

Pepe Mar brings his Wunderkammer to DiverseWorks

His art dances to a colorful club beat

By Molly Glentzer
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Artist Pepe Mar's solo show, "Parco dei Mostri," is on view at DiverseWorks.

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Mar grew up in Mexico, on the Texas border, and started making art during high school after moving with his family to Brownsville. He went to San Francisco for college, then graduate school in Miami - a place that finally felt like home. "Miami felt really right because there were people from all over Latin America," he said. "Also, they have a really good art scene. One thing led to another, and I was able to show my work out of school in public, and it was collected by museums. I got a lot of support from the community."

DiverseWorks director Elizabeth Dunbar, who encourages artists to push their disciplinary boundaries, told Mar about two years ago she heard music when she saw his mixed-media collages and sculptures.

"His work is so vibrant, I just had the feeling that it wanted to come to life in some way," she said.

Visiting Mar's Miami dealer, David Castillo, Dunbar learned Mar had other fans in Houston, including influential collector Jereann Chaney. "It was one of those Kismet moments," Dunbar said. "Jereann has a fabulous eye when it comes to young talent; that confirmed for me he was someone to watch. Like many artists we work with here, we think he has a lot of talent, a lot of potential. He's at a point in his career where he's gotten some acclaim, but he's ready to take it to the next level and try something new."

She commissioned a large-scale, multimedia installation at DiverseWorks that would push the artist to grow. "Pepe Mar: Parco dei Mostri" fills the large front gallery with riotous color and noise. While the walls are bright orange and left blank, an

X-shaped wall structure in the middle of the gallery creates four small rooms that Mar envisioned as a Wunderkammer, or cabinet of curiosities. The first room, painted yellow, features a huge shadowbox, "The Cabinet of Dr. Mar," jammed with dozens of paper figures and found trinkets. Around a corner is a white room with a built-in shelf full of small sculptural objects. In the back "room," colorful designer shirts are encased in elaborate frames on turquoise walls. Then you come around to a black room where a DJ plays during special events.

Students in MECA's after-school ballet folklórico, music and visual art programs will perform an original production inspired by the installation in October. Many of the kids in MECA's programs are grappling with the same immigrant-identity issues Mar has experienced, Dunbar said.

"It's really special that they're using his work to explore their own identities."

Q: How did growing up on the Texas-Mexico border influence your aesthetic?

A: I started making art in my mom's garage. I didn't have access to art stores, so I went to craft stores like Michael's for materials and started using them in a rock 'n' roll way, or a more sophisticated way. Somehow that economical, low-tech idea stayed in the work, but now it's done on a bigger scale. In "The Cabinet of Dr. Mar" you see some of that, with things that could have come from Michael's - beads, little figures, feathers. There's this craft-antcraft thing where I'm making something beautiful but at the same time kind of crude.

Q: Your work is incredibly complex. Where did you start with "The Cabinet of Dr. Mar"?

A: I'm obsessed with Wunderkammer, this idea of cabinets of curiosities, and the idea of collecting. And also with artists like Robert Rauschenberg. I started this piece by making the inside shelves out of cardboard, so then I have this excuse to fill out the shelves. I buy very nice art books for \$1 at thrift stores because today people want to look at things online. It's kind of insane. Also, when I visited the Menil Collection recently, they gave me a catalog. I kept it in my apartment for a couple of weeks. I wanted to respect it. But then... I brought it into the studio and I was like, let's just use it. So I take all these things into my studio and look through them like a curator. That takes days, then I start tearing out images that relate to my own mythology. The figures and masks cut out for this piece are like things I make myself. There's a mixture of cultures - something from Mesoamerica, something African, something from Mesopotamia. All of these things come together and clash and inhabit this mayhem you see. Here's something Chinese that looks like a dragon. I'm also obsessed with this idea of the vessel becoming a mouth, like a worm hole to another dimension. Sometimes it becomes part of the figures' bodies.

Q: What originally led you to create these monsterlike masks?

A: When I was a kid I was obsessed with alebrijes, Mexican figurines made of wood; and piñatas. All that started to come together in mask sculptures that were like anthropomorphic beings. They could be animals, persons or some kind of abstraction. I put so much information in the piece it starts becoming abstract through color, form or shapes.

Q: How long have you been enclosing your work in glass?

A: About three years. I was doing individual figures and wanted to do something more cinematic. So this becomes like a screen, and all of this happening inside could be a battle, and there's a mise-en-scène here with three-dimensional figures. Another new development is this paper that I paint and cut up. It's a lot of different sources.



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Artist Pepe Mar at DiverseWorks, where his solo show "Parco dei Mostri" is on view through Oct. 25.

I visited with Mar as the installation was being finished.

Q: What's the idea behind the installation's four rooms?

A: It's almost like the whole show becomes a Wunderkammer, just like the collage. You walk around and discover different things. You can create your own narrative.

You start with "The Cabinet of Dr. Mar," which is the biggest piece I've ever made. It was an opportunity to make something that viewers could stand in front of and be consumed by.

Q: The white shelf room looks more organized. Things are lined up.

A: Yeah, that's a good observation. I was thinking about Marcel Duchamp's reliefs that have small versions of his work inside. So I made small versions of older sculptures and combined them with other objects I've been collecting. I bought the ostrich egg at a Houston thrift store. I'm creating a narrative; maybe the egg is hatching the creatures around it. And maybe these are magical wands I've created out of ceramics. I'm also using vessels here. I was really free with it; some things I produced in the studio; others I added when I got here.

Q: The framed shirts in your turquoise room are pretty flashy.

A: Yes, I wore those at one point! They have a flamboyant spirit like the collage. I think you can see that the figures are all embellished, dressed up. I have trunks full of clothes from the late '90s. I had all these Versace clothes that for me were loaded with meaning. They have the character of Miami Beach when it became an international destination because of Gianni Versace being there. His clothes embody that. I obsessed with them and wore them; so this is like the cult of the artist; playing with the idea of my persona, bringing clothes that I've worn that have now become art. I used really crazy frames that echo the prints of Versace's fabrics. They're paintings because the shirts are flattened, but they're also sculpture because the frames are matchy-matchy with the clothes.

Q: Then we have a black room.

A: Yes, it's like a bar, and sometimes there will be a DJ playing, so there's a mood of a small underground club.

Q: There's a progression of ideas from one room to the next.

A: Exactly. But at the end of the day they all come together. Elizabeth wanted me to make something that integrated music. I was like, oh my god. I listen to so much electronic dance music; I loved the idea of the DJ becoming a cult personality. And the arch in the wall is ceremonial, almost like the DJ is an idol in a church. He's also like an object in the installation. So it comes to life. Music will be playing all the time, loud and kind of annoying. I put together a play list with dance anthems from the '90s that relate to the clothes. So there's a little bit of nostalgia; Miami Beach has changed so much. That was the tail end of a golden era when everyone went out clubbing; now it's more gentrified.

'Pepe Mar:Parco dei Mostri'

When: Noon-8 p.m. Wednesdays, noon-6 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, through Oct. 25

Where: DiverseWorks, 4102 Fannin, No. 200

Tickets: Free; 713-223-8346, diverseworks.org