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Ocultismo y barro

By Barbara Calderón



Installation view: *Ocultismo y barro*, Miriam Gallery, Brooklyn, 2022. Courtesy Miriam Gallery.

At *Ocultismo y barro* (“Occultism and Clay”) at Miriam gallery in Brooklyn, it’s not the vague notions of the supernatural or spiritual that

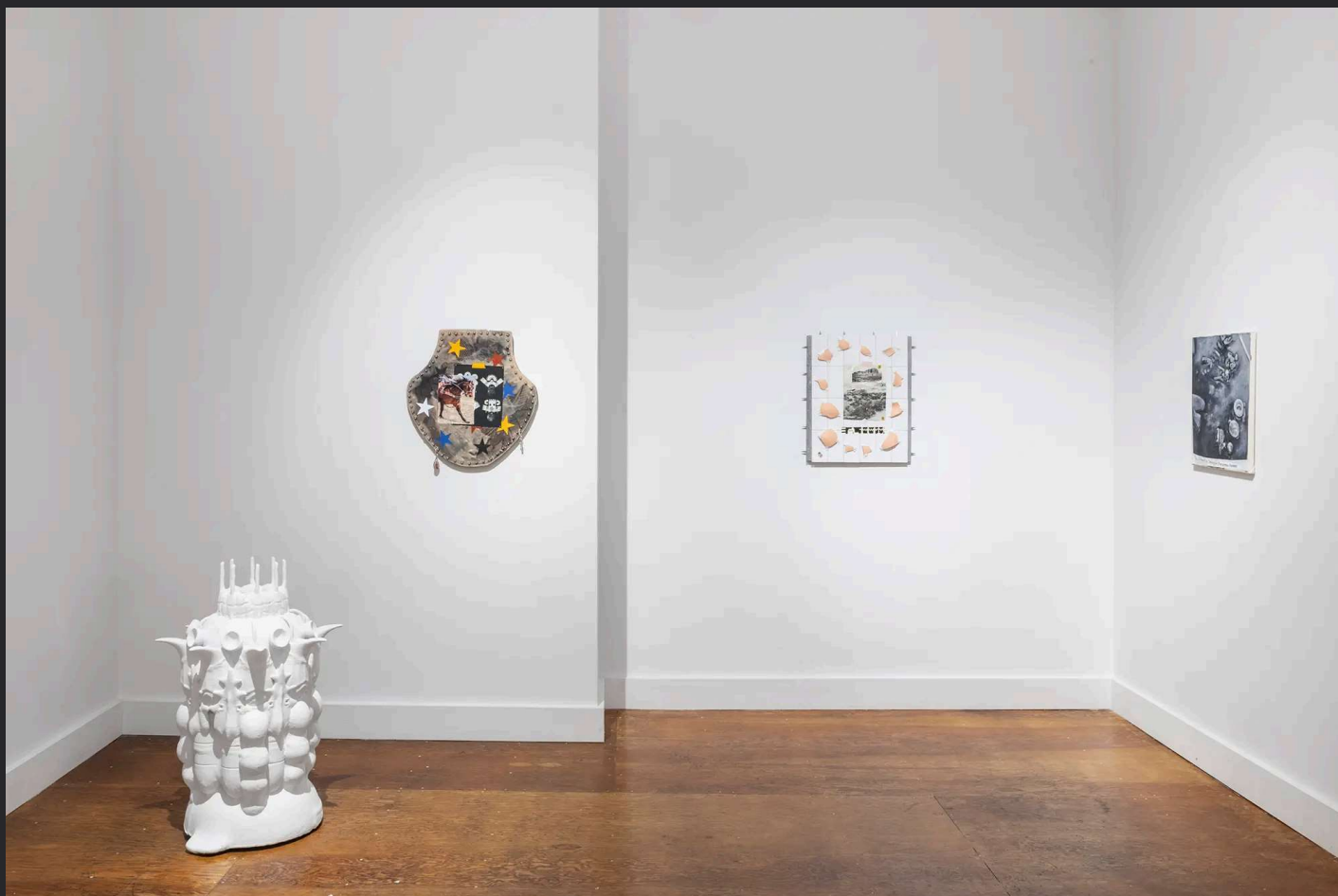
ON VIEW
Miriam Gallery
February 4 –

April 3, 2022
Brooklyn

connect the eight Latine artists on view, it's their self-aware and sometimes critical allusions to ancient pre-Columbian ceramic objects. While the curatorial duo ACOMPI proposes they've gathered "artworks made with or about clay that embody the medium's mystical qualities," there are more esoteric objects in the boutiques selling crystals and tarot cards that dot the surrounding Williamsburg streets than in the exhibition.

The labeling of objects as "occult" or having to do with magic has been a tool of exotifying and othering Indigenous worldviews since colonization. Given the artists' use of innovative techniques and experimental aesthetics that deconstruct tired, nostalgic tropes that plague shows with all "Latine" rosters, the characterization of these works as occult-related is sensational and only obscures their context and meaning. If anything, the work dissolves concrete generalizations about identity, place, and taste.

Karla Ekatherine Canseco's standout piece, *naricita llévame, cuídame, quiéreme. perra que guerrea* (2022), is a ceramic Xoloitzcuintli dog gnashing its teeth attached to a spiked ball and chain. Her punk approach to ceramic is noted in the object's partially raw, severe surface haphazardly applied with black and silver glaze. One could read it as a version of a "sacred" Mesoamerican Colima dog statue, but rather than fantastical or otherworldly, her objects are rooted in an urban, material world. The Los Angeles-based artist brings the paint marker love tags and popular airbrush aesthetics to her amphora-esque vessel *me quiero, te quiero malcriada*, 2021 aligning herself with a trend in ceramics that opposes the polished finishes of conventional high craft ceramic taste.



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While earlier generations of Chicano artists (and the Mexican modernists) used pre-Columbian motifs in a reclamation of history and to assert a sense of belonging, the inclusion of pre-Columbian elements here is less about claims to ancestry and more of a ponderance into how cultural aesthetics intersect. The Mexican-American artist Daniel Barragán from El Paso, Texas, uses the poetic metaphor of the vessel to hold seemingly contradictory cultural symbols. His traditional-looking ceramic water jugs are emblazoned with heavy metal band logos like KISS, ZZ Top and Metallica along with Puebloan designs. Even in flat wall works like *Ancient Attachment* (2022) he combines images of an Aztec deity with those of the crucifixion on a vessel-shaped board dangling with beadwork and bordered with silver spiked studs. Though one may anticipate a clash of worlds, the Catholic, Aztec, Native American, and pop cultural iconography intermingle effortlessly in Barragán's forms.

Colombian-born artist Andrés Monzón-Aguirre may also be teasing out these confluences of origin or interconnection with his series of "Veiled Alcarrazas." The alcarraza is a double-spouted vessel used to cool water found in the Calima region of ancient Colombia but whose name is Arabic in origin, coming from the Spanish-Moresco term Al-

Karazah. Monzón-Aguirre covers his curvaceous earthenware vessels in sensuous materials like velour, iridescent pleather, and beadings in his own queering of the form. One wonders if the fabric is meant to conceal, ornament or both?

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In a more literal approach that almost feels satirical, the artist Rodrigo Angel Jimenez-Ortega paints a parallel within ancient and modern ritual in the diptych *Sacrifice/Piñata 1*, (2020). A depiction of human sacrifice rendered in the style of the Aztec codices is positioned above a brown man hitting a Pokémon piñata. Is beating a piñata to pieces the modern-day human sacrifice? I don't think so. In their genuine grappling with how ancient non-western traditions have shaped modern day practice, the artist creates a bit of a false binary. Yet the work poses a central and pivotal question of this show: How does a Latino/a/x/e artist negotiate or maintain the tenuous connections to ancient worldviews and why do they continue to do so? Maybe the claim to indigeneity or an ancient relation to Aztecs, Incas, or Mayans is gone for many, but the influence of culture, language, tradition, and most importantly, aesthetics, is not.



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Rejecting clay altogether, artists Adrian Edgard Rivera and André Magaña use trompe l’oeil digital fabrication processes like 3D printing that present as ceramic. Similarly to Barragán and Jimenez-Ortega, Rivera humorously uses pop cultural and pre-Columbian juxtapositions with his piece *Hecho en Mexico (Goku-Ehecatl)* (2021): a *Dragon Ball Z* figure next to the Aztec deity Ehécatl-Quetzalcoatl, figurines reminiscent of tchotchkes in Latin American markets that cater to tourists. With his title “Made in Mexico,” Rivera gives them a sarcastic stamp of authenticity.

Drawing attention to the contentious ownership of ancient art objects and how we access knowledge about them, Tamen Pérez paints the smirking monkeys of Costa Rican vessels directly from their museum accession catalogs, sometimes even including their captions. Replicating the form of their documentation, her paintings show jars perched on white pedestals or framed in the sterile gray backgrounds of their textbook photographs.

The show is rich in critiques about accepted epistemologies, dilutions of the idea of authenticity, questions about the location of truth in form, taste, and the layered nature of identity. Yet, I found no

connection to the occult beyond the abstract works by Argentinean artist Dolores Furtado, whose titles reference esoteric concepts like portals and worship.

Though their curatorial lens was problematic and erroneous, ACOMPI did succeed in gathering Latine artists posing a range of critical questions about how ancient aesthetics continue to figure into an art historical narrative. Branding an all-Latine show with a title that insinuates the work has supernatural antecedents only mimics the colonial idea that cultures of the ancient Americas were primitive or “unaffected by objective reasoning.” There is a curatorial responsibility to move beyond essentializing frameworks and to consider audience reception and gaze when a show involves artists all characterized under an umbrella term unfamiliar to most. Magic is a sexy way to solicit attention, but Latine artists shouldn’t have to be associated with otherworldly, cosmic forces to be relevant.

Barbara Calderón is a writer, artist, and a founding member of the arts collective Colectiva Cósmica based in New York City. Her work is supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation Art Writers Grant.

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