africans, Jim Crow minstrel shows, and double identity” while Nuñez “critiques the corporate agribusiness drive for profits, ruthlessly commodifying Latin American workers in a system that trades humanity for dollars”. Given the subject matter of their art, personal identities and complex relationships with the country both men call home, it’s pretty certain these two artists and their bodies of work have lots to chop it up about.

Daniel Oliva’s curatorial choices for the current installation of Nuñez and Elam’s paintings effectively helps to set the stage for what feels like a silent dialogue in the details. This happens so clearly with the placement of Nuñez’s, *The True Identity Lies in the Teeth*, and Elam’s *Misperception*, side by side. The central figures of these works are almost in a face-off, a debate of sorts, wide-eyed and engaged in addressing issues and audiences that underscore the myths and messages, misperceptions and misrepresentations of a cast of characters in the



Carlos Nuñez, *The True Identity Lies in the Teeth*, Mikel Elam, *Misperception*

American story being told through their art. These moments of visual exchange between the artists happens throughout the exhibition walls of ***Speak Out!***—if only we, the audience, could be there to bear witness.

The problem all of us are faced with in the Age of Corona is the ongoing disconnect from community exchange and the lively conversations we would have otherwise had off-line and IRL. Until further notice, museums, galleries, artist-run cooperatives and project spaces like Pink Noise Projects can no longer host opening receptions buzzing with wall to wall people high on new art and bright ideas, house wine and pale ales. This is where audience and artists come to connect. These social gatherings have become anticipated public ritual to which our access is now denied. Remember the good ol’ days when we took being in the same “physical” room with five or more folx for granted? Now we’re all nostalgic for the moments when we could be close enough to eaves drop on the impromptu discussion between artists like Elam and Nuñez who might candidly highlight some delectable nuance in front of a painting as we stood by within earshot. After listening in, you wait for the opportune pause to pop your own question or two to the artists about this or that painting that has caught your eye or conjured your own memories and insights to share.

These authentic, first-hand art experiences have become inherent to the exhibition event and are as organic as life itself. These experiences cannot be cloned or replicated in virtual space. Sure, we can try. We must. What else can we do when the real world we once knew is on lockdown and in limbo? No matter how analog your art and soul, right now, digital domains are community’s safest platforms of public engagement.



Carlos Nuñez, *Generational Trauma*

When it comes to virtual art experiences, something is undeniably missing and we can all feel it. Inevitably, there are questions that beg to be asked, dots and patterns we

want to connect that only genuine, real-time conversations with living, breathing artists can begin to satisfy.

My questions and observations around the work of ***Speak Out!*** artists, Elam and Nuñez, dig into the collective mythos of America of which they are so clearly immersed. Returning to the idea of the art oracle, as a mythologist, when I look at the paintings of Elam and Nuñez, together in Pink Noise Projects space, I see an American Arcana of their own design. This visual lexicon they share speaks to the patterns and pantheon of the American Dream that could hit different on any given day to reveal an alternative vision of the truth or the future, for better or worse, depending on the viewer. Like other myths and Tarot traditions, one could say the arcana of ***Speak Out! The Historical Self*** is populated by a charged array of archetypal, historic and everyday figures of light and shadow. Allies and Enemies. Shape-Shifters and Change Agents. Warriors and Wanderers. Oppressors and The Oppressed.



Details: Mikel Elam, *For Sale*, Carlos Nuñez, *Money Hungry*, Mikel Elam, *Minstrel Show*, Carlos Nuñez, *The Profiteer*

From this view, the select paintings of Nuñez and Elam might read like cards from the tarot deck of the American Mythos. Like history, this is a myth still unfolding and boldly emerging to take form before our eyes. Expressed through an art language that is at the same time abstract and figurative, personal and cultural, historical and mythic, the works of ***Speak Out!*** present the viewer with multiple layers to peel back and unpack. And like any language or system of divination, these works have potential for multiple interpretations and constructions of meaning.

For Nuñez, the use of gold in his work is intended to represent very different, even conflicting ideas. Back in his native Ecuador, he recalls that visions of the American Dream would often include images of streets paved with gold. But even Hope as a golden symbol of Nuñez's lexicon does not always glitter. His application of gold in his work stands to symbolize hope as well as greed. Ideas and icons are not simply black or



Carlos Nuñez, *Divide and Conquer*

white, good or bad, right or wrong. As Nuñez recently shared, the “gold-eyed masses” depicted in his paintings were said to be “blinded by hope”. In the works that feature the archetypal Trump figure, (*Divide and Conquer* and *The True Identity Lies in the Teeth*) gold symbolizes “greed and capitalism”. The inverted American flag and KKK hoods and tombstones that serve as “teeth” are recurring symbols repeated in multitudes. These patterns underscore pathologies of distress and

deception, danger and death that

permeate the culture like the virus that now impacts us all.



Mikel Elam, *Made in America*

Mikel Elam’s self-portrait, *Made in America*, shows the artist wearing a cowboy hat, perhaps one of the more iconic symbols of American masculinity, heroism and conquest that still holds cultural resonance today. However, Elam notes that this symbol has often been misinterpreted with a presumed association with whiteness. The lack of representation of black and brown people in roles of leadership and power is a failing of our country’s history and its most celebrated fiction. Elam’s painting acknowledges these stereotypes and the shortsightedness of the collective imaginary. He noted in a recent talk with Daniel Oliva that there are not only black cowboys and ranchers out West, but they are hidden from the American imagination. As the exhibition title suggests, like Nuñez, Elam is speaking out about these matters using color, text and symbol as his

chosen weapons of creative resistance and truth-telling. Beyond Elam’s self-portrait, works like *Slave*, *Invasion* and *Minstrel Show* offer similar artistic spin on issues of race, class, identity and the broken promises of American dreams deferred. Elam is a self-proclaimed visual storyteller, a modern day griot through the voice of visual art. He says

that the act of exploration is what compels him to create. In mythic terms this mode of exploration aligns with the archetypal Seeker and The Quest. Elam's body of work reflects many quest missions that identify places of invisibility, denial and inequality as areas for digging deeper into his artistic practice. Some of the big themes explored, like Freedom and Survival, read more like figurative destinations in his still unfolding journey.



Mikel Elam, *Slave, Invasion, Minstrel Show*

As I write this, American history is days away from being made and it will ultimately set the future trajectory of this nation for years to come. As we face one of the most important Presidential elections of our time, all Americans are at a mythic crossroads, literally holding the destiny of this country in our hands. ***Speak Out! The Historical Self*** symbolically addresses many of the issues and concerns on the minds and hearts of American citizens who have long suffered under systems of white supremacy and structural oppression. The unapologetic art of Carlos Nuñez and Mikel Elam urges us to ask challenging questions of our selves and our leaders. The answers to these questions speak to the character of each individual with their own vote to cast. But even more auspiciously, these same questions reveal a once and future glimpse into the collective fate of America and humanity-at-large. If we do not wake up and open our eyes to the darkness of this world that artists like Nuñez and Elam aim to illuminate, our ignorance and indifference could one day consume us all.



Carlos Nuñez, *Die for the Dow*

About the Author: Li Sumpter, Ph.D. is a scholar and multidisciplinary artist who applies strategies of worldbuilding and mythic design toward building better, more resilient communities of the future. Her academic research explores the anatomy and aesthetics of apocalypse myths focusing on the role of feminine archetypes in End Time and afrofuturist narratives. Li's creative research and collaborative design initiatives engage the art of survival and sustainability through diverse ecologies and patterns of change. Li has been an art and museum educator for over 15 years and has taught curatorial studies, afrofuturism and humanities courses at Moore College of Art and Design, The Barnes Foundation, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and frequently guest lectures at museums, galleries and universities around the country.



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Pink Noise Projects is a collectively-run project space that strives to provide a platform for new work and new ideas.