

BURNAWAY

Pepe Mar: Myth and Magic at the Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa

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Installation view of *Pepe Mar: Myth and Magic* at the Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Florida. Photography by Zachary Balber and courtesy of the Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Florida.

Visually conspicuous near the center of the Tampa Museum of Art, *Pepe Mar: Myth and Magic* dramatically separates itself from the other exhibitions. Throughout the museum, carefully situated wall didactics interrupt the gallery standard, self-effacing white walls and cement floors used to demarcate individual exhibitions. However, *Myth and Magic* confronts visitors with a lurid, plush orange carpet that opens into a Seussian array of colors and textures. At a glance, *Myth and Magic* is a colorful and elaborate collage of an exhibition. However, within the show,

the distinctions between discrete works of art and the collections they populate dissolve in intriguing ways.

The exhibition collects sixty works of art, functioning as a survey of Mar's practice over the past fifteen years. Born in Reynosa, Mexico, near the Mexico-U.S. border, before moving to Brownsville, Texas, Mar now lives and works in Miami, Florida.

Like these liminal locations where national borders are clearly demarcated but cultures often are not, Mar incorporates objects both sacred and banal from around the world into his work. In the context of the exhibition and Mar's practice, these accumulations recall the ethnographic wunderkammers or cabinets of curiosities of past centuries, while also training a critical eye on them. Whereas traditional wunderkammers wielded a certain tyranny of taxonomy in which Western culture was centered, thus marginalizing others, Mar's work undermines this hierarchy. His cabinets of curiosities are a centerless web, an ever-shifting conversation across cultures and times, and a reflection of the complexity of collective human social behavior.



Pepe Mar, *The Cabinet of Dr. Mar*, 2014, mixed media collage on wood, 72 x 72 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist and the Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Florida.

For example, in the piece *The Cabinet of Dr. Mar* (2014), shelves are crowded with photographic images of art objects that seemed to have been plucked from issues of *National Geographic* alongside 3D crafted items. In this composition and many throughout the exhibition, ceremonial masks and religious figurines from African, Meso-American, and Mesopotamian cultures perch beside modernist masks and faces resembling that of Picasso and Modigliani, as well as colorful cut paper works by Mar himself. These images and art objects jarringly contrast in cultural traditions, time periods, sanctity, and mundanity. Still, visual and iconographic similarities also emerge, hinting at Mar's careful curation, if not something universal or widely shared in human expression.

Mar further navigates and explores these disparate cultural artifacts with the rituals and signifiers of personal identity through his alter ego Paprika. Paprika is depicted throughout the exhibition as a grandly plumed bird-like creature, who at times is the subject of portraiture and at other times, a participant within a larger scene. Paprika lends an appropriate mythological quality to the especially expansive scope of Mar's cultural exploration. The being foregrounds contemporary, often overlooked rituals and expressions of individual and collective identity such as thrifting, science fiction, leather subculture, commercial design, celebrity, and fashion. Paprika also appears as a mixed media figure, affixed to the foreground of museum-like collections of figurines, masks, statuettes, and clay vessels, sprawled across the composition.

In addition to Paprika, subtler components of Mar's aesthetic also echo throughout the exhibition. For example, the piece titled *Duel*, 2020, is a colorful 3D collage anchored by a white background filled with philodendron-shaped cut paper. In front of the collage, two highly abstracted figures stand beside each other arrayed in an elaborate plumage of bright cut paper and photograph clippings. These elements are seen again in *Revival V* (2020). *Revival V* is a kind of collage-as-gallery-scale-model replete with a small bust on a pedestal and a mounted framed collage within the collage. Mar quotes and collects his own artwork.



Pepe Mar, *Burning Up*, 2006/2019, collage sculpture, 49 1/4 x 13 3/4 x 15 3/4 inches. Photograph courtesy of the artist and the Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Florida.

Myth and Magic is purposefully overwhelming. Mar gives earnest consideration to contemporary visual ephemera as serious expressions of identity, placing it alongside priceless cultural artifacts. He uses historically white Western methods of collection and presentation to decenter that selfsame cultural hegemony while gleefully exploring his own curiosity. His work asks difficult questions about what it means to display and be displayed, the power flow between the two, and how we may personally be implicated.



From Left to Right: Pepe Mar, *Revival*, 2012, mixed media on wood cabinet, 41 x 41 x 12 inches and Pepe Mar, *Revival II*, 2012, mixed media on wood cabinet, 41 x 41 x 12 inches. Photographs courtesy of the artist and the Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Florida.