

Review of (Queer) Cultural Bounty

Cultural Bounty feels visually chaotic as it presents a diversity of media, subjects, and themes in the 48 artworks trying to speak over each other to the audience. The exhibition is constructed from the UTSA Art Collection and the Arturo Infante Almeida UTSA Art Collection Endowment of artworks donated by Alan Craig Bekstead, Danny Lerma, and Stephen Alexander Annala. The selected pieces are meant to celebrate the generosity of the donors and UTSA's commitment to cultural diversity, which fellow Viva Arte writer Chris Karr explores through landscapes in his Glasstire essay. The works that call out to me investigate sexuality, gender roles, and gender performance.

When I walk through the exhibition in an orderly fashion, my foot prints would have created an outline of the wall. I'm quick to identify the visual cues of queer culture that are subtly scattered throughout the space. It is undeniable in the photographs of Gooch's drag performers. The blurring of gender performance is encapsulated in Gooch's *Sister Flore Goodthyme: Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence*, where the subject is bedazzled in sparkling jewels, wearing a bright red corset that pushes together the hairy chest of the sitter. Hanging on the opposite wall in subtle conversation with this work is Jamie Vasta's *Giuditta e Oloferne, 1599*. It's a colorful oil painting sparkling with glitter that recreates a common Baroque and Renaissance scene of Judith slaying Holofernes. It is popularized today due to the recent feminist scholarship on Artemisia Gentilisci. The use of materials considered kitsch-y/campy applied to the contemporary depiction of the biblical scene explores the idea of power dynamics and violence within relationships. Standing between these artworks, a viewer is forced to consider their role in the glamorization and obsession with gender roles and performance.



Photograph of Jamie's Vasta's Giuditta e Oloferne, 1599, in Cultural Bounty at the Russell Hill Rogers Galleries. Reproduced with permission from the artist.

Andy Warhol's *Witch - from Myths (FS 11.261)* (1981) is a screenprint utilizing a still from the 1939 movie *The Wizard of Oz*. With the black hat, head tilted back and maniacal laughter, and green skin, there is no denying this is Margaret Hamilton's performance as the Wicked Witch of the West. When Warhol made this, he was exploring the themes of popular figures - in this case the representation of this character embodying fear and villainy. 85 years since the movie and 40 since Warhol's work, I can't help but admire how the character and her image have transformed. The

highly accoladed musical, *Wicked*, has redefined Elphaba into the misunderstood hero and a queer icon. I don't see Warhol's original vision of a feared villainess - I see Elphaba and hear Idina Menzel singing *Defying Gravity*. There is a nostalgia for my theater kid days.

Robert Mapplethorpe's portrait of Ken Moody is placed in the east gallery room. Known for his controversial BDSM series, this particular work focuses on his fetish of Black men. This is easily overlooked though as the work is displayed beside two other portraits of Black men: Dan Simoneau's watercolor *Prince* and Sher Fain's untitled monotype. Hanging across from the portraits is Christopher Olsen's cityscape, *Alley, Cape Town Flats, South Africa* (2002), of children playing in an alley as a woman walks towards a parked car, carrying a basket on her head. Mapplethorpe's exploration of sexuality is muted as it's situated in an exploration of race. It would be remiss of me to not challenge viewers to consider how sexuality and race affect power dynamics, similar to Vasta's work.



Chuck Ramirez, Quarantine Series: Yellow Roses, 2000, Pigment inkjet print, 46 x 34 in, 116.8 x 86.4 cm, Edition of 6. Courtesy Ruiz-Healy Art, New York | San Antonio

And of course, there is San Antonio-native artist, Chuck Ramirez. His photograph of yellow roses doesn't visually present a queer reading. Ramirez was a gay man diagnosed as HIV positive in 1999; the diagnosis is a constant reminder that life isn't permanent. *Quarantine Series, Yellow Roses* (2000) recalls the concerns of Dutch Baroque still lifes as a memento mori through a queer perspective. The photo is part of a larger series where Ramirez photographed floral arrangements he found in empty hospital rooms when he visited his grandmother during her final months. The yellow roses aren't at their prime as they begin to droop, but they also still hold on to life with the vibrant, yellow color - a metaphor of life with HIV.

Returning to the middle of the gallery space, I took a moment to listen again. Out of the 48 works in this space that represent various identities and backgrounds, it's the works that explore queer culture that speak to me the loudest. Whose voices do others hear? I also start to worry about what voices are missing.