

The Narrative Figure

David Richard Gallery
1570 Pacheco Street, Al

FIVE ARTISTS, FIVE TAKES ON NARRATIVE FIGURATION EMERGE FROM EACH ARTIST'S ABILITY

and willingness to share culture and ethnicity. *The Narrative Figure* (through July 4) showcases the work of Esteban Cabeza de Baca, Michael Dixon, Jeffrey Hargrave, Daisy Quezada, and Justice Whitaker.

A blend of his Mexican and Native American ancestry informs Esteban Cabeza de Baca's oil paintings. The large canvases are full of light, and the colors surprise. These are not the earth tones of traditional Southwestern art. Instead, we have eye-popping candy colors: a fuchsia weaving, bright orange adobe walls, and Wedgwood-blue mountains. Cabeza de Baca describes living in a no-man's land between cultures. "My skin is pale but my heart is red," he writes. In *Illusion of Oasis Making You Look Twice* he gives us a very pink figure with black hair and red face paint. The arm and torso resemble an art student's wooden drawing mannequin, and they float above the detached legs with a blue horizon peeking through the waistline. The notion of illusion appears in other Cabeza de Baca paintings. There is a series of white longhorn steer skulls drifting through the clouds in one of the untitled works, and a disembodied gray arm reaches out toward the ceremonial dancer through a dripping, trompe-l'oeil hole in *Dance*.

Michael Dixon uses his own blended identities throughout his work. "I have experienced fluidity in the perception of my race and ethnicity as a light-skinned, bi-racial Black man," he writes. His large portraits in oil—often conceived as self-portraits—are painted with pale, sky-blue backgrounds. He sometimes places his figures off-center in the canvas and with some feature missing, like a shoulder or a temple, which might be wrapped around the corner of the canvas and painted on the side. He uses so many colors to achieve skin tones that it blurs concepts of ethnicity. In those paintings where hands are visible, they are powerful, especially where fingertips touch. Lips are poignantly expressive, painted in multiple

shades of peach, mauve, and rose.

Lips also figure prominently in Jeffrey Hargrave's acrylics, but as racially charged caricature. Hargrave's work confronts viewers with portrayals or stereotypical images of African Americans. The combination of palette and caricature forces us to register Hargrave's message, even for viewers who may wish to look away.



Yet somehow, they are fun at the same time. The eyes and lips are oversized and often the paint is applied most thickly in those areas. Eyes bug out like they might in cartoons. Kinky braids, a proliferation of polka dots, exaggerated Aunt Jemima head scarves, and giant buck teeth all contribute to the playfulness that is and isn't. Hargrave's titles are provocative, too, like *Too Black for Words* or *Loose Lips Sink Ships*.

Daisy Quezada's sculptures look at figuration and narrative from the perspective of fragility and aggression. Quezada applies a thin porcelain slip to items of clothing, which burn off in the firing process and leave behind delicate, gentle fabric impressions in each piece. In *Sostener o Refrenar* a porcelain bra hangs from the handle of a shovel.

The weight of the "fabric" causes bits to fall off and shatter on the floor, taking with them shards of the wearer's story. "Having grown up between two cultures," writes Quezada, "I have witnessed an abundance of machismo that isn't questioned after it has become a part of everyday life." Quezada's sculpted garments, paired with items of aggression, invite us to confront issues of gender and violence. But her message is also one of healing, where the wearer's identity can "come to life to tell its story where it can be heard and seen."

The mixed-media collages of filmmaker and photographer Justice Whitaker blend his own hand-cut photos with found materials. Often varnished with resin, the pieces take on a rich, clear luster that collides with the subject matter of race, class, and other social issues. In *Procession of the Undead: Guardian Angel*, we see Whitaker's photo of a young black boy with a wary, untrusting face. Through collage, the boy sports a jacket, a crown, and a magnificent pair of wings. The piece is mounted on a found armoire door, with the lock intact and level with the boy's core.

These artists' approaches to narrative figuration are culturally rooted and deeply internal. Beautifully presented in David Richard Gallery's new, more intimate space, the work invites viewers to examine and question their own biases.

—Susan Wider

Michael Dixon, *The Fourth of July is Yours Not Mine*, 2015, oil on canvas, 48 x 36 in.