FIRE AND RAIN

by Felecia Chizuko Carlisle

Magdalena Fernández: 2iPM009
Humberto Calzada: The Fire Next Time

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The two concurrent solo exhibitions at the Frost Art Museum set up a complex dichotomy of forms and concepts. Magdalena Fernández presents a high-tech sound and video installation, entitled 2iPM009, and the two adjoining rooms contain numerous traditional paintings by Humberto Calzada, a body of work called The Fire Next Time.

The contrasting mediums, subjects and styles are distinctive in their opposition, yet these contradictions tie the exhibits together for a feeling of completion and an “equal yet opposite” dynamic. Each of the artists is dealing with something as elemental as fire or water, yet their particular approaches and narratives compel a deeper analysis, especially when they are considered in relation to one another.

Cuban-American artist, Humberto Calzada, has a long-standing reputation in South Florida as a conventional painter of dreamy island architectures, unblemished skies, reflective textures, and liquid landscapes. His new paintings add depth to his overall body of work by exploring a distinct and striking contrast in subject matter. Harmonious balance, solid geometry and cool, deep expanses are traded in for fiery night skies, exploding buildings, and chaos. Calzada’s exclusion of the figure evokes a sense of quiet aloneness, an approach that can lead to despair when taken in tandem with the subject, the destructive force of fire. These new landscape paintings, although fictional, recall familiar memories and images from media footage of actual places and events; bombed buildings, forest fires, disaster and war. This work seems to tap into a collective memory acquired only through mediation, as opposed to lived experience. They reflect on a general condition rather than a specific instance. The viewer is located outside of the scene, disconnected from it, yet somehow implicated, drawing parallels between the experiences of viewing the paintings and watching the news.

Magdalena Fernandez’ piece, 2iPM009, visualizes the sound of a rainstorm using animated geometric abstractions projected on a long expanse of wall in a large, dark room with a shiny, slick floor. The floor appears wet as it reflects a series of linear elements that create patterns of white light against a black background. The patterns emerge slowly and gradually, building up in density, undulating with the rhythmic and naturalistic sounds of thunder and raindrops. The narrow rectangular shapes intersect as they expand and contract with the sound and when thunder hits they quickly thicken and brighten the room temporarily. For that moment, one is convinced of the authenticity of the sound. The hazy reflection on the floor looks like the ground when it is wet from rain and the lightning strikes. It is startling to be snapped back into the room once that moment subsides. The irony is that all the sounds and images in Fernandez’ installation are simulated, not recorded. Nothing is real, yet the piece draws an empathetic response. It conjures memories of real, lived experiences, in contrast to Calzada’s paintings. The difference between the two is perceptual and experiential.

The fundamental comparison here is between two experiences: looking at an image and walking into an environment. These are basic questions of medium and form, yet these two artists complicate the issue with their strategic approaches to content. Calzada’s paintings are images of images, not images of real things. The landscapes that he draws are imagined, removed, and anonymous. The lie is obvious. On the other hand, there is the lie that 2iPM009 tells is more subverted, less visible. The sound tricks you into being there, in that particular place with the rain. The works rely on spectacle; Calzada’s paintings are comparable to watching an event on television in a distant place or time and the Fernandez installation is a more cinematic experience that fully engages the body in the present. Both are simulated, contrived, allusions of nature that are essentially fictional, yet they each coerce dramatically divergent visceral and memory responses, as opposite as fire and rain.

~Felecia Chizuko Carlisle