

NEWS	METRO	ARTS	BUSINESS	SPORTS	OPINION	POLITICS	LIFESTYLE	MAGAZINE	INSIDERS	TODAY'S PAPER	
			BOOKS	MOVIES	MUSIC	TELEVISION	THEATER & ART	SPECIAL SECTION: GARDNER MUSEUM			

ART REVIEW

New England Latino artists share the spotlight in Fitchburg



CHARLES STERNAIMOLO

"Millennium Homer," by Vela Phelan, is showing at the Fitchburg Art Museum.

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT DECEMBER 18, 2014

FITCHBURG — The Fitchburg Art Museum has a lot of aspirations. Director Nick Capasso, who took the job two years ago, has said he'd like to see the museum be known as the venue to see regional art in southern New England. He has also spearheaded a Bilingual Museum Initiative, with English-Spanish signage and active outreach efforts to the area's significant Latino population.

"One Language Is Never Enough: Latino Artists in Southern New England," the museum's current marquee exhibition (and closing soon, on Jan. 4), is a twofer then for an institution working to forge a new identity — and consequently at risk of being too busy and too earnest.

But associate curator Mary M. Tinti has done an agile job corralling a lot of diverse art. "One Language" is a garrulous exhibition, to be sure. There are artists with roots in Central America and South America, folk artists and conceptual artists, artists knee-deep in community-based art, and artists of international stature — 23 artists and artist-teams, in all.

It's thrilling to see painter Silvia López Chavez's grid of individually titled portraits of her neighbors in Chelsea just around the corner from one of Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons's grids of Polaroids. Campos-Pons has exhibited around the world, and did a performance art piece at the Venice Biennale in 2013.

Chavez, trying to raise awareness of the poor air quality in Chelsea, which has a high rate of asthma, painted people holding their breaths. Her palette is tropics-bright and the portraits are comical, but the gist is deadly serious.

Campos-Pons's "The Magician's Tools" features the toys and hand-built science experiments of her young son as the artist shrouds herself to one side — the hidden mother, laying the ground for her child's explorations.

It seems like a crazy leap from one to the other. Campos-Pons has always made deeply felt, metaphoric work in many mediums about her own fractured identity. Chavez is a painter concerned about public health. But the format sets up a kinship and fosters more links: Both are deeply personal, about relationships, and about helping.

"One Language" thrives on such connections. The works of Carlos Santiago Arroyo and Vela Phelan are, in many ways, worlds apart. Tinti places them side by side, and suggests an artistic lineage. Santiago Arroyo, a Puerto Rican folk artist, carves stiff little saintly figures out of wood. Phelan crafts dark, witchy assemblages from pop-inflected found objects.

Yet, is Phelan's "Millennium Homer," with a fierce Homer Simpson in a horned mask framed against a black toy Millennium Falcon spaceship from "Star Wars," all that different from Santiago's "St. John the Baptist/San Juan Bautista," clad in what looks like a bearskin and wielding a scroll? Again, the format connects them — the figurine — but so does a maverick spirit and a spiritual slant. The weird dissonance between St. John and Homer is delicious.

Toys pop up frequently. It's a playful show. Ana Flores's "Cuban Dancing Toys #1-4," featuring carved figurines shimmying on turntables and rooted in folk art, has a telling back story about her Cuban family finding freedom dancing in their Havana living room. Julia Csekö's soft sculpture "Middle Gray" a root system in plush gray, hangs in a triangular shape on the wall. She puts doll clothes on its junctures, giving it a snaking humanity. The whole thing is a family tree.

The fantasy atmosphere extends into adult themes in hard-hitting large-scale drawings by Raúl Gonzalez III and Elaine Bay, a husband-and-wife team originally from El Paso. Their work addresses inhumanity along the US/Mexican border.

These are the most electric pieces in an already bright show, and they have a dangerous charge, partly drawn from their subversive political content and partly from their graphic, comic-book style — in all, a kind of pulp Goya.

In "La Malinche, Sin Querer," a uniformed man embraces a naked woman in the desert; his penis is a comically big, thorny cactus. It describes an ugly power relationship between the border patrol and illegal immigrants. "El Migra as Heroic Virtue Overcoming Discord" depicts a brawny thug in a similar uniform — who, despite his muscles, is white-haired and aging — stomping and beating a woman whose face is a gaping, skeletal mask.

Themes of social justice, spirituality and religion, environmentalism, and cultural identity all course through "One Language." Works of simple beauty, such as Abelardo Morell's gorgeous suite of cliché-verre prints, read like reflective pauses amid all the conversations. Cliché-verre is a photographer's version of a monoprint; Morell applies ink to glass plates, then exposes the plates to film, and prints. "Asia: Cliché Verre With Ink Transferred to 8" x 10" Film," offers up a dark, sparkly continent, more celestial than terrestrial, surrounded by shadow-clotted silver.

Carlos Hernández Chávez, set up a bulky printing-press type operation in the Carite rain forest in Puerto Rico, where he painted giant ferns and leaves and pressed them onto a canvas. "Palms on Fuchsia and Orange," gaudy yet graceful, glows like sun rays. The pulse of that sunny palette runs through this show, and makes the Fitchburg Art Museum a warm place to be on a wintry day.

Cate McQuaid can be reached at catemcquaid@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter @cmcq.



Top 10 Trending Articles

Most Viewed | Most Commented | Most Shared

Celtics didn't get enough in Rajon Rondo trade

Meet Amazon's No. 1 reviewer

Why Market Basket employees are our 2014 Bostonians of the Year

Boy, 5, found dead in N.Y. wasn't abducted, police say

Stephen Colbert says goodbye to 'The Colbert Report'

Rajon Rondo not as valuable as we were led to believe

Do Red Sox really need to get an ace pitcher?

Authorities warn people to be careful of imposter ride-sharing drivers

Celtics agree to trade Rajon Rondo to Mavericks



COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS AND CARROLL AND SONS, BOSTON, MA

"El Migra as Heroic Virtue Overcoming Discord," by Raul Gonzalez and Elaine Bay.



ONE LANGUAGE IS NEVER ENOUGH: Latino Artists in Southern New England

Fitchburg Art Museum, 25 Merriam Parkway, Fitchburg 978-345-4207.

<http://www.fitchburgartmuseum.org>



OS HERNANDEZ CHVEZ

"Palms on Fuchsia and Orange," by Carlos Hernández Chávez.



CARROLL AND SONS, BOSTON

Abelardo Morell's "Asia: Cliché Verre With Ink Transferred to 8" x 10" Film."