



Dressing Up Sculpture



A Conversation with

PEPE MAR

BY LAURA ALBRITTON

Opposite: *Revival II*, 2012. Mixed media in wood cabinet, 41 x 41 x 12 in. This page: *Revival III*, 2013. Mixed media in wood cabinet, 41 x 41 x 12 in.

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Left: *Looking for You*, 2007. Mixed media and collage, 48 x 17 x 19 in. Right: *Spinning Around*, 2008. Mixed media, 8 ft. high.

Pepe Mar's sculptures pulse with vivid color and small elements—cut-up slivers of paper, tiny objects—that when assembled form quasi-creatures. The *New York Times* described his early exhibition “Hunga Bunga” as personifying “the visually devouring soul of modern mass media.” The process of collage constitutes a vital element of his art, though he distances himself from it at times. Fragility and tenderness make an occasional but pronounced appearance. Over the past seven years, Mar has challenged himself to explore new expressions of his core preoccupations, employing baskets masquerading as bronze, or most recently, ceramic. His work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami; the Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach; and the Miami Art Museum.

Mar, who was born in Mexico, arrived in Miami two years before the first Art Basel Miami Beach in 2002, and three years before the Wynwood Arts District Association was founded in 2003. In many ways, his experience reflects the trajectory of Miami's nascent art movement and the transformations that have occurred in the city.

Laura Albritton: *Could you talk a bit about your background and where you come from?*

Pepe Mar: I was born in Reynosa, Mexico, a small town along the border with Texas. When you grow up in a border town, it's very different from growing up in Mexico City—you cross the bridge and you're in the States. People liked to go State-side to buy things. That shopping shows up in my work. The town was very small, so when I started making art, the DIY aesthetic—the idea of using all those materials that I would buy in craft stores—stayed with me.

LA: *You later moved to the United States?*

PM: I attended California College of the Arts and studied painting. That's why my work has an affinity with painting and with a painter's approach to sculpture in terms of layers and colors.

LA: *Why did you switch to sculpture from painting?*

PM: I was always approaching painting in a very sculptural way, attaching objects to the canvas, stretching fabrics with crazy patterns; but for some strange reason, I did not want to let go of the square. One day, I did let go, and sculpture happened.



Left: *Cabeza (Orange)*, 2010. Baskets, paint, and gold leaf, 84 x 33.5 x 42 in.
 Above: *Pleasure Dome (Sunday)*, 2010. Fabric, wood, and wire, 53 x 45 x 37 in.

LA: How did you wind up in Miami?

PM: With the whole dot-com thing, it was very expensive to live in California. I heard about the Miami art scene and the opportunities.

LA: You arrived in 2000 at the very birth of Miami as a vital locus for art, and for making art. What was it like?

PM: Studio space was very cheap. There were also lots of opportunities to show locally. At the time, I showed at two alternative spaces, Locust Projects and The Moore Space, founded by Carlos and Rosa de la Cruz. Later on, I got free studio space from a developer named David Lombardi. When you're working with sculpture, it's always a matter of space.

LA: You got representation with a Wynwood gallery?

PM: In 2006, "My Mirrors," at the David Castillo Gallery, featured a group of collaged sculptures. They were really labor-intensive works, so there weren't that many, about five. The show was in December at the start of Art Basel, and it sold out. I was able to get some money together and quit my day job. That was really exciting.

LA: What was it like six or seven years ago?

PM: There was a certain energy in the air; you had emerging artists, working together, showing with the same people over and over again. Cristina Lei Rodriguez emerged around the same time. People would come to the shows, even at alternative spaces. Important people would come and look at things young artists were doing.

LA: How has Wynwood changed?

PM: It was a rough area—you would see drug addicts on the street every morning. Now there are cafés and restaurants. I think it's becoming more of an entertainment district, with clubs, bars, and food trucks.

LA: Looking for You, one of those first collage sculptures, has a certain fierceness. It looks tribal, almost like an African statue re-imagined.

PM: I think that each piece is like some kind of tribe that I create. The same fears mutate into different things.

LA: What were you thinking about when you were making Looking for You?

PM: That piece has a lot of different themes. The sculptures function as vessels into which I funnel all of my obsessions, like fashion, outsider art, and shopping. You can see that the legs are made out of wigs. At that time, I was obsessed with colored wigs. It's almost like you're dressing up a sculpture, putting all these things, obsessions, into it. The paper comes from different sources—books that I buy in thrift stores, things that I find. A lot of the process happens outside the studio. There's a lot of scavenging and shopping.

LA: With Cabeza (Orange), in 2010, your work takes a different turn.

PM: "Time Bomb" was the first exhibition in which I didn't have any collage. I thought, "I'm done for now with the paper sculptures." I enjoyed making them, but I wanted to find another, alternative way to make a sculpture.

LA: How did you evolve your new direction?

PM: I had given myself a break from the thrift stores, and then I went back. When you haven't been in a while, you start to look at things that you weren't looking at before.

LA: Such as?

PM: I started noticing that there's always a ton of baskets. I guess people throw them away because they're inexpensive. I looked particularly at baskets with the cornucopia shape. I was in love with the shape of the horn, which reminded me of my dreams and all kinds of mythological creatures that I create. I started collecting cornucopias, and then I put them together with other objects made out of basket material.



Cabeza (bronze), 2011. Bronze, 52.5 x 31 x 36 in.

I found other vases and shapes and put them together with burlap and gesso. Then I started experimenting with busts—almost like monster busts.

LA: They do look like busts.

PM: I covered some of them in gold leaf, so that from far away they look like they're made of metal—you know, really serious sculpture. And then, when you get close, you figure out it's a bunch of baskets and gold leaf.

LA: So, this was a deliberate divergence, away from collage?

PM: Yes. I've been a big fan of Judy Pfaff's sculpture, and I did a residency at the Skowhegan School in Maine, where she was a mentor artist. I was showing her my stuff, and when I got to *Cabeza (Orange)*, she said, "Oh my God, I love this; this is a really interesting piece." I got encouragement from her. When I came back to Miami, I started working on more sculptures like that, including *Totem*. I just kept making them bigger and having different things happening to them.

LA: You were already going in that direction, but her encouragement was important.

PM: Exactly. When I came back to Miami, I was very excited. I started making the sculptures bigger and more ambitious. And then, that show got a really good response. One of the sculptures is in MOCA North Miami's collection. They have a real commitment to supporting local artists.



Cruising Totem, 2012. Baskets, burlap, paint, and collage, 10 ft. high.

LA: You mentioned *Cruising Totem*, which you made in 2012. I can see how it's related to *Cabeza* (Orange).

PM: I always liked the idea of the totem, of stacking things like Brancusi. If you look at the top of the totem, there's a mane, like the top of a head. In this case, thrift-store cornucopia baskets become the head and reference a headdress. They have that kind of pointy shape. This work became more like a traditional sculpture, because it's not made out of paper and looks more three-dimensional. I wanted to play with something that looked more traditional, but at the same time, I wanted to work in my studio in a way that was very low tech, using burlap. It's not made out of metal, it's made out of simple materials.

LA: Does the use of color in *Cruising Totem* tie back to the earlier pieces?

PM: I wanted to make these new sculptures relate to the paper sculptures. Another thing I had fun with was that *Cruising Totem* became like an art exhibition that I set up for myself.

LA: How do you mean?

PM: On the windows and shelves, there are collages, so I am bringing that aspect into the work, having areas where I can showcase two-dimensional collages. The sculpture becomes a place like an exhibition. I'm so attached to collage that I wanted to sneak it into the sculpture.

LA: You could just make two-dimensional collages instead of "sneaking" them into your sculptures. Isn't that satisfying?

PM: I'm never satisfied by something flat.

LA: Does the geography or "look" of Miami influence your work?

PM: I'm inspired more by the idea of Miami in the public imagination than by the reality of living here. By this, I mean the patterns, crazy colors, and energies that are part of the outside world's view of Miami as a place.

LA: You can certainly see color and energy in *Revival II*, which David Castillo exhibited during Art Basel this past December.

PM: *Revival II* is like a small retrospective of my work. The paper sculpture is referenced; it's like a small *Looking for You*. It was kind of like making miniature pieces and putting them in a vitrine.

LA: Each one is like a miniature sculpture, recalling an earlier piece.

PM: For me, it's almost like a small time capsule. I was moved by Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise*. It has smaller versions of his work inside, all grouped together.

LA: I notice that one piece is different. Are you doing ceramics now?

PM: Yes. I had access to a kiln. Paper sculptures are so fragile, and I liked the idea of ceramics being so rough and hard. I'm also finding some thrift-store pieces, bringing them back to my studio, and integrating them with my ceramics. In a way, I'm making collage with ceramics.

LA: The found object and collage remain?

PM: Exactly. That has been consistent through all these years.

LA: What's in store for the future?

PM: My next exhibition is "The eye, the vessel and the spell," on view at David Castillo through April 6. And I will be participating in the International Residency Program at the Bronx Museum during the months of May and June.

Laura Albritton is a writer living in Miami.