

THIS TOO SHALL PISS

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by

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## INTRODUCTION

From soccer balls and ancient mythology to the dirt and debris of everyday life, my work is a visual depiction of history. History is the connective tissue between an individual and larger entities of power such as a nation, religion, or era. To speak on history, my work is personally, and politically from the viewpoint of an immigrant's eye. This perspective highlights the violence exacted in who is creating history and why. For example, a despot like Hugo Chavez denying his failures as American CIA interference.

Politically, hegemonic history is rewritten to galvanize people towards ends. Born in 1994 in Caracas, Venezuela I lived in Latin America's first democracy (1958) and best economy (GDP per capita). By the time my family was forced to leave for the US in 2007, democracy had been destroyed by greedy politicians. Since then, the economy has collapsed from hyper-inflation and corruption; an overwhelming amount of Venezuelans suffer from poverty. The Venezuelans with means are now refugees. My interest in personal interactions with history stems from my life being consumed by a national tragedy and living its consequences.

Using my journey as a jumping off point, my work seeks to investigate the emotional and philosophical relationship between recorded history and lived experience. I use self-portraiture to expand my personal narrative, situating myself in an ongoing, collective history of struggle that reflects the human condition. How the self fits into a larger whole is continuously investigated by inserting myself as the figures populating these historical settings. My work is the figurative finger of Doubting Thomas used to prod at wounds, heroes, and persistent myths.

## FORMAL STRATEGIES

Like an immigrant's abstract experience between memory/time, place/space and self/identity, an oscillation of experiences and materials is a key aspect of my work. This is depicted in literal ways, such as my wood panel supports being collaged together. This creates a distance in time and space that can be visualized formally, as the split depicts different surface histories colliding. The panels are painted separately with their own palettes and textures which frustrates how they hold a shared image cohesively. The disturbance of the image comes from the distinctive textures causing the viewer to sometimes have a tactile, sensory experience instead of simply reading the image.

My painting surfaces borrow from the everyday. They are painted on full sheets of industrial Masonite with house paints, gravel, soil, and crayons. These materials are used to build up a rust patina for several reasons. First, it frustrates the act of depiction, making the images at moments illegible which adds uncertainty to a single narrative being presented. The patina, like weather, builds up a surface history which is at times austere and independent of the image. The surface is falling apart physically and coming back together as an image. The paintings are both engaged with images of the past and simulations of history in the laborious struggle involved in their material creation. This evokes a tension between past and present, between what's depicted and how it's made.

The paintings are a struggle to create. The materials, brushwork and layering are a physically arduous process that can involve chisels, scraping and cutting. Their difficulty coming into being is intended to reflect the act of making history. There is an existential quality to this process that speaks to an uncertainty over the past in an epistemological sense. The

material is trying to get at the experience of history through grit and dirt. The act of painting is a struggle, just as the violence the paintings depict causes real world physical consequences.

The paintings featured in this show investigate where violence originates as well as the myths that use violence as a solution. My research draws from a Western history of storytelling, for example, within medieval Catholic iconography or Spanish Colonial imagery and investigates throughlines to a contemporary experience of imprinted cruelty. The research is very involved in stories that hold violence as a secondary character, for example, the flood in Noah and the Arc which culls the population of the world.

### PAINTING ANALYSES

The origin of tropes regarding violence and the origin of childlike fascination with destruction are areas of interest. A good example would be my painting *St. George Vanquishing his Dragons* (Image 1). The Painting is compositionally modeled after *St. George and the Dragon* (Image 2) painted by Bernat Martorell, painted c. 1434 – c. 1435. The narrative is of a man-eating dragon who had a racketeering scheme with a local village for human meat. To appease the dragon's appetite the townsfolk supplied human sacrifices through a lottery system. In the traditional telling of the story, these casualties were accepted by the village until the princess was chosen to be eaten. The king was distraught and sought help from Saint George who valiantly slayed the beast.

My painting is centered on St. George riding his buddy's shoulders in the foreground. St. George is wielding a spear that has impaled an ant of monstrously large proportions. The spear extends from one corner of the painting to its opposite, but not in a straight line. Its axis is formally identical to the spear's trajectory in the original painting. The weapon resembles a



pointing arrow, but its course flies in an arc, like history. In relation to the playful demeanor of a game of chicken-and the colorful storybook composition and palette, the arrow points to a meandering future. Many ants remain scattered around St. George and we can see a smaller version of the composition repeating itself in the distance. A continuous cycle is suggested, St. George will exterminate ants forever.

The ants are stand-ins for the casualties of violence in historic events. There are so many ants to exterminate in the painting. In dogmatic terms, many evils to purge. What is depicted is the tyrannical flood a child tends to indulge in - poolside near an anthill or with a magnifying glass and the sun. Ants can be faceless and countless casualties, indicative of the numerous agents of labor in a hierarchical system.

*St. George Vanquishing his Dragons* (Image 1) intends to challenge the violent Dogma that is inherent in a myth about dragons. Mystical creatures that manifest our fear of the unknown. Instead of the unknown being great and threatening it is vulnerable and minute: an ant. The dragon is representative of xenophobic fear of a flood of immigrants coming to invade. The ant is a helpless individual in need of community and aid.

The formal logic of the painting is scattered in its approach to depiction. The painting uses jarring oversaturated colors to step in two worlds, one is a Candyland utopia of fantasy, the other is a feverish nightmare. Perspective is following an archaic medieval logic with trees depicted at the same size despite where they are in the picture plane. A brick pathway recedes loosely towards the background where a childlike structure resembling a sandcastle sits. The painting is a depiction of the juvenile taken seriously, of a thoughtless absurdism in the legacy of this narrative.

The lineage of the stories we share is a theme this body of work investigates, this is explored in my painting, *Perseus Gets His Sword Wet* (Image 3). Perseus is archetypically seen as a precursor of the story of St. George<sup>1</sup>. His slaying of a Sea Monster to save Andromeda is the same story arc, down to the inclusion of the noble white horse, Pegasus. In *Perseus Gets His Sword Wet* the moment Perseus beheads Medusa is depicted. In the myth Pegasus could only be born when Medusa was dead. In the painting we witness the winged horse released out of her decapitated body along with some blooming flowers. Perseus becomes the horse rider and gains flight and so access to Olympus (Heaven). This ascendancy is juxtaposed with Icarus, burning up as a zoom-in crop of the sun in the top right corner of the painting. Icarus touched heaven as well, yet his ascent was non-violent and resourceful so instead the narrative is about arrogance. To reach great heights, the aspirant must spill blood.

The painting relies on cartooning as a strategy to remove the visceral impact of a violent moment. Perseus famously beheaded Medusa through a reflection on his shield. Here instead we see a small contemporary make-up mirror whose reflection holds a green figure with an X over their head. Instead of depicting the scene realistically and encouraging an empathetic response, the violence is emotionally distanced/playful. This softening of depiction speaks to a cultural inoculation towards brutality.

In *Perseus Gets His Sword Wet* there is a head floating to the left of Perseus. This form is an ephemeral rendition, depicted as a plastic bag, of the beheaded Goliath as illustrated by Caravaggio. The portrait is summoned as a lingering phantom of art history, and the temporal

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<sup>1</sup> Bazant, Jan. (2015). St. George at Prague Castle and Perseus: an Impossible Encounter?. *Studia Hercynia*. 19. 189-201.

plastic material is modernity's refuse. This is a recurring motif that speaks to a timelessness in our shared cultural baggage regarding violence as normalized waste.

Fabled vanquished foes whose deaths are celebrated (Goliath, Nemean Lion, Dragons) are depicted with vulnerability as the casualties of narratives that de-humanize. The overlooking of their life's dignity is like the wanton violence an autocrat will exert on their opposition. The crushing of ants, the ousting of enemies. The torment these cultural narratives allow the losers to be subjected to manifests in political realities of persecution and polarization.

In my painting *King David v. Goliath* (Image 4), the character of Goliath is explored further. We see Goliath towering over a reclined and unbothered David. In this suspended moment of tension, a viewer may be left anticipating Goliath's enormous might being blown away by a gun. The gun is blasting off in the center of the composition, the explosion covering Goliath's genitals. The explosion is a facetious sexual double entendre, about the heightened allure violence provides our folklore. The pathos of David's underdog status is not present as in the original biblical tale and instead, all we have is the decisive act to end a life. Excusing violence is done away with and all we have is the primitive club being taken out by the revolver. Progress in means not in ideology.

In my Painting *Hercules Finds the Nemean Lion* (image 5) I show Hercules smash a miniscule lion with the proportions of a stuffed animal. The carnage is direct, and Hercules holds what could be a perverse expression of curiosity. As part of his series of trials the lion exists for Hercules to defeat in his apotheosis to become a hero. The hero's ascent through violence is not depicted as toil but instead as one of perversion, through the acquisition of requisite pain. This Hercules must take from the lion despite its helplessness, and Hercules enjoys it.

The work is painted on a scale of a history painting. The figure depicted is much larger than life and the support can barely contain Hercules in its frame. The scale is meant to refer to history painting and its traditions of pushing a national or political agenda through depicting acts of valor. The size and content are meant to be reminiscent to a painting such as *Washington Crossing the Delaware* (Image 6) by Emanuel Leutze. Instead of the heroes' journey being noble and righteous the viewer is intended to be left to ask questions about the stories we consume.

### CONCLUSION

The stories Western culture has been sharing for centuries inform how its political bodies treat people. My paintings seek to scrutinize popular narratives and denounce their problematic elements. Witnessing this culture as a newcomer, I see throughlines in the content we share and the experiences immigrants face. For example, the vile nationalism that sprouts from repurposed stories of heroism Hugo Chavez famously declared himself a descendant of Simon Bolivar by blood and spirit. Heroes can never rest. Stories exist in the actions they produce. Goliath is real every time we vanquish a foe.



Figure 1

Mike A. De La Rosa, *Saint George Vanquishing His Demons*, 2023, acrylic, oil, crayon, dirt and pastel on Masonite, 48 x 72 inches



Figure 2

Bernat Martorell, *Saint George Killing the Dragon*, 1434, Tempera on Panel, 61 1/4 x 38 5/8 inches



Figure 3

Mike A. De La Rosa, *Perseus Gets His Sword Wet*, 2023, acrylic, oil, crayon, dirt and pastel on  
Masonite, 8 x 6 feet

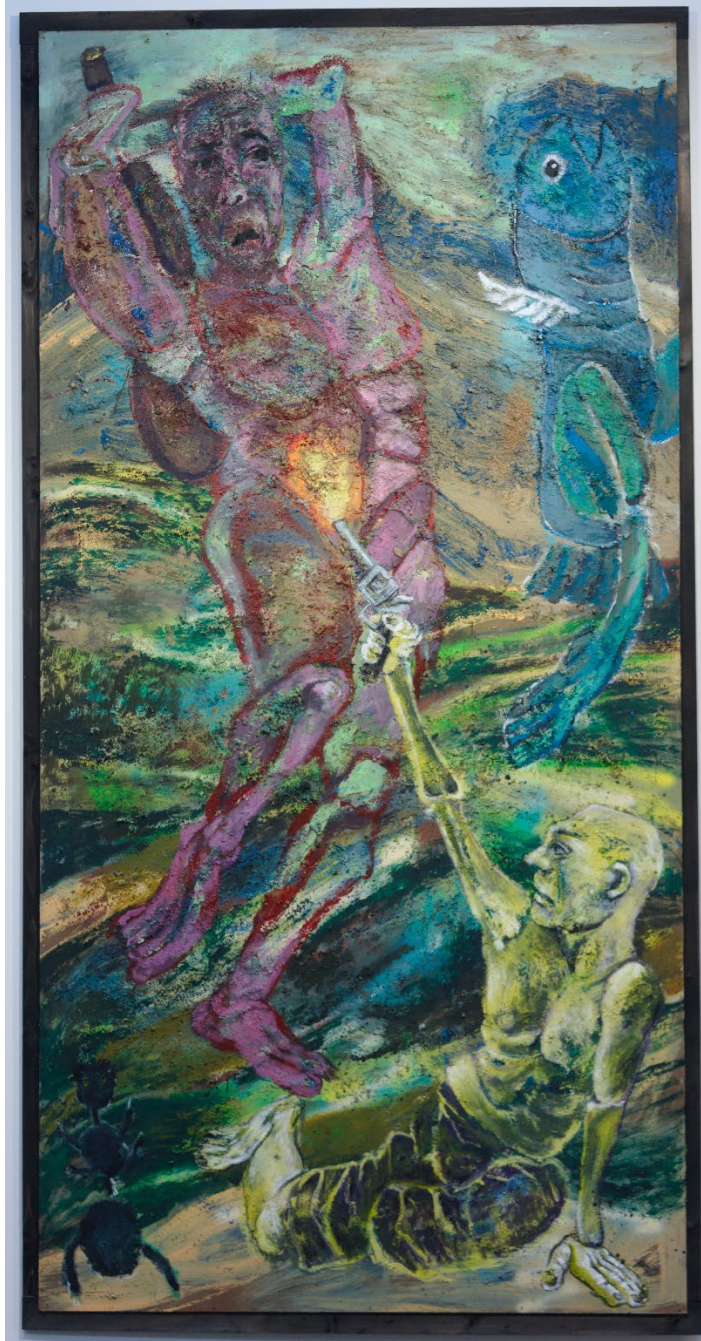


Figure 4

Mike A. De La Rosa, *King David v Goliath*, 2023, acrylic, oil, crayon, dirt and pastel on  
Masonite, 4 x 8 feet





Figure 5

Emanuel Leutze, *George Washington's crossing of the Delaware*, 1851, oil on canvas.

Metropolitan Museum Of Art



Figure 6

Mike A. De La Rosa, *Hercules Finds the Nemean Lion*, 2023, acrylic, oil, crayon, dirt and pastel  
on Masonite, 8 x 6 feet

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