

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

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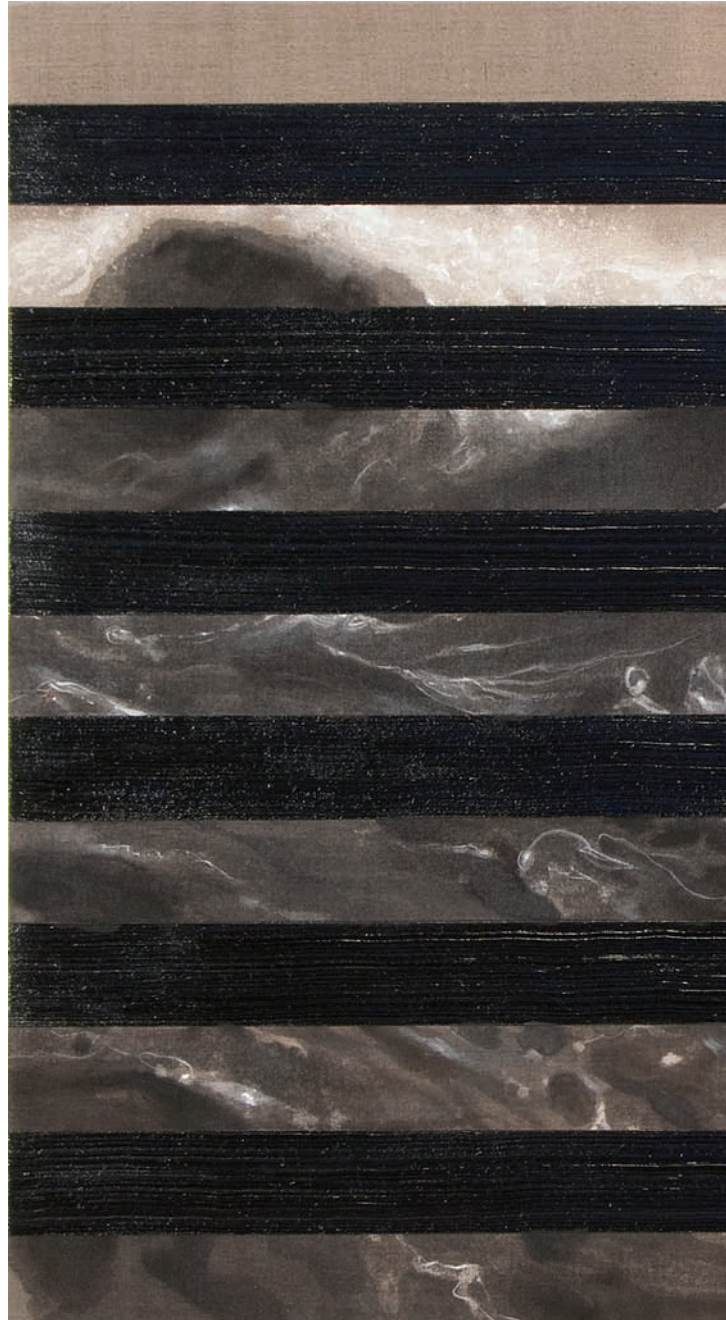
BY MICHAEL DUNCAN

WHILE GLOBALISM PREACHES universal outreach and cross-cultural understanding, some American artists continue to probe national identity, delving inward to explore the darker side of the country's psyche. Several recent exhibitions in Southern California presented works that address distinctly American themes with poetic and surprising references to politics, religion, race relations and pop culture. At the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (SBMA), a solo Tony de los Reyes show of 14 works inspired by *Moby-Dick* and a group show of 11 artists titled "Stranger Than Fiction"—both organized by SBMA curator Julie Joyce as part of an exhibition program called "Reframing America"—made a strong case for the continued relevance of allegorical and narrative art. At Los Angeles galleries Susanne Vielmetter and ACME, respectively, Martin McMurray and Dario Robleto presented new works that likewise examines aspects of the American soul.

Written in 1851 when the imperialist notion of Manifest Destiny was in full swing, Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* has been interpreted as a kind of cautionary tale addressing the illusions of power. For the past five years, midcareer Los Angeles artist Tony de los Reyes has been making paintings and sculptures that reflect on the larger meaning of Ahab's obsessive hunt for the elusive white whale. In paintings on linen or paper, de los Reyes employs large splashes of red bister—a pigment extracted from wood soot that was often used by Old Masters—as explosive expressions, conjuring both blood-spilling and the irrepressible surge of the sea.

Bold and purposeful, the splashes in *Pequod* and *Eclipse* (both 2008) cover and nearly overwhelm painted images of Ahab's ship, serving as a visual analogue for the inexorable spirit of Ahab's quest and throwing into relief the ominous connotations of "heroic" Abstract Expressionist gestures. In several works, de los Reyes splatters bister over large-scale painted re-creations of individual pages of the novel, alluding to Ahab's ultimate defeat by the sea.

D.H. Lawrence once described *Moby-Dick* as representing "the extreme transactions of the isolated, far-driven soul, the soul which is now alone, without any real human contact."¹ De los Reyes's works draw out the social and political ramifica-



SOUL SEARCHING

IN THE U.S.A.

A spate of shows in Southern California reveals artists casting a critical eye toward thorny questions about American identity.



Tony de los Reyes: *1851*, 2009, ink and oil on linen, 33½ by 56½ inches. Collection of Guy and Nora Barron.

tions of Ahab's isolate monomania. In *Chapter 1: Loomings*, *Page 7 (II)*, 2010, the artist reproduces an oddly prescient passage of text, in which Ishmael fantasizes that his stint on the Pequod might be considered part of the "grand programme of Providence" and whimsically lists it among events of national interest: "Grand Contested Election for the Presidency of the United States / WHALING VOYAGE BY ONE ISHMAEL / BLOODY BATTLE IN AFFGHANISTAN." Today Melville's text seems to prophetically link the voyage of the Pequod to two future events: the contested 2000 election and U.S. war in Afghanistan that followed the 9/11 attacks. Above and below this part of the text, de los Reyes flings drippy splashes and sprays of red bister that resemble disjointed Rorschach blots.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Works by Dario Robleto in "An Instinct Toward Life" at the MCA Denver, through May 15.

In *1851* (2009), the stars and stripes of a backward flag appear in thick black paint over a painted image of a rough night sea. As the wall text states, "The flag is partially transparent, as if the viewer is looking through the clear side of a one-way mirror on which the flag image is printed. In this sense, the viewer becomes America (the flag), gazing upon, reflecting, or perhaps even complicit in the turbulence of the



Right, de los Reyes:
Pequod, 2008, red
bister on paper,
91¾ by 75¼ inches.
Collection Gloria and
Steven Johns.

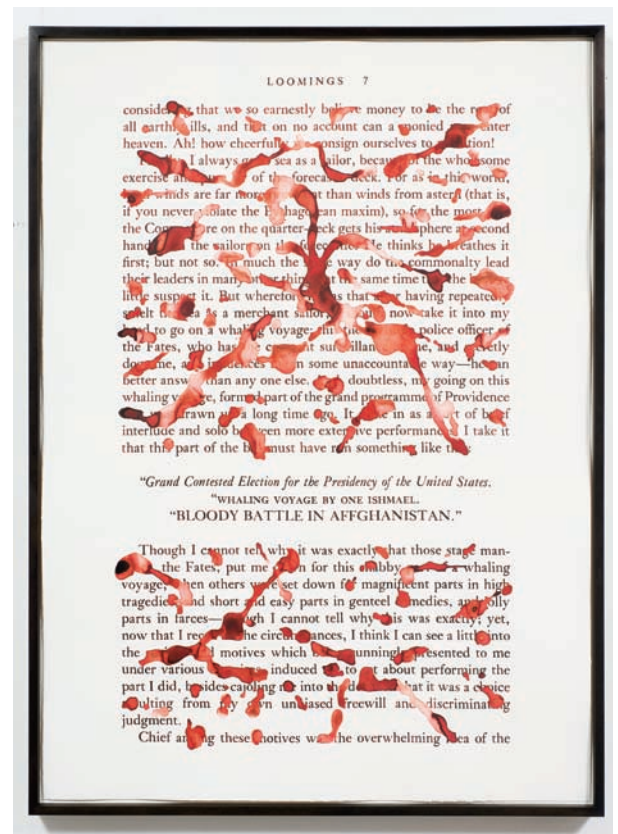
Below, de los Reyes:
Chapter 1: Loomings,
Page 7 (II), 2010,
red bister on paper,
60⅞ by 44½ inches.

waters on the other side." De los Reyes examines the national symbol not with the deconstructive objectivity of, say, Jasper Johns, but with passion fueled by the emblem's darker significance and legacy.

The novel's sense of doom is embodied in *The Prophet* (2009), a 6-by-4-foot black resin sculpture depicting ocean waves, set atop a table with curved wooden legs in the style of classic American furniture. A horrific cast-resin skull with gaping nose- and eyeholes floats partially submerged in the work's expanse of delicately molded dark sea, representing Ahab's fate with shockingly visceral impact.

SHOWING LESS FERVOR and a flair for the fantastical, the artists in the second SBMA exhibition, "Stranger Than Fiction," also employed narrative to address some of the country's problematic aspects and troubling motivations. Two ink on Cel-Vinyl drawings from Erin Cosgrove's multimedia project "What Manner of Person Art Thou?" depict incidents from the history of a supposed 19th-century cult. An eccentric and comical parody of archeological and art-historical speculation, the project includes anachronistic pop-culture references, its own hybrid language and absurdist humor that skewers religious and historical sanctimony. The bloody violence and oddball visions Cosgrove depicts are not far from those recorded in the Book of Mormon, the Koran or the Old Testament.

Similarly broad and cosmologically complex are Eric Beltz's masterfully executed pencil drawings. Beltz has shifted away from his symbolic deconstructions of the Founding Fathers to fig-



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ural depictions that call for a reconnection between contemporary American culture and nature. In *Drunk Jesus Calendar* (2010) a tipsy Christ full of holy “spirit” sprawls in a Santa Inez Valley vineyard, envisioning the bountiful paradisaical fields. *How to Identify Flowering Plant Families* (2010) depicts a prone Vitruvian man who has become one with the thriving plants growing around him.

Although Jeni Spota’s thickly painted images of the dream-visions of Giotto—inspired by Pasolini’s film *Il Decameron* (1971)—seem far from the myths of America, her painting *Flag* (2009) cleverly shifts her enterprise into the political sphere. In her version of the U.S. flag, tiny heraldic shields like those for medieval European cantons take the position of the stars. By equating U.S. states with aristocratic fiefdoms, the work cleverly skewers the hoary arguments for states’ rights being put forth by the current House of Representatives and Fox News.

Two portraits in ink and acrylic by Frohawk Two Feathers (the pseudonym of L.A. artist Umar Rashid) depict characters from his elaborate mock-historical narrative chronicling the 18th-century history of Frengland—a country formed through the imaginary union of England and France—and its vast colonial territories. Executed in an illustrational style vaguely reminiscent of John Graham and Henry Darger, and stained with tea for antique effect, these portraits seem oblique commentaries on the complex history and perplexing race politics of postcolonial nations like Haiti, Algeria and the U.S. With fanciful humor, the drawings grapple with the tangled complicity of locals and colonizers in imperialist regimes.

Several works mine the myth-making aspects of American pop culture. Allison Schulnik presented *Old Hobo* (2009), a sad-sack portrait in chunky oil impasto of Michael Jackson and his chimp Bubbles. Eschewing the icy condescension of Jeff Koons’s treatment of the pop singer and his pet, Schulnik captures the emotionally adrift singer’s abject nature with genuine pathos. Brooklyn artist Dawn Clements was represented with *Adjoining Rooms (Sudden Fear, 1952)*, 2004–06, a vertiginous panorama of the apartment inhabited by a character played by Joan Crawford in the juicily overwrought film *Sudden Fear*. Drawn in multiple perspectives, from slightly shifting points of view, and featuring scribbled fragments of the film’s crazed dialogue, the drawing records a paranoid, insulated vision, akin to that of a terrified person home alone, hearing an intruder with every creak and passing breeze. Clements’s panorama of fear transcends its roots in kitsch Hollywood melodrama, exemplifying the paranoia that seems to be a national pastime, particularly evident in today’s isolationist border-fortifying and anti-immigration legislation.

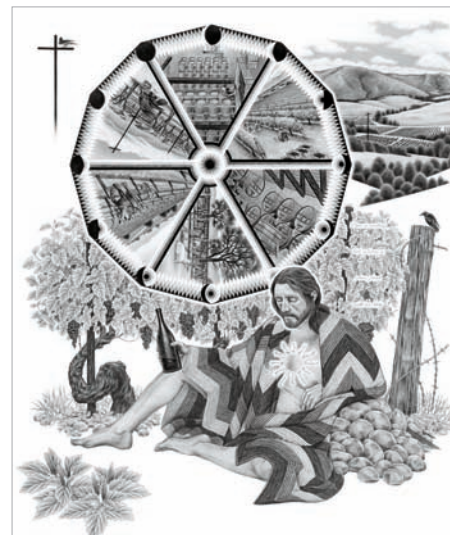


Above, Erin Cosgrove: *Marterz Tree*, 2009, Cel-Vinyl on one-sided film and mixed mediums, 48 by 36 inches. Courtesy Carl Berg Projects, Los Angeles.



Left, Frohawk Two Feathers: *"Tabac Et Banane" Maria, (Now) Empress of Frengland (After the Death of Francis IV) and Her Servant, Gannibal, in the Courtyard of the Royal Palace at Calais, 1870*, 2008, ink, acrylic and tea on paper, 43 by 30 inches. Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

Below, Eric Beltz: *Drunk Jesus Calendar*, 2010, graphite on Bristol paper, 27½ by 23 inches. Santa Barbara Museum of Art.





MARTIN McMURRAY AND DARIO ROBLETTO are both artists who have used the nostalgic qualities of Americana for larger purposes. McMurray's exhibition of new paintings at Susanne Vielmetter showed the San Francisco artist to be freshly engaged with classic American themes. The show provided an oblique critique of imperialism in "V.F.W.," a series of small portraits of haughty uniformed military figures from the Civil War to the present, including one in Arab headdress. An installation of wooden facsimiles of books with back-cover portraits of their pompous U.S. military authors augmented the wry social commentary.

Most potent, however, were selections from a series titled "Protagonists" (2009-10), which depicts rural Americans with midcentury garb and hairstyles, posed in front of a Greyhound station or Trailblazer bus. Ranging from down-and-out farmers to army and navy men, the bus passengers share a compelling, hangdog plaintiveness that evokes the works of Walker Evans. Posing stiffly as if for photographs, these "everyman" subjects are rendered bluntly and slightly larger than life, with oversize heads that stress a kind of human commonality.

Over the past 10 years, Houston-based Robleto has explored the theme of war in sculptures,

installations and collages that have focused particularly on the loss of lives and the suffering of survivors. While the works ostensibly address the divisiveness of the Civil War and the shocking devastation of World War I, the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan serve as an implicit backdrop.

Robleto's recent exhibition at ACME brought his war work to a close with collages alluding to Americana, including mock-commemorative ribbons, handmade flyers for arcane activist groups and parodic album covers for recordings of spirituals and sermons. The showstopper, and one of his strongest pieces to date, is *The Defiant Garden* (2009-10), a nearly 7-foot-tall collage that resembles a wreath and consists of an eclectic mix of materials, including carrier pigeon skeletons, hair flowers braided by war widows, shrapnel and bullet lead excavated from battlefields, snippets of text and hundreds of paper flowers. This epic work was inspired by the practice of soldiers planting flowers and crops on hostile fronts. First cultivated in the trenches of World War I and now planted even in the deserts of Iraq, these patches of vegetation have been dubbed "defiant gardens" by University of Oregon historian Kenneth Helphand, who asserts that they "exemplify the struggle to create something normal in the most abnormal conditions."²

Taking on the collective personas of two Civil War-era groups, the Women's Central Association of Soldiers' Relief and the Ladies' Soldier's Aid Society, Robleto presents a celebratory wreath for a seed drive in support of soldiers on the front line. Framed by white paper rosettes edged with gold, a central panel of text titled "Rise From Your Dream of Melancholy" reads: "When barbed wire is the only vegetation, Defiant Gardens must respond. Unfurl your banners, stake your flags, plant your seeds!"

Along both sides of the wreath are three found period photographs of soldiers or family members framed by rosettes and labeled with poetic descriptions or exhortations. Above a photograph of a soldier and his lover is the statement "Matter and Love are Inseparable"; a photograph of a somber Victorian-era mother is labeled "When the Waiting Has Meaning." While in subject and style the work evokes the Victorian age, there are a few anachronistic references to World War II (including a photo of a 1940s G.I., captioned "Lunge For Life As If It Were Air"), hinting at the continuity of war and advocating the seed drive's ongoing relevance. A cluster of tiny vials holding seeds is tagged "Gardens for the Future Unborn."

The concept of the wartime garden melds seamlessly with Robleto's interests in alchemical and spiritual regeneration. Robleto was a key figure in the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's 2008 group exhibition "The Old Weird America," which surveyed work by contemporary artists dealing with Americana and folk traditions. Those artists and the ones discussed here continue to investigate what it might mean to be American. Given the tragic wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the nation's loss of status in the world's eyes, it seems more crucial than ever for American artists to focus on the home front in hopes of shaping change. ○

Above, Martin McMurray: *Protagonist No. 20*, 2010, acrylic on wood panel, 17 by 11¾ inches. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

Opposite, Dario Robleto: *The Defiant Garden*, 2009-10, mixed mediums, 79½ by 61 by 4½ inches. Courtesy ACME, Los Angeles.

1 D.H. Lawrence, "Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*," *Studies in Classic American Literature*, New York, Viking Press, 1968, p. 147. 2 Kenneth Helphand, *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime*, San Antonio, Trinity University Press, 2006, p. 48.

"Chasing Moby Dick: Selected Works by Tony de los Reyes" and "Stranger Than Fiction" were on view at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Sept. 18, 2010-Jan. 2, 2011. "Martin McMurray: Dystopia: 1010 Years Ago" was exhibited at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Nov. 6-Dec. 11, 2010. "Dario Robleto: Folks on the Fringe" was at ACME, Los Angeles, Oct. 16-Nov. 13, 2010.

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