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Reliving Post Impressionism

Venezuelan-born painter Richard Merchán surrounds himself with fabrics, flowers and shapely models reminiscent of the French Post-Impressionist artists of the 20th century | BY KIRK DONNAN

The sensuous, wide strokes. The vibrant—and at times vibrating—colors. The full-figured models, moodily at rest on divans. All suggest a practitioner of Fauvism reincarnate, of French Post-Impressionism reawakened. Richard Merchán is a contemporary intersection between classical expressionism and high-tech impressionism, painting with the same minimalist effect of his famous artistic forefathers, yet also with an understated optimism that glows just beneath the surface of his work.

“I feel as if I’ve continued where 20th century Post-Impressionist painters left off,” says Merchán, sitting on the floor of his sun-filled San Francisco Bay Area studio. “Sometimes I feel like an artist from another era, transplanted to modern times ... and am now injecting historical voices with a ‘relative optimism’ of the day.”

Essentially practicing his own form of expressionism now, Merchán began his career strongly influenced by impressionism—a genre that seeks to duplicate an impression of reality. “And then I began to express myself in ways that mixed up art school disciplines, or ignored them altogether. If I wanted to paint a blue horse with a distorted perspective simply because that’s how I felt in a given moment, I would do that,” said Merchán. “If I was sad, I would use sad colors. It’s funny ... today, impressionism shows itself in traces. But when it happens, I know that it’s my academia imposing just a bit of needed structure to my painting.”

“Upon viewing a Merchán—whether an intimate line drawing or a monumental canvas, the impression is clear: this is an artist in perfect command of the medium.” RIC MICHEL, RIC MICHEL FINE ART, NEW YORK

Kept in perspective, Merchán realizes his impressionist moments are actually a vital part of his work. “The French impressionists ushered in a time of change,” reflects Merchán. “The coronations, the crownings of Napoleon and the pope transformed the times with a sense of pageantry. Artists began to capture the era in a very different way: by painting still lives of women. Women ironing shirts. Women reclining in painterly poses. Or peasants cultivating the fields. This dramatic shift in subject matter surprised the art world, and marked the beginning of the modern era. Then the Postmodernists pushed it even further.”

The notion of everyday women captured in celebratory renderings is, today, a major component of Merchán’s artistic expression. One of his favorite subjects is beautiful, ample, curvaceous women. “I’ve always loved the shapes inherent in full-figured women,” says Merchán. “The curves, the shadows, the textures—it’s all there for a painter to create gorgeous landscapes.” Ric Michel handles Merchán’s work in New York and attributes sales of his figurative paintings to great technical prowess. “Merchan does not merely capture the human form, he liberates it from the constraints of representational art and imbues it with a soul and spirit very much his own.”

In order to fully understand the nuances of each subject’s persona Merchán insists on creating special, singular relationships with his models. An immediate artist-model bond is formed as a painting begins, and evolves over the time span to complete the art. This relationship is the undercurrent of energy for Merchán’s work.

“I like to work with models who take me back to an era when women were less uptight about their weight or their age,” admits Merchán. “I also want to know my model in the same familiar way that Matisse, Degas, and

Renoir did—as neighbor, as maid, as friend. As a whole person, not just as a figurine.”

The connection with his subjects is at the heart of what makes Merchán’s work unique, as if the essence of that human connection is what permeates up through the layers of paint, the coats of sealant, and rests just atop the finished pieces. Nearly tangible. Almost able to be touched. And yet as elusive a presence as it is familiar. This idea of relationship doesn’t stop with

Merchán’s live models. “If I’m painting a chair, I establish a relationship with that chair. If I’m painting a swimming pool, I establish a relationship with the pool. However one-sided our verbal conversations might be,” Merchán laughs.

Along with the serendipitous relationship that Merchán creates with his subjects, there’s another relationship at deliberate work in his paintings: the very intended relationship between the piece



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the study In the studio, Merchán creates loose drawings of his models that become the foundation to his canvases.



henri’s house Oil on canvas, was acquired days before exhibit opening.

and the person who will eventually own it. Even a cursory glance at a Merchán painting will have your eye filling in the blanks, projecting onto the canvas what the artist has left out. Merchán intentionally forgets important components of every painting—so that his viewers can then fill in the missing pieces according to their interpretations. “In a way, this is how I communicate my relationship to my subjects. By allowing the buyers of my paintings to establish their own relationships with the pieces. Visually, time and time again, the viewer fills in what’s supposedly missing.”

Highly cinematic in tone, Merchán’s sequential studies range from marathon swimmers in competition to couples locked in embrace. And while his subject matter is constantly in flux, Merchán’s style is almost always consistent, yet not predictable. He compares tackling the scope of a sequential study to the process a screenwriter might pursue. “Sketching the model is where the plot begins. The story is then written when the sketch materializes itself to the canvas. With the final piece, the viewer completes the narrative, adding in their own plotlines and twists. And each painting is a story within itself, as well as a chapter from both the study and the infinite narrative that is our lives.” Life began for Merchán 53 years ago in

La Concepción, Venezuela. The youngest of five siblings and son of the small town’s doctor, his upbringing was colored with more traditional European values. At the time, artistic education in Latin America was neither nurtured nor taught. The prevailing attitude was that Picasso was an “episode” in life that had already passed. Despite this, Merchán began drawing as a young boy, and at 14 he migrated to Miami.

Following high school and college in Florida, Merchán was accepted into the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 1976. There, he experienced a different America: four distinct climates, dramatic seasons and more artistic inspiration. With a bachelor of fine arts, Merchán returned to Miami to begin a career as a commercial artist. Illustration and magazine publishing would become his financial staple for the next several decades.

In 1984, Merchán realized a need to more fully experience the world of fine art. With just \$500, his acoustic guitar, and a Coleman cooler filled with art supplies, he moved to New York City. Having access to major museums and galleries was the catalyst to launch Merchán’s passion for painting.

In 1987, Merchán moved to San Francisco where he now lives and works. He continues to be intrigued by the Mediterranean-like West Coast light. The way California’s natural light reflects off of various surfaces—including paint and canvas—requires him to use a slightly more muted

color palette, and a slightly more subtle set of painting techniques.

Living in California has also allowed Merchán to become more introspective about his art. He sees his pieces as potential change agents within the world at large, and in people’s lives—as discrete entities within people’s inner worlds. Merchán believes his art has fulfilled its purpose when it generates an emotional charge that, in turn, provokes a response.

At a recent Merchán exhibit opening, a guest told him a touching story. “A man came upon one of my minimalist, black-and-white, wall-sized portraits. It was a representational painting of a woman that reminded him of a long-lost love, and he filled in the missing pieces of the face in the painting with her face,” said Merchán. “After he allowed himself time to mourn the loss of his beloved, he decided to track her down, and they reconnected. Though their life situations made it impossible for them to fall in love again, they’ve become very close friends and agreed to nurture that friendship for the rest of their lives.”

Merchán’s painting did its job. It allowed the man to remember the first wave of true romance in this life, and to reconnect himself, however platonically, back to that romance. **AL**

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