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A Terrain of Legends

Spring 2010 - Reviewed

Daniel Rothbart



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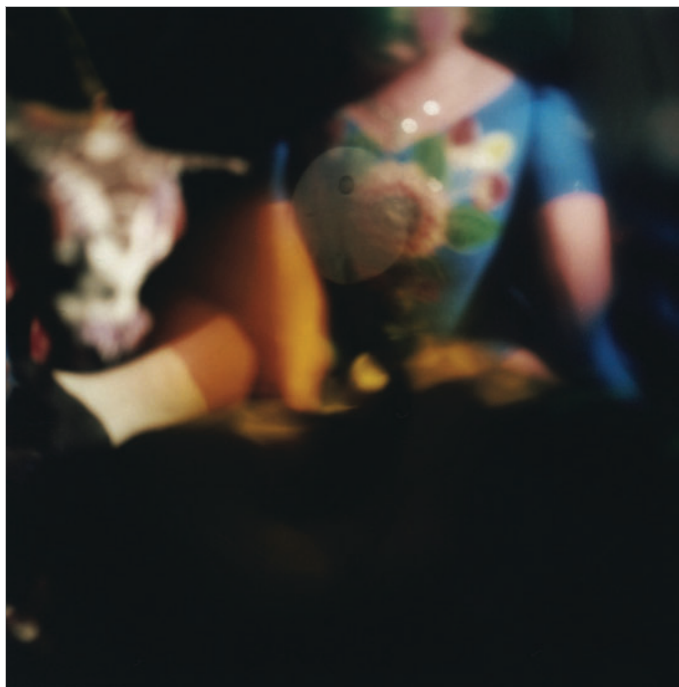
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Barbara Rachko, Untitled, 2009. Chromogenic print, 24 x 24 inches, edition of 5. Courtesy of HP Garcia Gallery.

Mexico holds a fascination for artists with its edgy proximity to nature. Teeming with life and death and heir to a civilization at once technologically advanced and steeped in human sacrifice, it is a country of contradictions. The folk religion of Mexico is a fascinating combination of Christianity and Mayan traditions, combining a pantheon of saints with nature gods—some benevolent and others bloodthirsty. Soviet film director Sergei Eisenstein was intrigued by the complex tapestry of Mexican culture and brought his cinematographer Eduard Tisse to film an expressionist motion picture featuring a lively dance around the Day of the Dead. For artist Barbara Rachko, Mexican folk imagery becomes a point of departure toward surreal, psychologically charged photography in her recent exhibition at HP Garcia Gallery in New York.

Rachko's *Gods and Monsters* is an exhibition of 12 large-format C-prints, consisting of tableaux arrangements of Mexican polychrome woodcarvings, photographed behind colored gels and filters, with set focal lengths. Through experimental lighting effects and short depth of field, objects seem to float in space, blurred at times to suggest movement, as though they were stills in a film. They seem liberated from gravity, traversing a black ground in unlikely relationships to one another, like apparitions. The resulting images are mysterious and archaic, conjuring a nether world inhabited by youthful maidens, demigods, monstrous animals, skeletal ghosts, and Mephistophelean demons. Starkly close to nature, these animistic spirits reflect longings, fears, and taboos that live on today, particularly in the agricultural communities of contemporary Mexico.

Light and color are striking elements of the Mexican landscape, and these photographs evoke this extraordinary luminance and palette. A skeletal form begins to emerge from the ground, but then evaporates into an electric aura surrounding a yolk-yellow sun. A devilish green griffin seems to levitate in a black void surrounded by what seems to be a woman's folded glove and abstract elements like a textured magenta crescent and a hopelessly blurred figure receding into the distance. The photograph calls to mind Roman Polanski's brilliant dream sequence in *Rosemarie's Baby*. A young girl with stockinged feet sits calmly unaware of a frightful Minotaur that lurks menacingly behind her. At their best, these works attain a subtle balance between representational photography and abstraction, celebrating the mystery of ancient Mayan cults and fostering imaginative speculation.

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