

HELMEL
STUDIOS
presents

VICTOR CASTILLO
SOMEWHERE OVER THE RAINBOW

SOLO EXHIBITION APRIL 10 – JUNE 26, 2021

By Sharon Mizota

Victor Castillo is out for revenge. His latest body of work, on view in HelMel’s main gallery, takes Hollywood as its target, revisiting and warping iconic scenes from classic films through the lens of an equally iconic style — that of cartoons, from Disney’s *Silly Symphonies* to Warner Bros.’ *Merrie Melodies* and *Looney Tunes*. Like fellow Angeleno Paul McCarthy, Castillo excavates well-known entertainment imagery to undermine the fantasies of happiness and abundance it projects. But unlike McCarthy’s more visceral aesthetic, Castillo turns the industry’s own seductive tools against it, employing cheery colors, shiny, rounded forms, and those ever-smiling faces. For the Chilean-born artist, it is way of both claiming and getting back at the American pop culture that infused his childhood. By extension, it advances a pointed critique of American imperialism and the lies that support it.

Castillo’s signature motif is a smooth, cartoon face with empty, hollowed out eyes and a juicy red sausage nose. The black, soulless eyes make his figures look as if their insides have been scooped out, leaving nothing but a zombie-like, hollow shell. The nose is a reference to Pinocchio’s revealing protuberance, which grew every time he told a lie, but is also a phallic symbol, at once clown-like and salacious.

The artist developed this convention while living in Barcelona, where he observed how graffiti artists used a consistent “tag” to announce their presence. It was also in Spain that he was first exposed to the original works of Francisco Goya, the 18th and 19th century giant whose early career as a court painter gave way to trenchant political and anti-war imagery. Following Goya, Castillo developed his own blend of pop culture style and biting cultural commentary.

In *The Birds* (2020), titled after the Alfred Hitchcock film of the same name, the artist takes a scene of terror — crowds of children fleeing a flock of menacing birds — and twists it into horrific glee. Accompanied by a cross between Daffy Duck and Mickey Mouse (another kind of menace), the dead-eyed, sausage-nosed children grin maniacally as they run. The image comments on how fear becomes palatable as entertainment, but also how the children’s act of desperation might also be a form of liberation.

[Cont. on reverse]

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Similarly, *Snow White* (2021) inverts a scene from Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), in which the titular princess bids farewell to the sweet, industrious dwarfs as they head off to the mines. Castillo has turned the dwarfs into impish red devils who are arriving, not leaving, drinks and guitar in hand, ready to party. The tweaked color palette, bordering on neon, is like sweetness on crack, perfectly echoing the way in which U.S. pop culture sugar-coats the government's efforts to destabilize communities both abroad and at home.

Castillo's subversions become more blatant in a series of works painted on lobby cards. These small (typically 11" x 14") film advertisements were displayed in theater lobbies starting in the 1910s. They were usually issued in sets and unlike most movie posters, featured actual stills from the film. Their use peaked in midcentury, the era from which Castillo's examples are taken. The film *Son of Flubber* is from 1963, but the artist has transformed the lobby card into a commentary on the present. Embellishing the image of a police car crashing into a lake with exaggerated flames and a sea of hellfire evokes current critiques of police brutality and the carceral state.

In *Everything But the Truth* (2020), Castillo turns a handshake between a man and a little boy into a literal deal with the devil, as two ghouls look on. The man's face has been painted over with a horned, bright red devil's head, and the little boy wears a stars-and-moon wizard's hat, not unlike the one donned by the naïve sorcerer's apprentice, Mickey Mouse, in *Fantasia* (1940). Although this image echoes the plot of the 1956 film itself — a little boy gets in trouble for telling the truth — it also reads as an exposé of Hollywood's cunning indoctrination of children.

The roots of these efforts can be seen in HelMel's second studio gallery, which contains a few earlier paintings, a large selection of preparatory drawings and two documentary videos. Here we see how Castillo's focus on Hollywood refines his critique of American pop culture, and its fascination with childhood innocence. These works largely depict boys and girls behaving badly, combined with works that lampoon the cartoons they are encouraged to consume.

Castillo intervenes in a visual language that most of us know and understand all too well, which makes his work treacherously captivating. In a closed system of international media domination and saturation, what else can one do? He uses the vocabulary we have been given and dares to fashion a different narrative, one that turns a perverse mirror on our childhood dreams to reveal the deceit and emptiness at their core.

— Sharon Mizota

HelMel Studios & Gallery

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Victor Castillo:

Somewhere Over the Rainbow

Hardcover book 192 pages

With texts by Val Kilmer, Merry Karnowsky,
Kirsten Anderson, Miguel A. López, Monte
Beauchamp, and Tom Stratton

Available for purchase in the studio gallery