

Looking for a Hero: Whips, Whims and Wigs, and Gio Ponti is Just an Excuse

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Orange and red tears fall from the eyes of the girl, their shapes morphing into inverted hearts, buttocks, amoeba. If we imagine them as metal (as the title would suggest), their hard surfaces are pocked with intricately circling indentations. Perhaps these tears are diseased, perhaps filled with seed. And yet, despite her steadily flowing tears, many larger than her head, our protagonist seems calm. She may be levitating, her short, pink legs ending in white lace socks and black shoes like those a child might wear to her first communion. Her white dress is frilled, scalloped, gathered, puffed. She might actually be a floating confection. Behind her, a blue rocking horse is also covered in dots and ovals and organismy eyes. We see both of the horse's eyes, too, which sit almost crossed, almost certainly stunned, one larger than the other. And in the background, which crawls immediately and intrusively behind them, foliage and flowers in greens and rusts, pink, teal, and brown, press in. In *Metallic Tears*, there is very little breathing room, we see no sky.

Which is to say: Gerardo Rosales's particularly claustrophobic canvas is at once bright and unnerving. He maneuvers that tension between a smile and its underlying discomfort, between childhood and adulthood, between tears and bumpy liquid drips. This is Rosales's second solo exhibition in his adopted city since moving to Houston in 2000. In 20 years away from Venezuela, he has adapted to the uneasy dailiness of being between places, of being invisible, of not being a Venezuelan kinetic/chromatic/abstract modernist like those Houston happily celebrates (Think of Cruz-Diez or Soto or Otero or Gego or, or, or....). Indeed Rosales's painting style is grounded in the cheerful tourist canvases he began painting as a young artist. Their bright colors, flat surfaces, and intricate details might make a charming recuerdo, a fantasia of Latin America. And that is precisely what Rosales does not allow. Indeed, if the works in *Looking for a Hero* are recuerdos, they are melancholic ones, memories of distance, wet nightmares of a nation's stolen promise. The child cries calmly, but the jungle continues to creep around her.

In two new series of work, Rosales is moving away from painting on canvas, thinking about sculpture and clothing design. With the Early Birds series, he has painted directly on the clothing used by day laborers and domestic staff. His designs riff on Venezuelan modernism, and his titles suggest the quotidian realities of class divisions and immigrant labor: Homesick, Wish I could eat with them, 4:30 a.m. These are uniforms of exploitation, decorated by brightly colored abstractions. He has titled one uniform Gio Ponti is just an excuse, thinking of the Italian architect whose modernist buildings so marked Venezuela's golden age of building. With his mops, from the series Whips, Whims, and Wigs, Rosales has piled artificial hair and cotton into the bundled fibers of mops, making baroque configurations that might be both a material of poverty and a signal of the impending revolution: somehow we hear a whispery let them eat cake and then, as Disney foretold, the mop becomes a figure, a person, a worker, filled with dancing potential, ready to strike. Look how they gather together, and yet how beautiful.

Gerardo Rosales's skies are filled with whimsy. His black and white constellations become magical figures, animals, plants. Eyes peer out of a moony man, his Cosmic Angel, whose furry tendrils spiral from his limbs while three antennae glow from his head. Around him, necklaces of stars meander and morph into animals, snakes curl into one another, an armadillo creeps along the upper corner. There is a sad knowingness to Rosales's figures, a placid weight that we see in their stares, their pursed lips. And yet, there is always magic, always the imaginings of what wonders a night sky might hold in its inky depths. The world might be cruelly uneven, but here we continue dreaming of a hero, touching the mystery in surfaces of the unseen.