

# ARTFORUM

## Pepe Mar

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There's a lot going on, materially and conceptually, in Pepe Mar's large-scale constructions, which brim with a dazzling array of objects and imagery. The kaleidoscopic impact of the works in "You Never Should Have Crossed the Rio Grande," his exhibition here, could have caused a momentary loss of bearings—but that may have been the intended effect. Mar was born in 1977 in Mexico's Reynosa, which borders Texas, and moved to the United States during the 1990s; he currently resides in Miami. His journey, explored through assimilation, foreignness, and selfhood, undergirded the show. Mar also mused on queerness, South Floridian aesthetics, pop culture, and art's white-washed canon.

Seven of the thirteen works on view were wall-mounted assemblages, housed in Plexiglas frames, featuring spindly-limbed figures with leering faces—or what Mar calls "Paprikas." They are constructed from fabric, ceramics, plastic tubing, golden lobsters, fake plants, belts, sundry personal items, and other bits of ephemera, either collected or bought from regional thrift stores. High-voltage pinks, oranges, and reds radiated from several of the maddeningly bug-eyed sprites. Of these, *Holes*, 2020, dominated by greens and blues, had a more aquatic, claustrophobic quality. Despite the works' careful composition, Mar's frazzled subjects hint at life coming apart in ways that can only happen in Florida. As a resident of the Sunshine State, I recognized the artist's take on this Republican stronghold's swampish conservatism, its face-eating maniacs delirious on bath salts, and the featureless strip malls lined with garbage and broken palms shimmering in the lurid sunsets of this so-called "paradise."



Pepe Mar, *Grey Matter*, 2021, acrylic on printed fabric, 90 × 60 inches.

*Undone*, 2019, depicts a spread-eagled, leather-clad character whose neck and head are made from blood-red velvety piping; he is constrained by straps, buckles, and metallic clips. This sex pig's thin erection points sharply upward. Behind him is a blazing-yellow ground overlaid with a black, cage-like design. It's a cartoon version of what you might see at Fort Lauderdale's 321 Slammer club, where cum-hungry bottoms wait ass-up on a man-size lazy Susan for loads from eager daddies. Our hero also sports a pair of incongruous, cerulean ankle warmers that evoke Key West's sweaty dragqueen joie de vivre down in the Florida Straits. But this element also highlights Mar's migrational focus, as that island is just ninety miles from Cuba and studded with rotting vessels used by refugees from that country.

The show also featured six panels made from fabric, printed with images of the artist's past series, cut and stitched together to form new configurations, replete with painterly splashes. The painstaking arrangements ran the artistic gamut, featuring everything from stately fields of color (à la Robert Rauschenberg and Mark Rothko) to all manner of consumerist detritus. *Grey Matter* and *Solar Power*, both 2021, derived their imagery from *Mothership*, 2012–20, an earlier three-dimensional collage by the artist. In *Grey Matter*, a torrent of ornaments, fans, flowers, statuary, masks, and animals explode across the picture. On the work's right side, a silvery cloud fogs the cavalcade, while a blast of stellar-intense orange buoys the composition from below. In cannibalizing his oeuvre, Mar echoes Brazilian polemicist Oswald de Andrade's *Manifesto Antropófago* (Cannibalist Manifesto, 1928), which espoused the devouring of colonialist identities to forge new cultural sensibilities.

Mar's *Wunderkammern* are essentially portraits—of himself, his odyssey, and the inheritances of South Florida's Afro-Caribbean, Latin American, and Latinx constituencies. But they go deeper. Take the strange, surveilling Paprikas, who aren't protected by skin. We see their exposed skeletons, ligaments, and viscera, yet they are whole. This contradiction, and the varied elements in play, is resolved by Mar's ability to embody and synchronize the disorienting circumstances of the immigrant experience. Such sociological commentary, wrapped in a Tolkien-esque Day-Glo visual language, offers rare insight, particularly to white Americans, who haven't had their existences politically weaponized and who cannot know the tolls taken by such long roads traveled. —Darren Jones