

"Pepe Mar: *Parco dei Mostri* (Park of Monsters)" -- a Trip Down Memory Lane

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A framed shirt by Versace worn by the artist Pepe Mar, Photo courtesy of the artist, David Castillo Gallery and DiverseWorks; Photo by Lynn Lane

The Miami-based artist Pepe Mar has created a highly personal exhibition, one that I had to visit a second time to grasp. I haven't written "fully understand" as that still remains beyond me.

This is a personal show, a trip down memory lane for the artist. It has three elements: a large richly textured window box collage, a wall-size bookcase filled with objects which fascinate Mar, some of which he made, and some of which are found art, and, surprisingly, four framed shirts which Mar has worn, three by Versace.

The title of the exhibition refers to the "Park of Monsters", a 16th century outdoor sculpture "garden" in Bomarzo in northern Italy, composed of many larger than life-size sculptures, some of wood, some of

bedrock, including one of Hannibal's elephants mangling a Roman soldier, and a giant who brutally shreds a character. The sculptures are scattered about the mountainside "Garden," apparently at random.

That the Parco dei Mostri left a strong impression of Mar is no surprise, as it also captured the imagination of Jean Cocteau, Salvador Dali, and Niki de Saint Phalle, who created her own sculpture garden, The Garden of Tarot. I gather that here Mar, like the park of Bomarzo, intends not to please, but to astonish.

I was certainly astonished to see four shirts that Mar had worn included as such a major part of exhibition. One by Versace is blue, white, and gold, ornate, and stunning. Versace, in my view, with his choice of colors, textures, fabrics - and his wit - may be the greatest visual artist since Picasso. Even a more modest Versace shirt with zebras grazing finds a few of the zebras with tinges of colors - Versace had the courage to improve on God's creation.

Mar shares some of that courage, by including such mundane articles in an exhibition. And, yes, they are beautifully framed and displayed.

The bookcase is filled with interesting objects, and is worth considerable study -it reveals a keen eye for found art, and a rich sense of humor, including a taste for the erotic. There are scores of objects, so leave time on your visit to savor them.

The major work is *The Cabinet of Dr. Mar*, a reference to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, a 1920 German silent film, a surrealistic horror movie that became influential. Here in a shadow-box collage is where some of Mar's "monsters" emerge to do their work, but the art here is so complex as to defy description. Lest one be overwhelmed by the extraordinary detail, I suggest concentrating first on one section, then perhaps on another, to get a sense of what the artist is offering. The artist has given a lot of himself here, and this is a work that requires a lot from its audience as well.

Mar lives in Miami, but has been schooled in California and Florida. He was born in Mexico and raised in border towns. This exhibition is largely a personal statement, but it reveals a powerful artist with a far-ranging sensibility.

Pepe Mar: Parco Dei Mostri continues through October 25 at DiverseWorks - Midtown, 4102 Fannin, Wednesdays noon to 8 p.m., Thursdays through Saturdays, noon to 6 p.m., 713-223-8346, diverseworks.org.