

Elbert Joseph Perez's "Just Living the Dream"

by Hallie Ayres

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A pristine, nondescript hammer dangles upside down from the skylight in Rachel Uffner's upstairs gallery. Situated on a pedestal directly underneath are three porcelain figurines: a swan, a lamb, and a pony. Arranged in a congregation that is as tender as it is eerie, the figurines exude a fragility that is exacerbated tenfold by the hammer's precarious installation. The notion that moments of suspension—of disbelief or otherwise—can so quickly turn catastrophic runs through the rest of the works on display in "Just Living the Dream," Elbert Joseph Perez's first solo gallery show in New York City.

The motif of ceramic figurines of baby animals on the brink of violent extermination recurs throughout Perez's suite of paintings. The eleven compositions, all oil on canvas, oscillate stylistically between aesthetics of naturalist still life and symbolist metaphysics. Their conventional orientation on the gallery wall belies the foreboding subject matter. *Duhkha Aisle* (all works 2022) features a ceramic duck in a cowboy hat, an immobile target for the rearing snake in the hellscape behind it, while *16 oz. Migraine* positions the glazed upper body of a horse inches away from a glimmering sledgehammer affixed to something beyond the bounds of the canvas by a gossamer string. In the background is a faint sketch of a dragon's fiery expression and a serpent's maw. The sketch bears a resemblance to the celestial charts we see mapped onto ceilings from the halls of antiquity to Grand Central Station. In *Bambi: Reloaded*, a figurine doe dotes on her fawn. Positioned in the middle of an asphalt road that opens onto a void at the right corner of the canvas, the deer are moments away from being engulfed by a wildfire. On the torso of the mother is a porcelain blue rendering of a lion attacking a horse, a reference to the Romantic painter George Stubbs's decades-long engagement with this allegory. Perez carries forth the mantle of Stubbs's obsessive inquiry into the circle of life. But here, the inanimate animals of Perez's paintings are merely proxies to absorb the shock of deferred perils.

The press release notes that Perez, a mechanic by day, painted these works in late nights and early mornings, the liminal period when most people are comatose, immersed in dreams. Perez's works arrive as dispatches from these unrealities, where animal avatars undergo the fate of mythology so that we don't have to. A number of the paintings make reference, either in subject matter or title, to the psychological horrors of our temporal lobes: *Hypnic Jerk*; *Don't Dream For Me*; *The Long Nap*; *The Next Bardo*; *Thoughts of Mercy and Grace*. It's a small leap to read these works as vehicles for psychoanalytical signifiers.

Perez's show contributes to a resurgent discourse on surrealism and dreams, on full display in Cecilia Alemani's international exhibition at the Venice Biennale, titled "The Milk of Dreams" in a reference to Leonora Carrington's enchanted worlds. The language and theory of dreams has been widely employed toward imagining alternative futures with an implied social or cultural benefit, usually geared toward liberation in the broadest sense. And yet, this idealism can sometimes feel like an escape from the real rather than a means of reforming it. Without straying into fatalism, Perez's work arrives as an analgesic to this dream-speak phenomenon, toeing the line between healthy cynicism and the desire for transcendence.

Cute and comical as some of Perez's compositions appear, they suggest a darker loss of reason—an ominous consequence of living through these fantasies of escapism. Imagining alternative realities allows us to exercise control, but Perez seems more committed to warning against the romanticism of dreams and the allure of escapism. We should be wary of seduction by the fantasies that Perez depicts: sleepwalking through life may grant us some emotional security, but it also precludes us from reckoning with reality. In the end, I wished the sledgehammers would drop, so that the slumbering beings might wake up.

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