

BOMB

INTERVIEW

Pepe Mar by Alpesh Kantilal Patel

Exhibition as collage.

MAY 13, 2024



As part of my interview in 2011 for a contemporary art professorship at Florida International University (FIU) in Miami, I was asked to critique the work of MFA in Visual Arts students, one of whom was Pepe Mar, who was about to enter the program's final year. I had about a dozen faculty members watching me. Given the circumstances, I remember a lot about that afternoon. (I ended up getting the job and spending a decade there.) At that time, Pepe had already been showing his work in the art world. I've been following his progression for almost fifteen years now; but as I discuss in this interview, his works do a funny thing with time by making past, present, and future blur together. I visited his survey exhibition with my niece and sister-in-law. As always, it was a treat to enter his vibrant, queer world that literally and

metaphorically collages signifiers connected to Mexico, California, South Florida, and queer club culture. Even more exciting was seeing the work through the eyes of my family, who don't get a

¹ Image: Installation view of *Pepe Mar: Myth and Magic*, 2023–24. Tampa Museum of Art. Tampa, Florida. Photo by Zachary Balber. Courtesy of the artist, Tampa Museum of Art, and David Castillo.

chance to view contemporary art. It was absolutely a pleasure to find Pepe's work being embraced in a part of the United States where issues of race and sexuality are being politicized.

Alpesh Kantilal Patel

Do you remember I critiqued your work as part of my interview!? While I can't recall what work we discussed, I remember thinking of Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt as a reference because of his "baroque" approach in the sense that his work is highly decorative and theatrical. I also love his ability to transform the quotidian into something precious; I'm thinking specifically of his *Syphilitic Rat* (1970s) sculptures comprised of glittery gold foil paper. I feel that in some way you were picking up where artists like him, who were a part of the short-lived Pattern and Decoration movement, left off. Do you see yourself connected to this movement at all?

Pepe Mar

Yes, I remember when you were interviewing at FIU, and as part of this you did a crit of grad students' work. You mentioned Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt at the time. After that critique, I became utterly fascinated with how my work was in dialogue with Lanigan-Schmidt's. The use of detritus and kitsch materials has always been a part of my practice. A decade later when I curated *Tesoro* at Frost Art Museum, I secured a Lanigan-Schmidt chalice to open the exhibition. It was a nod to our early conversation and to queering the space with his vibes. I also included a Baroque mirror in the space and some of my old Versace clothes encapsulated in ornate frames. The entire first gallery of the museum was inspired by Thomas—very baroque, very kitsch.

It's so interesting that you're mentioning the P&D movement since *Embellish Me*, which is a show about the movement curated by Amy Galpin and Joanna Robotham, is traveling to the Tampa Museum of Art. Amazingly, it will coincide for a few months with my fifteen-year career survey, *Myth and Magic*, which has been on view for the past year. It's serendipitous because there is so much material there that has inspired me for many years, going as far back as when I was a student at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. And in a full-circle moment and a nice surprise for me, there is a Thomas rat in the show following me to Tampa!



Installation view of *Pepe Mar: Myth and Magic*, 2023–24. Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Florida. Photo by Zachary Balber. Courtesy of the artist, Tampa Museum of Art, and David Castillo.

AKP

The white cube tends to make works like yours feel even more colorful and energetic than they already are. In Tampa, a decision was made to paint the walls in delicious, vibrant colors. And the floor is covered with a bright, orange-colored carpet. Were you involved in this decision? This choice helps viewers become fully immersed in the experience that your work instantiates.

PM

When Robotham, the show's curator, started to think about the layout, she didn't want the show to be chronological. She loved the energy of my studio and how there are works everywhere evoking a Gesamtkunstwerk, so we decided to create an immersive installation with various thematic sections. The survey exhibition itself became an immense collage that took fifteen years to complete and will never be seen again after the show closes.

“The discovery of this new material was part of my ongoing use of quotidian kitsch objects, which has always queered my creative process.”

— Pepe Mar

AKP

My sister-in-law and niece came with me, and we all had so much fun at the exhibition. I asked them what questions they would ask you if you were there with us. The first question is that the works in gold leaf stand out as very different from the others. Can you talk about the impulse behind the aesthetic strategy of these works? What do these works offer to your vision?

PM

Those works circle back to our time together at FIU. During those graduate school years, I was experimenting with different materials and moving away from paper. I started collecting baskets from thrift stores, and I was especially attracted to cornucopias for their anthropomorphic qualities. I began making these busts that in a way reference the art-historical canon and classical materials like bronze but are more akin to Lanigan-Schmidt. The discovery of this new material was part of my ongoing use of quotidian kitsch objects, which has always queered my creative process.

AKP

Here's the second question. In some works, there appear to be multiple representations of Paprika, your alter ego. Can you talk about what that means for you?

MP

Paprika became my alter ego fifteen years ago, at the beginning of the timeline that is covered in *Myth and Magic*. When I was creating abstract collages prior to this, I was not completely satisfied. I was always looking for another element in the work, and I found it in a doppelgänger. It's this alter ego that confronts the world and has stayed with me all these years, appearing in different forms throughout my body of work.



Installation view of *Pepe Mar: Myth and Magic*, 2023–24. Tampa Museum of Art. Tampa, Florida. Photo by Zachary Balber. Courtesy of the artist, Tampa Museum of Art, and David Castillo.

AKP

What is the origin of Paprika?

PM

I did a solo show in 2020 during Covid called *Origin*, and it centered around a 3D collage called *Mothership* (2012–20) that sought to trace the origins of Paprika. I wanted to play into the myth of creation, and I attributed this 3D collage work as the point of origin for Paprika. The imagery in *Mothership*—now in the permanent collection of the High Museum in Atlanta—is very encyclopedic, and in this one work you can decipher most of the art-historical influences of how Paprika came to be.

AKP

This exhibition is a retrospective, but in some of your printed fabric works you present images of past works; they are archives in and of themselves. Can you discuss what drew you to this strategy?

PM

I think I was manifesting this retrospective since you visited my solo show *Man of the Night* at Locust Projects seven years ago. That is the first instance in which I printed my entire archive of images of prior works on fabric. From a very young age, I have been a collector of fashion, and I have always been drawn to prints. This was a way to bring back works that live far away from me and to collapse my practice, cannibalizing my own work into new material and new directions.

AKP

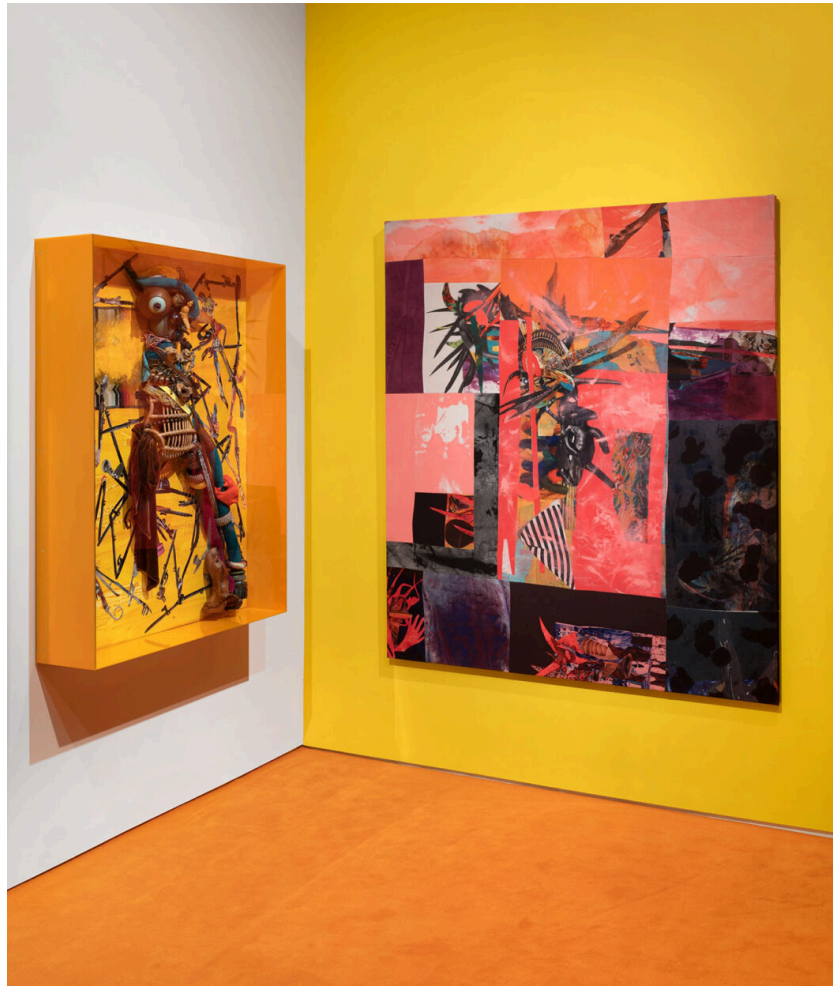
In addition to this retrospective, you've recently had several other major shows. How have the shows, both leading up to them and then the reception, impacted your thinking?

PM

The last two years have been really great with solo shows: the Kemper Museum Atrium Project in Kansas City, the Everson Museum in Syracuse, *Myth and Magic*, and the Baker Museum of

Art. *Myth and Magic* of course being the centerpiece of these exhibitions. I have been reenergized in my practice by having a younger audience engage with the work. It's also been great because some of these shows have lasted a year, giving visitors opportunities for multiple visits, experiences, and interpretations. These installations have an in-depth way of allowing for the discovery of different aspects of my practice and getting audiences engaged in my otherworldly objects.

Pepe Mar: *Myth and Magic* is on view at the *Tampa Museum of Art* in Tampa, Florida, until May 19.



Installation view of Pepe Mar: *Myth and Magic*, 2023–24. Tampa Museum of Art. Tampa, Florida. Photo by Zachary Balber. Courtesy of the artist, Tampa Museum of Art, and David Castillo.