

POUSSIN M'INSTRUIT: Poussin teaches me. Maybe, but what Poussin teaches and what Graham learned are not congruent. Truer to what we see is Graham's intriguingly postmodern observation from 1931: "We use painters of the past as we use paint, so much per tube, so much per magazine reproduction." Like every modern neoclassicism of any value—and there haven't been many, but they're always more modern and less classical than they claim—Graham's became a tool of the most outrageous eccentricity, allowing the artist to express his erotic obsessions with just the flimsiest protective veil of formal rectitude. Self-contradiction, perhaps even self-deception, lends these late paintings an unfathomable sense of mystery that makes them impossible to forget.

—Barry Schwabsky

CHICAGO

Tania Pérez Córdova

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

For "Smoke, Nearby," Mexican artist Tania Pérez Córdova's first US retrospective, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago made the unusual decision of leaving one of its downstairs galleries clear of any dividing walls. The open expanse was bathed in a uniform white light, which lent a still, clinical appearance to the sculptures hanging from, leaning against, or tucked within a series of irregular wooden display structures. These constructions functioned as stations at which the viewer could pause, gradually building conceptual connections between the different sculptures as she navigated the space. Only one work, *Detour*, 2017—a photograph of smoke curling into the air—hung on the perimeter wall. The photograph staged a missing element of a nearby sculpture, *They say it's like a rock*, 2015, an elegantly warped glass plane from which a stick of incense was suspended (the museum's fire code meant that it could not be lit). Distributed throughout the room were kindred works made from found panes of glass (one taken from the museum's ceiling above) coupled with other objects, one per work: a jade bracelet, plywood, soap-free cleansing gel, a plastic bag, nail polish, a guitar string, and a cigarette butt. Pithy wall descriptions

Who these people were, and whether they knew each other, was unclear. Upon initial viewing, these mannered riffs on Fluxus and institutional critique felt overly broad, but on closer inspection, subtle clues unveiled pointed, site-specific narratives. (As it turns out, the man and woman who inspired these paintings are local Chicagoans with whom Pérez Córdova made a "small agreement . . . [they] would pop by [the exhibition] from time to time wearing the shirt [and the dress].")

The show, curated by José Esparza Chong Cuy, presented Pérez Córdova's practice as a pointed departure from those of other contemporary Mexican sculptors, such as Abraham Cruzvillegas. As scholar Robin Greeley argues, Cruzvillegas's references to slums (*colonias para-caidistas*) in his work have created a recognizable set of signifiers for Mexico City as a specific metropolis, albeit one harshly conditioned by the global economy; by contrast, Pérez Córdova seems to return to the melancholic, placeless poetics of Gabriel Orozco. In *Yielding Stone*, 1992, Orozco rolled a ball of plasticine in the street as it picked up detritus, consequently immortalizing indexical traces of the external world in its gnarled surface. Pérez Córdova's *We Focus on a Woman Facing Sideways*, 2013/2017, similarly refers to a time and a place that we cannot see or experience: The work comprises a Swarovski diamond earring dangling from a brass display, as well as "a woman wearing the other earring" somewhere beyond the institutional space. What social class does this individual occupy; what sort of mobility does she have?

The practice of incorporating inaccessible elements or events in an artwork has its roots in the postwar avant-garde, from Yves Klein's "immaterial transfers" to Robert Smithson's nonsites. Pérez Córdova locates a darker possibility in this tradition with *A person possessed by curiosity*, 2015, a ceramic bowl with the fossil-like imprint of a Banamex debit card on its surface. The debit card was linked to a real bank account into which the artist deposited money throughout the exhibition's run. *A person possessed* likely makes reference to a major money-laundering bust that occurred in 2013, when the Federal Reserve connected Banamex USA, a subsidiary of Citigroup, to Mexican drug cartel activity. If Pérez Córdova imbricates this work in vast flows of politics, finance, and crime, she engages the scale of the individual body in *First-Person Narrator*, 2013/2017, a marble slab with a shallow depression in which honey, green hazel, and blue cosmetic contact lenses float. Another example of the sinister elegance of Pérez Córdova's practice, *First-Person's* disembodied gaze prompts us to wonder if someone once wore the contacts in an attempt to lighten the color of their eyes. Here the pathos of identity in the Trump era is rendered ghostly and yet acutely physical.

—Daniel Quiles

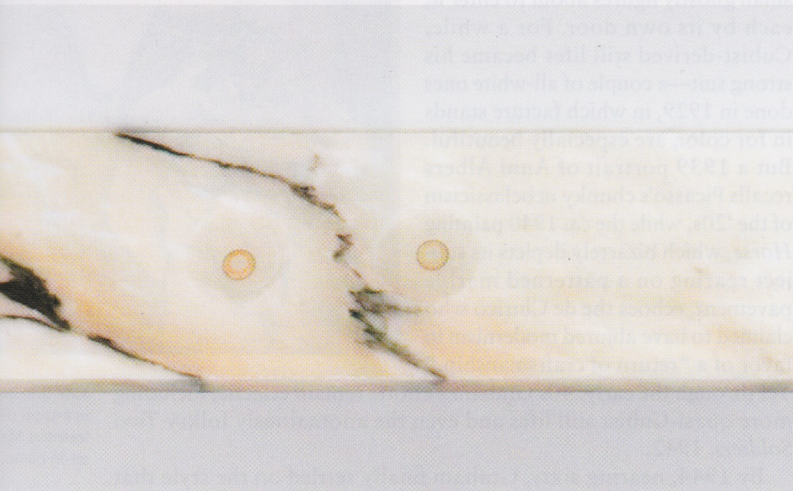
PORTLAND, OREGON

Ryan McLaughlin

ADAMS AND OLLMAN

Recently returned to the US after a multiyear sojourn in Berlin, American painter Ryan McLaughlin has come home to a changed nation. His country's public life, always grotesque, has become an outright horror show, riven by daily violence and the breakdown of any common public language. How might a painter like McLaughlin, of such searching intelligence and melancholy sensibility, get along in this stridently polarized era?

At Adams and Ollman, McLaughlin continued his long-standing practice of graphic appropriation, showing a suite of seven paintings from 2017 that feature hieroglyphic shapes set afloat in fields of gentle taupes, tans, and frank browns. *Demeter*, one of the larger works on



Pérez Córdova, *First-Person Narrator* 2013/2017, marble and cosmetic contact lenses, 74 3/4 x 1". produced interplays between obdurate materials—bronze, marble, clay, aluminum, earth—and absent things, people, or events: For instance, the captions for *Portrait of a Man Unknown* and *Portrait of a Woman Unknown*, both 2013/2017, paintings that replicate the patterns of a man's shirt and a woman's dress, informed visitors that the works' mediums also included the man and woman wearing those clothes.



Ryan McLaughlin,
Demeter, 2017, oil on
canvas, 15½ x 24".

display, presents fruit-like forms—a dusty hot-pink apple recognizable by its stem, maybe a banana, and maybe a wilted green snap pea—rendered in silhouette beneath a sickly (yet lovely) baby-shit-brown overcoat. These explicit vegetal signifiers comprise only one part of the overall design schema, however, sharing space with other, more nebulous icons, such as a dijon-colored star and an oval flecked with midnight lavender. The pictographs orbit each other, suggesting allusive meanings that never entirely resolve—leaving the viewer to languish in a lightly charged realm one might reasonably call poetic, or simply beautiful.

Another painting, also titled *Demeter*, revisits a recurring motif within the artist's oeuvre: the logo for the titular German organic-food-certification organization named after the goddess of the harvest. In McLaughlin's hands, the logo, painted in off white, raspberry pink, and forest green and set against a battleship-gray backdrop, commands central attention even as the letters forming it are garbled and indistinct. The conceptual goal seems less polemical here (a critique of corporate branding or of the agricultural-industrial complex) than simply observational: a Ruschavian presentation of a word that's also an expressive image. If the picture's intimate signification hints at a politics of communication, it enters as a whisper or an echo, not as a scream.

The remaining untitled works, even more gnomic in nature than the *Demeter* paintings, emit a muted, pre-distressed glow. Here, McLaughlin's rustic and intellectual tendencies combine, generating images rich in both aura and ad hoc syntax. The resulting aesthetic is akin to that of self-taught artist Bill Traylor by way of Jasper Johns. One canvas depicts a blocky bovine in navy with a white cross emblazoned on its flank, partially evoking the Swiss flag, partially resembling an ambulance. Elsewhere, symbols and fragments of symbols cluster in different formations, incorporating alphabets, dots, squiggles, and insignia, but always the semiotic circuits remain muzzled and damp. Ultimately one's attention returns to the paint itself, which is applied with a uniformly supple, delicate thoughtfulness.

In an age of fiercely announced opinion and identity, McLaughlin's tendency toward self-effacement comes as a tonic. If anything, his voice only seems to get quieter as the headlines become ever more explosive. While his early figurative work held a certain Philip Guston-influenced archness, involving cartoonish still lifes and flashes of the postwar painter's favored emerald green and pork-chop pink, McLaughlin's most recent output pursues a rigorous intimacy of scale and vibe. His voice, though increasingly hermetic, is also at once critical, lyrical, and earthy. These paintings invite the viewer into the mind and eye of a person they might actually want to know, who lives in a place they might actually want to be.

—Jon Raymond

LOS ANGELES

Rebecca Warren

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

In the Hadean period, the earliest geologic era in earth's history, the planet's defining characteristic was its hot, molten surface, which would ultimately cool and harden to create the relatively stable terra firma we enjoy today. Much later, following the arrival of *Homo sapiens*, the Bronze Age would see the advent of metal tools, after which the sturdy iron supplanted bronze; the alloy would thereafter become the medium of choice for artisans and sculptors. British artist Rebecca Warren recently produced a series of painted bronze sculptures titled "Los Hadeans" (all works 2017), whose spindly forms, like cattails gone to seed, call to mind both amorphous protean globs and the blue-chip bronze figurative works on which they are commonly seen as riffs. Yet Warren has remarked that her titles are intentional red herrings, and her "Hadeans," invariably described as Giacomettiesque, on closer inspection reveal themselves to be rather squirrely and coy, diverging from both Giacometti's pathos and the primordial Sturm und Drang of their namesake period.

One of these sculptures includes a diminutive yarn pom-pom of the sort that one might make at summer camp, which linked it to other likewise adorned pieces among the works on display across Matthew Marks's two Los Angeles galleries. *Los Hadeans (III)*, a lanky shape with two legs, a headlike lump crowned with a spire, and a flat plane extending from its midsection that brings to mind a matador's flag, has a pom-pom affixed where the figure's right eye might be. The adjacent work *Let's All Chant* also featured a pom-pom, in this case perched on an angular, table-like structure of shiny painted steel, held in place by a skinny pink beam that sliced across the room and rested against the table's surface. As the only non-"Hadean" work in this gallery, the piece underscored the signature tension in Warren's practice between the lumpily figurative and the sleekly planar. In both modes Warren leans heavily on art-historical precedents. Her figures reference not only Giacometti but also Futurist sculptors such as Constantin Brancusi and Umberto Boccioni, while her boxy structures are more anodyne minimal—save for their plushy additions. Yet all of Warren's citations, from the explicit to the generic, seem chosen to serve as heroic foils for her deliberately flippant surface treatments and embellishments. Indeed, *Let's All Chant* is painted in a color I must resignedly describe as "millennial pink"—the much derided yet omnipresent hue of 2016.

While this somewhat forced dialectic of competing formal language dominated the works on view at the gallery's North Orange Grove

