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ART

Welcome to Dr. Estrada's Odd Island

It's not Dr. Moreau or Dr. Frankenstein. It is art.

January 04, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska Philp | Hunter Drohojowska Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

Victor Estrada stands in the garage of his modest Sunland house, hands on hips, and stares at a chicken-wire armature mounted on a welded metal pedestal. Soon, he will cover this amorphous shape with brightly colored resin to execute one of his strangely deformed sculptures. The artist, 41, is completing a body of work for his exhibition opening Saturday at the Shoshana Wayne Gallery at Bergamot Station in Santa Monica.

Right now, the human-scale armature looks as though it could become a fish, a bird or an extraterrestrial. In his gravelly voice, Estrada explains, "It's a form that will give way to different kinds of shapes and give a sense that it's a breathing, living thing." Scattered on various small tables are fake eyeballs, ears and teeth, rather unnerving clues as to the future of this and other monsters in the making. "The eyeballs give them a sense of life," he adds. "Plus, it has to do with the idea of looking, of vision. That's how we come to know the world."

Estrada could be called the Dr. Frankenstein of the art world, working quietly in his crowded garage, experimenting with the invention of new life forms. He even has a small streak of white running through the front of his dark hair--a homage to Frankenstein's bride? Indeed, one of his recent sculptures showed a figure painted entirely black but for a scarlet and erect appendage from which a hose was connected to a three-eyed, three-legged hybrid, possibly a cross between a poodle and a frog.

"I see shapes. I have to make them simple to make since they come out of my chaotic inner world," the artist says.

Although Estrada is known for larger-than-life sculptures and installations, the 10 pieces for his upcoming show are smaller, as they were for his 1996 show at the Friedrich Petzel Gallery in New York. In addition, on the walls of his garage hang dozens of runny, melting, cartoon-like paintings that look like two-dimensional versions of his sculptures.

"People think of me as a sculptor, but I think of myself as a painter because of my use of color," he says. "I don't have a sculptor's respect for materials as a whole. I make objects of reasonable scale and physical, three-dimensional presence in space. But in terms of what goes on top of them, I think of them as canvases with a lot of stuff accumulating on the surface like a skin. I'm not making objects that are about representation as such."

He continues: "I combine the sculptural and painterly process as I work through the thinking involved. I had always been a painter until I went to art school. There, I was anxious because I felt I could not create enough density in the paintings. I wouldn't tweak them so they would work as both an image and a thing."

"It's a very raw, low-tech way of working. I want to have my hands involved. I don't want to farm it out. It's my particular way of working since I don't have a linear process."

By 1988, Estrada had earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees in fine arts from Art Center in Pasadena and studied with established artists such as Mike Kelly, Sabina Ott and Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe. After being included in a few group exhibitions locally, Estrada was one of a handful of newcomers selected for "Helter Skelter," the highly publicized 1992 exhibition of Los Angeles art curated by Museum of Contemporary Art Chief Curator Paul Schimmel for MOCA's Temporary Contemporary space.

Estrada's 30-foot-long urethane-foam sculpture "Baby/Baby" looked like Siamese twins linked at midpoint by a giant phallus and was mentioned favorably in nearly every review of the otherwise controversial show. Even Time magazine's conservative critic Robert Hughes called it "authentic." In fact, the sculpture garnered so much attention that critics overlooked Estrada's bright pink and purple paintings melding big-eyed girls and psychedelic patterns with fragments of sentimental text in Spanish.

"I still have those paintings," the artist says with a sigh. "I don't think people were ready for them. My desire is to deform the painting surface. I feel anxious about things being left out, both formally and psychologically." Disturbing protuberances extended from the canvas, and eventually these appendages mutated off the wall to become the sculptures.

Estrada believes that his art reflects the changing social landscape of Los Angeles. Born and raised in Burbank, he has watched neighborhoods and attitudes change.

"Change is not controlled here. Anxiety about that change is reflected in my work," he says.

Although Estrada didn't settle on art as a career until he was in his late 20s, even in the third grade, as he was painting a picture of a landscape, he realized that "the activity worked the way my mind worked. Later, I saw Giotto's images in art history books and it brought my mind back to that painting."

"Thinking about art is a messy intellectual endeavor," he adds, "and a lot of times, I'm mired in confusion. The messiness of art is interesting to me because my life is messy. When I was in high school, I was surfing. I didn't want to go to college. I wanted to make surfboards." Bored by higher education, Estrada held a series of part-time jobs and went to junior colleges and the University of Texas before his interest in graphic art led him to Art Center in 1984.

Estrada has been married for 17 years to Irma Estrada, a third-grade teacher, with whom he has fathered three boys, now adolescents. On this day, he has a Christmas tree in the living room, homemade chocolate chip cookies in the kitchen and monsters in the garage. Estrada grew up middle-class Latino, and his choice of an unpredictable career in fine art was difficult for his engineer father to accept.

"I used to visit the L.A. County Museum by myself," he recalls. "My family was, like, 'Where did you come from?'"

Asked if his roots have influenced his art, Estrada says: "I'm not necessarily making work that's politically constrained around that concept. Aesthetically, there is a difference from what an Anglo sensibility is about. There are notions of decoration, a disrespect for the materials. It might be the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism. It's more about what decoration can do than just a love for bright colors. These are things you are supposed to suppress in an Anglo aesthetic."

In February's Artforum, critic Mark Van De Walle wrote that Estrada's sculptures "remind us of Nature's wild fecundity, remind us of the power of a Nature that creates constantly mutating viruses, genetic machines re-creating themselves . . . embracing the breaks and flaws that give rise to such lovely monsters."

"I think about Plato's ideal, or God, and from that way of thinking, we are all not perfect," Estrada says. "We are partial images of perfectibility. Beauty is a proof that in the world another space does exist, but it is unattainable. We exist in a deformed and imperfect world, socially, aesthetically, politically. I'm not one to denigrate beauty. People have problems with it because it is not democratic. My sculptures are trying to be but can't necessarily be beautiful, which is another form of beauty."

Estrada's paintings and sculptures are born of pop culture, especially cartoons.

"They are a space where deformity happens easily," he says. From a portfolio, he takes out a series of drawings writhing with dripping and pneumatic body parts that recall the efforts of pulp cartoonist Robert Williams.

Critics have mentioned Estrada's sculpture's relationship to science-fiction movies, but the artist demurs:

"Everyone sees these movies, but they are not necessarily making that kind of work. Maybe it's coming out of a sense of pathos about life, about the unattainable wholeness, a place of desire that can't be fulfilled. It's about an extraordinary happiness about life with an extraordinary sadness.

"Can you put that breadth of emotional experience into something? That's a difficult thing to do. At some point, I'd like to make work that could do that. It would have to be messy! The boundaries of it would have to be unstable. It would have to be able to expand and contract at the same time.

"Art is not entertainment," Estrada insists. "Art is the space for everything the world wants to leave out, which is a problem for people who don't know how to deal with all that messiness."

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VICTOR ESTRADA, Shoshana Wayne Gallery, Bergamot Station, 2525 Michigan Ave., B1, Santa Monica. Dates: Opens Saturday. Tuesdays to Fridays, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.; Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Through Jan. 31. Phone: (310) 453-7535.