

Humberto Batista: Recent Assemblages

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Humberto Batista's restless inventiveness and constantly evolving vision pervade his recent assemblages. Like a boxer who is so confident that he goes into the ring with one fist tied behind him, Batista has largely decided to forego saturated colors in this work, although it was color, and the successive layering of translucent colors, that helped make his previous paintings so affecting. But even with those elements reduced to secondary importance, the assemblages are visually powerful—several of them, possessed of elegant, balanced beauty; others, baroque in their complexity of detail. In each one, disparate components of varying provenance are conjoined to create formally harmonious objects that engage the viewer's eye. The warm, dark-stained wood of some of the pieces (such as the one made from a manikin bust) evokes a desire to caress their sensuous, convex curves: They want to be touched. In other cases (e.g., the skeleton with dangling arms and legs), gritty, mottled surfaces tell us to keep our hands to ourselves; and in yet others (e.g., the manikin with mask and helmet), *both* tactile sensations are evoked, leaving the viewer with altogether ambivalent emotions.

If the assemblages engage the eye, they also engage the mind. Since childhood, Batista has used his acute aesthetic and analytic sensibilities to seek out and collect a dizzying array of natural and cultural artifacts and oddities; and now they provide the building blocks for the pieces that make up this exhibition. Antique musical instruments and carpenter tools; mannequins and architectural details; Jesus

Christ figures, deer heads, pistols, and masks—all are grist for Batista's creative imaginings. Batista is a true *bricoleur*—a handyman who concocts remarkable novelties out of the odds and ends that happen to be lying around.

Many of the component elements are interesting in themselves: With the addition of a pair of beady eyes, an armadillo body viewed from the side becomes a human head, complete with a furrowed brow and a monstrously flattened skull; a wooden foot, seemingly of a ballerina *en pointe*, is inverted to give us a face whose eyes have a befuddled expression, the pursed mouth of a central African mask (BaLuba?), and a nimbus of feathers that complete her other-worldly demeanor; and where did the artist find the parts for a piece that matches a man/angel with a woman/cat: How compatible the two disparate creature's bodies seem, encircled by the cat's tail and gazing into each others' eyes. Like two corpulent people who have been married for decades, they seem content with their own and each other's hearty corporality.

That the just-mentioned piece is entitled *The Animal and Death* raises the most intriguing aspect of this work, namely, its allegorical dimension. The pieces are rife with visual allusions to other artistic traditions. The seated wooden figure with circular, owl-like eyes reminds one of some styles of Indonesian carving; the two pieces that use carpenter planes and the armadillo-headed figure all have the dark simplicity of sculpture from eastern Polynesia; and, as mentioned previously, artistic traditions from Africa are sometimes evident as well, as in the nail-covered fetish figure ironically entitled *The Secret of Happiness*.

But in contrast to African figurative sculpture, where heads are usually disproportionately large, Batista gives his figures oddly small heads. Moreover, many display ineffectual hands and arms, appendages that—at most—can only admonish the viewer or that take the form of wings to give passage to another reality. Intellect and agency may be diminished in the figures, but their intuitive, animal selves come to the fore; and this fact directs us toward the most pervasive allusion to other art traditions to be found in the exhibition, namely, to pre-Hispanic and colonial Mexican art. Like some massive stone carvings, the assemblages are columnar and are pieced together. Many works present mutilated humans that fascinate the viewer with their horrific beauty. Jesus Christ is often present, but so is the spirit familiar, the *nagual*, especially in the form of the coyote. Despite their occasional spectral imagery, most of the figures strike me as being people I'd enjoy spending some time with—companions whose wisdom is balanced by a healthy sense of humor, friends with whom I would rarely be bored. (In this, of course, they resemble my comrade, Humberto Batista, himself.) Other pieces, such as the hairy-faced, red-helmeted figure and the deer head in a box, carry such emotional force in their implied narratives that they aggressively confront the viewer: They would be good *but demanding* friends.

The theme of the show, animal and death, concatenates two concepts with which indigenous artists and thinkers, from the Olmec to the present, have struggled and that perhaps were most clearly articulated by the *tlamatinime*, the philosopher-priests of the Mexica/Aztecs: How are we to reconcile the joy of life with the inevitability of death? Like Nezahualcóyotl, Batista seems to conclude:

Finally, my heart understands it:

I hear a song.

I see a flower,

Behold, they will not wither!

The figures in Humberto Batista's assemblages inhabit an uneasy space between the quotidian detritus of Western material culture and the multi-faceted realm of the spirit—which, as a matter of fact, describes quite well how most of us live our own lives. Like the Toltec artists who were so admired by the Aztecs, Batista holds up the smoky mirror before us to reflect us as we truly are.