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Carlos Vega Combines Stones, Renaissance Frames, and Forgotten Celebrities to Make Paintings Designed to Transcend Time

At Jack Shainman, the artist (and gallerist's husband) unveils his first solo show in seven years.

WORDS **Karly Quadros** (<https://www.culturedmag.com/@karly-quadros/>)

DATE March 30, 2026



At the beginning of our conversation about Carlos Vega's current show at Jack Shainman, the artist leans forward conspiratorially. "Should I go open heart with you? Should I tell you everything? I don't wanna sound like a freak."

Open-hearted seems to be the dominant mode for the 63-year-old artist (who is also Shainman's husband). His vast paintings on lead substrate evoke an Edenic image of the universe most often found in '60s psychedelia. A nymph with a waterfall for hair and foliage for a dress carries a young stag on her back. Extraterrestrial flora sprout tendrils, buds, and roots from a placid face in repose. Galaxies swirl. Portals yawn. Mother Nature is there, a haloed odalisque.

Vega isn't afraid to come across as a bit woo-woo. For him, art isn't about the expression of his individual identity, but rather universal truths about the soul, consciousness, and death. The show's title, *Anima Mundi*, is rooted in ancient Greek philosophy and refers to the interconnectedness of all animate and inanimate things. There's something alchemical about Vega's works, all imploding stars and mutant botany, as the artist attempts to push beyond the rational and discrete and towards the intuitive and interconnected.

As he gets older, Vega says, all other artistic questions converge into one: what happens to consciousness after death? The subject is especially potent for Vega, who was born and raised in the small, autonomous Spanish town of Melilla in northern Morocco. His grandfather was assassinated during the Spanish Civil War, leaving his father orphaned. This awareness of life's precarity, paired with his proximity to the vibrant natural beauty of the Mediterranean, drove a young Vega to classical art with a spiritual overtone. He studied painting at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Spain, where he spent hours copying still lifes and nudes. "*Anima Mundi*" has its own nods to this classical training: all the frames featured are Renaissance antiques.

"*Anima Mundi*" is on view at Jack Shainman until April 18. CULTURED called up Vega to go deep on metaphysics, saints, and how COVID changed the spiritual landscape of America.



Carlos Vega, *Levi*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photography by Dan Bradica Studio.

Can you tell me about the inception of the show?

I'm an artist that invests a lot of time in the studio, meaning hundreds of hours of labor for each piece. It takes me a couple of years to resolve some of them.

I've been doing art since I was 17 or 18. When you're that young, there are all kinds of crises you haven't gone through yet. Back then, the ultimate question we go through is one of identity: who am I? How has my past affected me? But at a certain point, the ultimate question is whether consciousness can survive death or not. It is the most important question that humanity has placed on the table because it's something that we all confront sooner or later.

Until 150, 200 years ago when encyclopedias and science came full force, art was a vehicle to talk about the world of the invisible. The world of the invisible is dreams, premonition, intuitions, connections with a benevolent higher force, all those things that have propelled art to be what it came to be in the 18th century. Most of all, it was about finding images that guided you through life. Then, being intelligent and rational beings, we began only accepting things that are measurable and tangible.

Conversations about the nature of consciousness—the nature of the soul, the silent voice that we all feel at night in bed, asking, Why are we here? What's the future going to bring?—became secondary to static expressions of society, of the self.

Artwork represents identity, but I've been dealing more with the concept of the soul and the journey of life. What inspires me in this show is not only the soul but also lived experience. For example, there's a work, Levi, involving a horse and a moment I witnessed when he was adopted. He understood that something had changed, and I saw this moment of love between two species, human and animal. I'm sure you've experienced something similar with your pets or things you love. That's what motivates me.

Were you always interested in these metaphysical questions, or were there particular experiences that led you there?

I was always a bit quirky. I'm gay, which wasn't easy. Then, over the past 20 years, I decided my work had to hold something powerful and immense. I also come from a European tradition where the main function of art is to remind you of something important.

There's something visually compelling about art that pushes you to think about what the triviality of life takes away. Years ago, I did a whole series based on people's diaries, portraying how an individual life can become a representation for all of us. For example, I think you and I have both experienced the highest and lowest points. Nobody is safe from feeling like they're drowning in life. That's where I like to go. I like artwork that asks questions, not with a hermetic answer, but something you can relate to. These are not abstract gestures. They are tangible experiences we all recognize.



Carlos Vega, *Luxe-Joie*, 2026. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photography by David Schulze.

So much of your work has visual references to alchemy as well as medieval and Renaissance art. I would love to hear how you sourced your Renaissance art frames.

I wanted to create a sense of power. I believe that as an artist, you charge the artwork. When I paint, it's like cooking: you start with a base, but every gesture, every cut, every decision adds meaning. All the accessory elements carry energy.

I wanted to create objects of reverence, like when you go to the Metropolitan Museum and see a Madonna. You might be Jewish, Hindu, or anything else, but you still feel that sense of divinity or tenderness.

For this exhibition, I also purchased many semi-precious stones, and I was fortunate to acquire frames from an auction house connected to the Metropolitan Museum's acquisition funds. I specifically chose tabernacle frames—those with columns and a pediment—because they elevate the artwork. I want to reach the same level of power as Raphael or Leonardo. When you're alone in the studio, the inner call is always to be as good as the masters you admire.

The frames help emphasize works related to divinity. I believe in synchronicities, in a kind of guardian presence or universal intelligence that loves each of us as if we were the only ones on Earth.

That comes through in your depictions of nature, especially plant life. I was even thinking of something like the Voynich manuscript. What draws you to those forms?

Sometimes I fantasize that in the afterlife I'd have a job designing plants and flowers. I'd love to be a biological engineer, creating new forms that could evolve, fall in love, produce new variations. The older I get, the more I enjoy dwelling in that kooky, imaginative space.

The exhibition's title, "Anima Mundi," really ties into that, this idea of a spiritual connection with nature beyond religion.

Yes. When I talk about spirituality, I mean something completely separate from dogma. I'm not interested in religion as a system. I want to speak about something universal, something not tied to any one belief.



Carlos Vega, *The Highest Place in the World*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
Photography by Dan Bradica Studio

You live in New York now but do you have another home outside of the city? Do you spend a lot of time in nature?

I grew up in North Africa, in a Spanish city on the Moroccan coast. The woman who raised me, a Moroccan Muslim nanny, taught me how to eat, how to behave. From her I learned compassion and love, and from very early on I understood that we are all fundamentally the same.

I later had a very traditional European education at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Spain—six hours a day for five years drawing from nudes from life. That training made me sensitive to the visible power of things, including nature.

I see magic in nature all the time, in works like *Gea (Gaia)*, or *Don't Tell Me You Can't*, or the cactus piece where humanity emerges from its trunk. There's always something symbolic, something alive.

Your landscapes feel especially lush, reflecting your positive outlook for humanity. The environment in your work feels almost idealized, like a kind of Garden of Eden.

I think that's my own therapy. I can be a bit depressed, so I create a world that is as loving and beautiful as possible.

Your last solo show was in 2019. What's changed since then?

That show was very different. It focused on female saints, broadly speaking. I've always loved women—the way they think, the emotional intelligence I've experienced from my nanny, my mother, my sister, my friends.

What's changed now is the intensity of effort, especially working with lead. Painting allows for correction, but with lead, every mark is permanent. You can't erase it. That rigidity forces intention. Nothing is accidental. It's all by subtraction.

Even now, I'm still working on the large triptych for the show. So I go back to the studio at night. The process almost becomes trance-like because there's no room for error.



Carlos Vega, *Don't Tell Me You Can't*, 2012-25. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.
Photography by Dan Bradica Studio.

Do you think the pandemic influenced that shift?

Yes. COVID also brought an awareness of spirituality. I don't think I'm unusual in asking these questions. In times of confusion, noise, and online distraction, people begin to wonder what lies beyond the immediate. COVID made people realize we are not simple beings. We contain something greater, something connected.

I was curious about your use of postcards in Red Giant. I recognized some of the faces: Jane Fonda, John Wayne. Where did those come from?

I've used different media. In one work, I used U.S. postal stamps because they reflect 140 years of cultural history, moving from emperors to artists, thinkers, and environmental imagery.

For the piece Red Giant, I used images of famous actors and actresses from the '60s and '70s. Most people today don't recognize them. That's the point. I wanted to use those popular figures to represent how we are conditioned to others' perception of us—what if I'm misunderstood? What will they think of me? But we have to pay no attention to how people perceive us. Life is an opportunity to bring forward what is best inside of you. It could be like a game of discovery, but it goes beyond that. It's to acknowledge that there are two aspects of life: one is the context of the people surrounding us and how they perceive us. And the second is the cosmic meaning of your life.

Having a Ball Living in a Former Ballroom Jack Shainman and Carlos Vega's apartment had to have space for "big art."



By Wendy Goodman, Curbed and New York Magazine's design editor ▾



Great Rooms

*A visual diary by Design Editor
Wendy Goodman.*

The Living Room: "The Donald Judd furniture was something I always wanted," Jack Shainman says. Emanuel Araújo's polychrome wood sculpture hangs on the back wall; El Anatsui's *Obscured Narrative* is on the right wall; a 16th-century panel and chest is on the left. Photo: Jason Schmidt

It was dreary. I mean really dreary,” gallerist Jack Shainman says of the loft, which occupies part of what was once a ballroom in an 1872 building near Madison Square that he and his artist-husband Carlos Vega bought a decade ago. The apartment hadn’t been inhabited for years and was filled with unclaimed furniture scattered around the dark musty space that retained the trimmings of ’80s living: gold-painted tin ceilings and pipes, ruddy natural brick walls, and, in one corner, a narrow spiral staircase that led to the primary bedroom with its uninviting brown hot tub.

“It was very unattractive,” Vega agrees, “but immediately the scale—2,057 square feet and 16-foot ceilings—was the most exciting thing.” They wanted space, both for themselves and for their rotating art collection.

At the time of my visit, they are living with Emanuel Araújo’s *Relevo*, a monumental wall sculpture of polychrome wood, and, on another wall, El Anatsui’s *Obscured Narrative*, a tapestry composed of aluminum and copper wire that hangs opposite a 16th-century work, *The Virgin and Child With Saint Anne, Saint John the Baptist, and Saint Sebastian*. There’s Donald Judd furniture in the living room along with Arturo Herrera’s felt *One Time (Orange)* placed between the windows, looking as if it had blown in on a breeze and just happened to attach on that spot.

Renaissance religious and royal paintings face off with the powerful beauty of portraits by Kerry James Marshall, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Barkley L. Hendricks, Michelangelo Pistoletto, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. The juxtapositions add to the impact of the collection that changes according to what Shainman and Vega decide to exhibit at any given time.

Collecting started early for Shainman, whose father was a professor at Williams College. He’d visit the Clark Art Institute where, he says, “as a kid, I especially liked the old paintings but mostly the famous Bouguereau, *Nymphs and Satyr*.” He adds, laughing, “It was titillating as a child. It was probably like porn, almost.” He started buying photographs from students at age 10 for \$20 or \$30. “I still have those. Some of them still look really good.”

Shainman opened a gallery in 1984 in Washington, D.C., with his then-partner, Claude Simard. An early show featured the work of a self-taught postal worker, John Robinson. “I found these paintings,” he says. “I mean we always love bringing something into the art world that wasn’t considered.” Nine years later, he sought out Kerry James Marshall and gave him his first exhibition in New York City, where Shainman had moved his gallery. In 2014, Shainman opened a 30,000-square-foot exhibition space, the School, in a former Kinderhook high school near his 235-acre farm upstate in Stuyvesant. This fall, he will open a new space in the landmarked, Tribeca-adjacent Clock Tower Building. (His Chelsea gallery will remain open.)

Vega grew up in Spain and North Africa before moving to the U.S. to attend the Art Institute of Chicago. He and Shainman have been together since 1995, often making a home in spaces tighter than this loft. “For years,” Vega says, “we lived in a very little apartment; 11 years at Eighth Avenue and 21st Street.” “Although,” Shainman points out, “we actually had big art in there. It made it look bigger.”



The Entrance Hall: Vega, left, and Shainman seated on Judd chairs beneath paintings of different eras, including works by Gomez Bueno, Rodrigo de Villandrando, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Kerry James Marshall. Photo: Jason Schmidt



The Guest Room:
The shelves, and
16-foot
ceilings, create
space for a
collection of
Charles Catteau
pottery. Photo:
Jason Schmidt



The Kitchen: The renovation included moving and enclosing the kitchen. Charles Catteau and Barry McGee ceramics are on the shelves. Photo: Jason Schmidt



The Dining Area
"I have had that
Noguchi table
since the early
days of
Washington D.C.,
1985. The chairs
have changed a
few times
because they
just don't
last," Shainman
says the area
they use for
meetings and
meals. Carlos
Vega's *Ivory
Tower*, 2012,
made with stamps
and oil paint on
lead is on the
back wall behind
the table.
Photo: Jason
Schmidt



Dining Area
Wall: Kerry
James Marshall's
Ecce Homo, 2008-
2014, acrylic on
PVC panel, hangs
opposite the
dining table.
Photo: Jason
Schmidt



View into Powder Room: Nick Cave's *Arm Piece*, 2018, made of cast bronze, and vintage sunburst and tole flowers, hangs on the wall to the right of the kitchen door, at the far end of the entrance hall. Two 19th-century marble-panel rain water drains from India can be seen on the wall inside the powder room. Photo: Jason Schmidt

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Editors' Picks: 9 Great Art and Design Events This Week

Pioneer Works presents a new group show, and Wendy Red Star gives an artist talk at the Brooklyn Museum

by GALERIE EDITORS

FEBRUARY 19, 2019



Here are *Galerie's* picks of the must-see art and design events in New York City this week, from a new group exhibition at Pioneer Works to an artist talk by Wendy Red Star at the Brooklyn Museum.

6. Carlos Vega: Correspondences **Jack Shainman Gallery**

Taking inspiration from 17th-century Spanish painter Francisco de Zubarán's "Santas" paintings, Vega presents 24 portraits of female figures from mythology, history, and religion. The roster of heroines includes many intellectual figures whose contributions have never been widely appreciated, from the ancient mathematician and astronomer Hypatia, who is theorized to have discovered the elliptical orbit of planets more than a millennium before Johannes Kepler, to the martyred St. Teresia Benedicta, a vocal Nazi opposer who died at Auschwitz.

Where: Jack Shainman Gallery, 524 West 24th Street

When: Opening reception: Friday, February 22, 6–8 p.m.



Carlos Vega, *Lakmé*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Harper's BAZAAR ART

Spring 2019



*Spanish-born New York-based painter
Carlos Vega celebrates matriarchal
power through the lens of his vibrant
upbringing by the Mediterranean, writes
Osman Can Yerebakan*

The WOMEN ON THE VERGE OF *Life*

“L

ife advice I receive from women around me is very important, because their priorities are more in tune with mine in life,” says Carlos Vega of his decision to present life-size paintings of women in his recent solo exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York. Entitled *Correspondences*, the exhibition occupies the Chelsea gallery with 24 female figures for which the artist seeks inspiration from contemporary and historic matriarchs. “First, I fall in love with a character at an intellectual level,” admits Vega at his studio located at the gallery’s upstate outpost The School, in New York State’s scenic town, Kinderhook. Amicable, energetic and attentive, the 56-year-old finalised his renderings of inspirational female forces in early February. The subjects range from contemporary names such as Malala to religious icons including Mary Magdalene, embodied through Vega’s brushstrokes and placed in contemporary attires and backdrops.

The decision to focus on women as his subject matter aligns with the Spanish-born’s new chapter in his career, following a decision to veer away from his former material-heavy multimedia paintings towards an intimate relationship with the canvas. After years of cutting and carving lead or metal, these days Vega solely relies on his paintbrush. He enjoys experimenting with this conventional tool, trimming its hairs in order to create serpentine lines on surface. The process is visible and personal, allowing him to endow emotional depth and otherworldliness to his characters’ strong narratives. Vega’s search for spontaneity and fluidity prompted his return to a waltz between gestural brushstrokes on the canvas, freeing his female figure from specific photographs or model sitting as source material.

Studio time is both a luxury and a curse, according to the painter. Spontaneity is now key. “If I get too comfortable with what I am doing, I’d lose the mystery,” he says, moving his “women” amidst his light-filled, spacious studio, introducing each of them one by one as if they were guests arriving at a gathering. At the exhibition, the artist expects the audience to similarly manoeuvre around the gallery and familiarise themselves with each subject as if they were attendees of a festivity. He therefore added an explanatory text to each painting in order to inform the viewer about the character. The widow of the architect, Antonio Jiménez Torrecillas, who also built The School stands amidst her two children in one painting, joined in another work by Luisa Ignacio Roldán, a 17th-century Spanish Rococo sculptor who was refused compensation for her work by the king because of being a woman. Vegas notes how The Metropolitan Museum of Art recently acquired her work, adding: “Everyday, women, similar to these subjects, go unnoticed, although they take on vast responsibilities. They refuse being victimised—they eventually find a way.”



“EVERYDAY, WOMEN, SIMILAR TO THESE SUBJECTS, GO UNNOTICED, ALTHOUGH THEY TAKE ON VAST RESPONSIBILITIES”

Facing page:
Hypatia, 2018.
Acrylic on
canvas, 198x110cm
Above: (Left)
Pachamama,
2019. Oil on linen,
198x110cm; (Right)
Nova, 2019.
Acrylic on canvas,
38x25cm

Just like his fellow Spanish filmmaker, Pedro Almodovar, whose passionate movies chronicle strong female protagonists assuming control of their own destinies against a patriarchal backdrop, Vega celebrates a Mediterranean maturity and ease towards the beauty and the agony of life. Growing up in the southern town of Melilla, which shares a border with Morocco, exposed him to a vibrant and eclectic panorama of cultures, religions, and modes of expression. “I firsthand learned the universality of God and how no culture has standing authority over the other,” he says about spending his formative years in Gibraltar, where observing Christian, Jewish and Muslim populations gave him a sense of relativity. “We had great curiosity for the cultures around us. Islam, for example, showed that God and spirituality could be represented in geometry and totality.” Vega studied printmaking in Spain and moved to the US 30 years ago as an already established name in his home country. However, life took its course for his next phase, and he studied at Chicago’s famed School of Art Institute. After working on public commissions, he moved to New York in 1995. He tried to work between two the metropolises, but New York’s competitive art scene required a full-time presence.

“In Spain, artists never have to explain a painting, so the US was initially a culture shock,” says Vega, who goes back home twice a year in order to “charge batteries.” Decades later, the artist still takes nourishment from the history of his homeland and through his *oeuvre* absorbs the artistic differences between two countries.

Captured in kinetic gestures and timeless attires, Vega’s women, which include the artist’s close friends, celebrated Spanish figures as well as individuals like Malala Yousafzai, orchestrate the multiplicity of human experience. In his paintings he expresses them with love and compassion even while they are challenged by society’s hardships and suffering. Vega’s women, however, survive their difficulties and celebrate the ardor. They are, in the artist’s own words, “carriers of fire.” ■ *Correspondences* runs until 30 March at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. jackshainman.com

IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN, NEW YORK

whitewall

March 12, 2019
By Pearl Fontaine



Carlos Vega, Pachamama, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 13 x 12 inches. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

Carlos Vega: Correspondences
Jack Shainman Gallery
Now—March 30

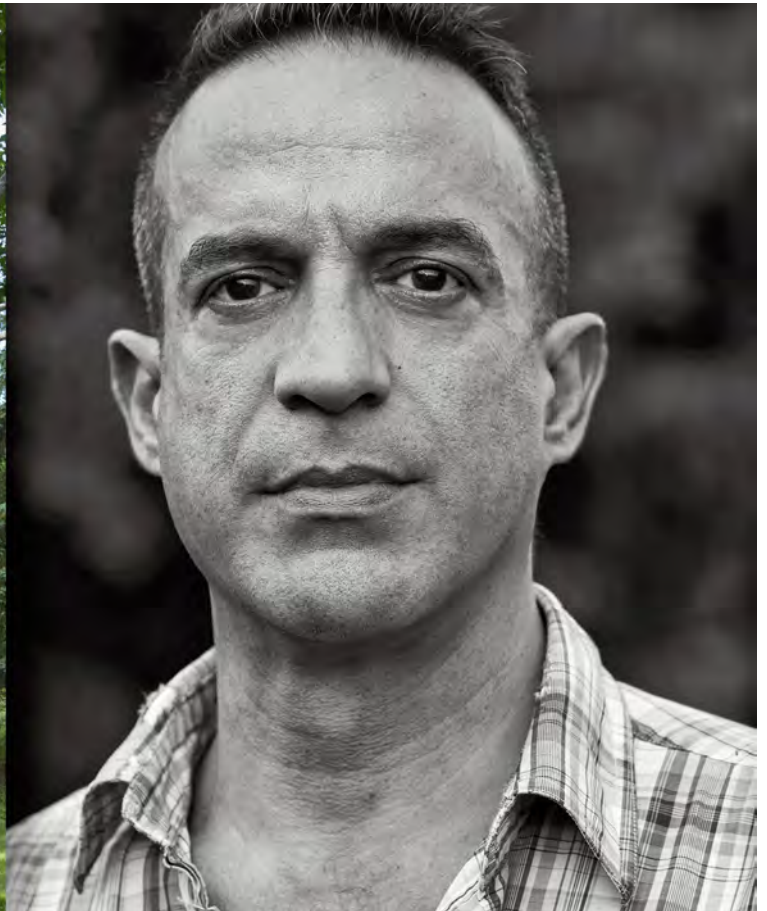
Cultivating a meeting point between mythology, religion, and history, the works of Carlos Vega's "Correspondences," also now on view at [Jack Shainman](#), become the new spiritual icons for today's contemporary world. Inspired by the *Santas* works of 17th-century artist Francisco de Zubarán, Vega has created 24 portraits of heroines, saints, and goddesses who struggled in their search for meaning and purpose. Including women like martyr St. Teresia Benedicta a Cruce, Nobel Peace Prize recipient Malala Yousafzai, and mathematician and astronomer Hypatia of Alexandria, the show depicts the tribe of heroines on backgrounds of linen in lively colors and markings, painted completely from his own intuition and memory.

UPSTATE DIARY

What Happens At Vega's...

Text Kate Orne Photographs Guzman

Originally published in No 7 .



*There are six canvases in
various stages of progress
that line the walls of*

Carlos Vega's studio, all life-sized females. He calls them his Apostles. It's a quiet space, in the little village of Kinderhook, New York, and the only sound one hears outside its large north facing windows is the sound of the birds.

Yet the studio is simmering with energy from both the unusual brushstrokes in the work and from Vega's presence. Just like the brushstrokes in the paintings, he is no stranger to exploring different processes or materials in his practice; from postage stamps, to lead, to collage elements, using gemstones or even executing large, site-specific installations. When I visit him, Vega is getting ready for his solo show *Correspondences* on 2/22 - 3/30, 2019 at Jack Shainman Gallery





“I have been thinking of how to make my contribution to the world. Since I was born, powerful women, women whom have had an important impact in my personal choices, have surrounded me and I wanted to create an homage to them. I also want to expand on a universal kind of aspiration — to represent all female talents.” His admiration of strong females is evident in his two paintings of Malala Yousafzai, *The Eternal, I Am Framed*, 2016, and *Thoughts of Joy, Words of Truth, Feelings of Love (Malala III)*, 2016. Malala, the youngest Nobel Prize laureate, took a bullet in an assassination attempt by the Taliban in retaliation for her activism. Vega’s powerful paintings express a deep respect for her.



There is an energy about Vega, a vibrant, exciting energy that draws one in. He is graceful and gentle, and to hear him talk is like dancing with a vocabulary steeped in mythology, history and religion, and underneath it all is a profound love and respect for humanity.

While we chat, there are times where he momentarily drifts away in thought, returning moments later with a broad, irresistible smile — his mind constantly working and contemplative. Vega is not someone who walks the usual path of contemporary art, nor, for that matter, the usual path of life, he seems way ahead of the game, like he'll lead you to places you want to go but didn't know existed.



“Being alive is your chance to manifest the ultimate level of perfection, of joy and of love — you have to try to make it

happen right here and now
— and I'm committed to
that.”

Vega believes that we are now in a different era — the era of women. “A friend of mine said that the concept of the apostle encompasses the diversity of human kind, the human spectrum, from the good to the bad. And I want to expand on that universal kind of aspiration: I’m drawn to the concept of twelve female apostles, each one of these females is a treasure and, like Judas Iscariot of the Twelve Apostles, the one who sold out Christ, one will be included as the cranky person. “Do you think Judas was cranky?” I ask, never having considered Judas as a grumpy kind of guy. “Yeah, he was too concerned about the things of this world and you shouldn’t be too concerned about the things of this world because these things are already lost. I’m more interested in the soul’s journey and the ultimate frontier; the question of where we are heading. I have always been interested in the metaphysical, in the God concept and in my soul. I have no question that consciousness is timeless and will not die.” His words are delivered with such passion. “I embraced Buddhism probably ten years ago and it was through Buddhist practice that I came back to Christianity. The chanting ... the mantras ... the repetition ... it all reminded me of the Rosary and prayer in Catholicism. You get to a point of mindless connection, but I’m interested in that aspect. I would love my painting to wake up the senses and the soul of the viewer. Of course the work must also be seductive visually but, in essence, it becomes representative of the observer’s soul. You know, I think that we are living in paradise, this earthly domain is a

wonderful place where synchronized magic happens all the time.” I ask if he believes this, despite the suffering in the world.



Without a beat, Vega responds, “Despite everything. All these iconic images of horror in art and the media, like the plague or people burning in purgatory for eternity, have more to do with how we’re all obsessed with tragedy and chaos, because it keeps us busy, it keeps our minds busy. But we are really only picking the bits that create the turmoil — the rest of the world is beautiful. You need to be fully aware that being alive is your chance to manifest the ultimate level of perfection, of joy and of love — you have to try to make it happen right here and now — and I’m committed to that. I’m committed to being in touch with my soul and to making wonderful things happen. I seek out religion like a child, just wanting to find the peace, the comfort and the reward of friendships, a moment of sincerity with somebody that you care about — I think that’s Godliness too.”

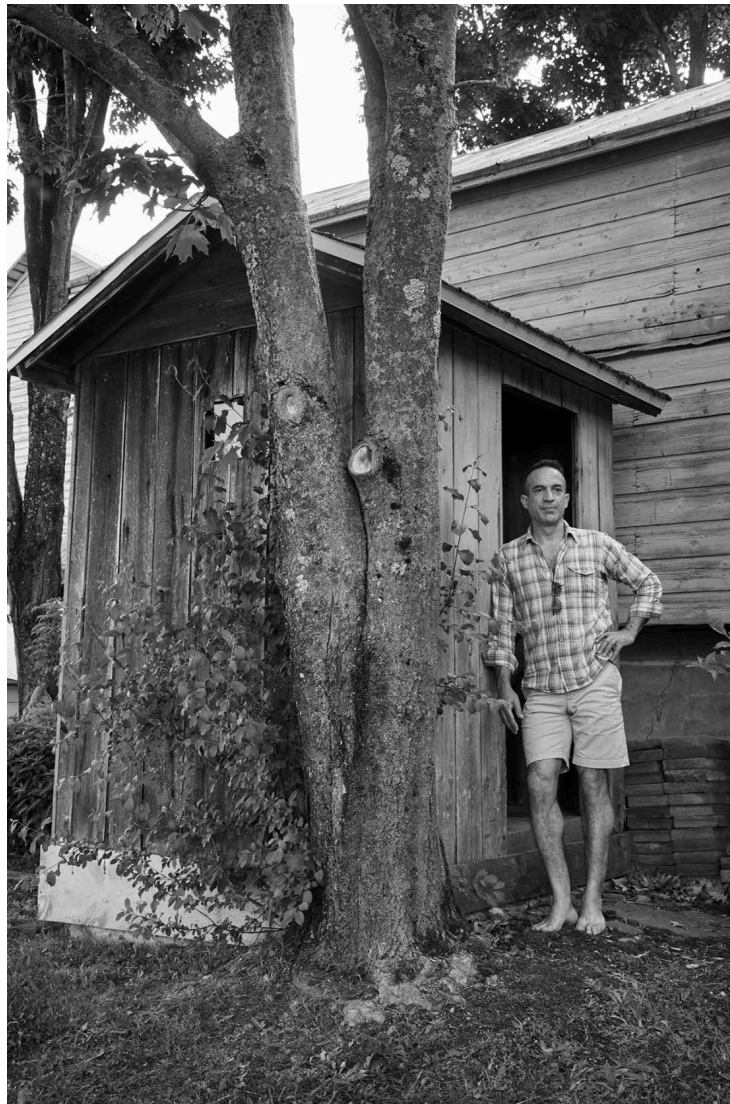


Vega was born and raised in the small, autonomous Spanish town of Melilla , a former Berber village on the coast of Morocco. Melilla, even the name of the place sounds like a discovery, is an architectural gem of Art Nouveau and Catalan Modernism, featuring the only authentic Gothic structure on the African continent. It must have been dreamy to grow up on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, in such visually rich surroundings — a place where inspiration could run wild and free.



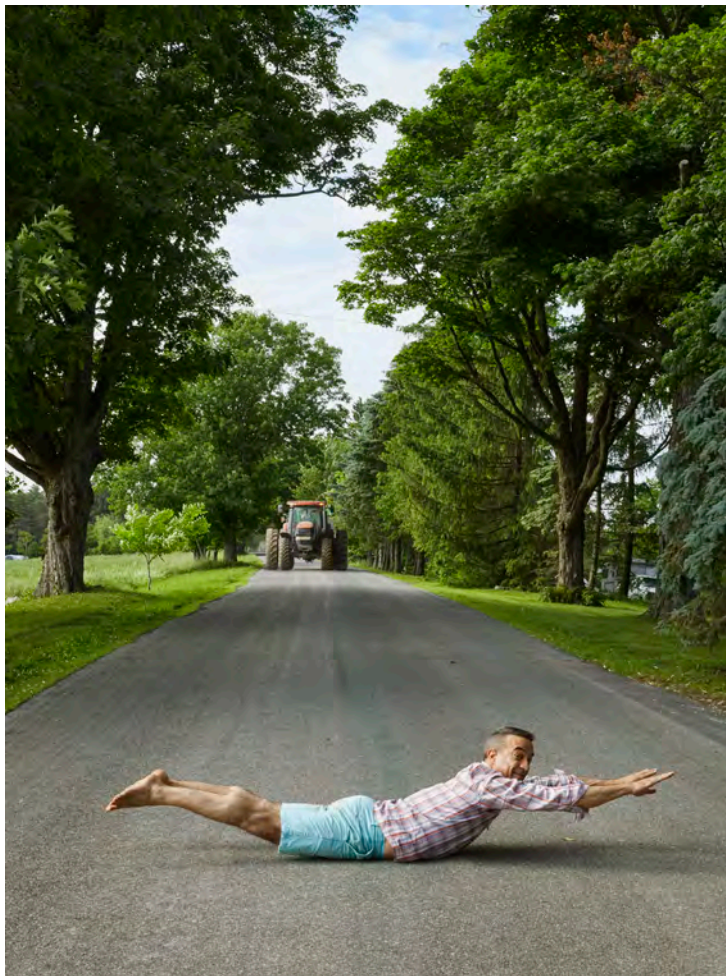
His father, who became a colonel in the Spanish army, had lived as an orphaned street kid after Vega's grandfather had been executed in the early days of the Spanish Civil War. Their house was burned down and Vega's grandmother died a few weeks later, at age 29, leaving behind two little children, ages 3 and 5. Food was scarce; Vega's father knew hunger. These kinds of life-altering experiences stick deeply within. Vega heard these stories growing up, and I suspect they contributed to his humbleness and appreciation for life. "My father didn't know a mother or a father. So for my father to be a father he needed to discover and learn the role. But he was the most beautiful father, really, the most beautiful," he says lovingly. "My mother was a nurse, third generation born and raised, in Melilla. "Since I was a child I have been

aware of mortality. I have always tried to find.... to resolve the riddle of life. Of course the riddle has infinite answers and not one answer can satisfy it all, but I've come to believe that the riddle of life is to enjoy life."





Vega makes the analogy that life is like an exquisite china cup with a visible crack running through it, and says, "If we can only accept that our imperfections and our pain are where they belong, then we have already reached another dimension. I think we are on the brink of becoming a synchronized humanity, where we are going to heal all these worldly problems. I think we are in the dawn of that. I really believe that what is ahead is all about the spirit, the soul." He continues, "Recently, I had an epiphany. I heard someone say, 'Don't envy success or pity failure because you don't know what success or failure is to the business of the soul.' We don't know what it is that our souls have come to this world to experience." Do you see what I mean? Vega takes us places....I ask if nature inspires him, being that he lives surrounded by it. "Nature is the foundation of everything I do, because I find nature's creation, like the human body, is a vocabulary for my communication. So yes, I love nature; nature is fundamental for my work. I also need art to teach me something. It's not about being religious but about being curious, about what your soul aches for. As artist, I'm here to make the invisible visible."



In this new series, one of the *Apostles* is going to be Flora, the goddess representative of the birth of spring, the power of regeneration. In the painting she is watering a tree. "She is inspired by a dear friend of mine, Maria Moreno, an artist and a stewardess of hundreds of acres in Spain. My *Flora* will represent the care, the farming, that good steward of the land. I grew up in a spiritual family, a dynasty of people who have worked for the service of society. My family have always been social servants; people who are doing their job because of a calling, not because they *have to*."

There is no doubt Vega walks in their footsteps, following *his* calling, perhaps not as a social servant but as an artist communicating an aspiration we are all part of.

Correspondences by Carlos Vega Feb. 22-March.30, 2019
at Jack Shainman Gallery.

(<http://www.jackshainman.com/artists/carlos-vega/>)

Why paint the saints? An interview with Carlos Vega

Ciaran Freeman

In a New York gallery—at the center of the contemporary art world—hangs a life-sized icon of a Catholic saint. In the austere space with white walls and cement floors I look up at this image of a nun in full habit, holding a halo. Against a flat purple backdrop, she glances over her shoulder to look at me, standing in awe of her.

The stack of books at her feet tell us who she is: Edith Stein, the 20th-Century German Jewish philosopher who converted to Christianity, joined the Carmelites, publicly denounced the Nazi regime and was ultimately martyred in the Holocaust. You may know her as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. But what is she doing here in Chelsea, hanging on walls reserved for contemporary art?

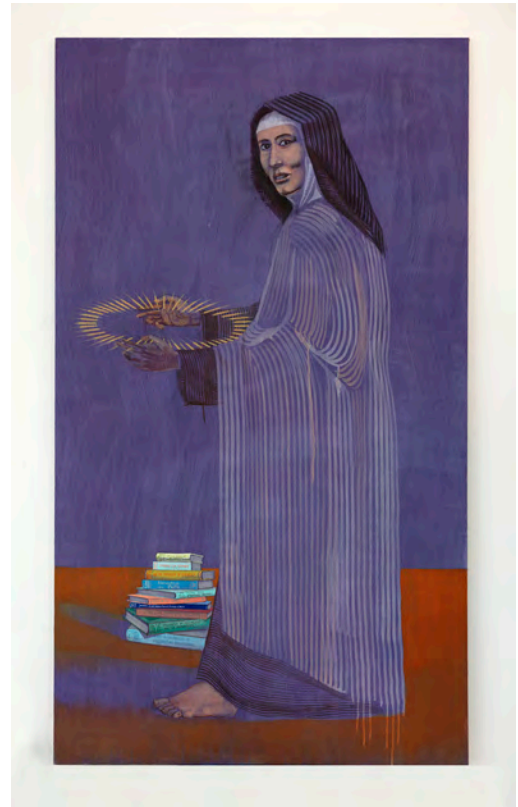
I sat down with the artist, Carlos Vega, at the Jack Shainman Gallery, to find out. He told me in this new body of work, “Correspondences,” (on view until March 30th) he wanted to explore traditional concepts of the body and the soul. In dialogue with the 17th-century Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbarán, who painted aspirational images of women to be hung in convents across Spain and the New World, Vega decided to paint his own saints. His goal was 12, like the apostles, but that quickly doubled to 24.

Some of the women are historical figures, some mythological, and some taken straight from the artist’s own life. Along with a few sketches and studies, these 24 sizable canvases hang in the gallery, begging to be fawned over. Aesthetically they are beautiful, colorful and pleasing—they are a joy to look at. Conceptually they are inspiring; they urge us to be better versions of ourselves. To be, some might say, saints.

Below is an edited version of our conversation.

Why paint the saints?

Why paint the saints?



"Edith Stein" painting by Carlos Vega; oil on linen, 78 x 44 inches, 2019. Jack Shainman Gallery

People don't really talk about the soul—it's like dirty talk. People shy away, but I think it's the ultimate question: "Who are we?" I'm here, I've got this body, but I have a voice inside that aches for truth and beauty, for connection. To shed my ego, to quiet my mind. I'm just like you and all of them [the saints], we are all the same—just people. We are destined for greatness, too.

I'm here, I've got this body, but I have a voice inside that aches for truth and beauty.

What is your spiritual background like?

I was raised Catholic, and I participated through a big part of my life. But at a certain point I had curiosity toward Buddhism. I was practicing Buddhism for five years, but somebody asked the Dalai Lama, "How did you feel about all these conversions to Buddhism from other religions?" And the Dalai Lama said, "Well, I don't know what to say because I feel that if you have come to this world as a member of one religion, you should investigate those beliefs before you change."

Through all those Buddhist practices—the repetition, the mantra, the prayer—I thought that it was getting to a point where it was very similar to the rosary or Christian prayer. I came back to Catholicism because in a certain way it brought me back to that childish trust—there is something wonderful when you don't question it too much, you just embrace religion totally open, believing in the magic of it.

What initially led you to Buddhism?

The pain of being alive. I think the human experience—even with all the wonders and beauty—is not an easy task. It doesn't matter how fortunate you are, how much money you have in your bank. Being alive is a tough call, and I need the connection with spirituality to make the journey bearable, to get detached from yourself and to connect with the ultimate purpose. I believe in the mortality of the soul—that we are not here by chance. We are all called to be here with a purpose.

What does it mean to be a painter who deals with religion and spirituality in the 21st century?

It's a tricky question because when you connect spirituality with contemporary art people get a little itchy. But when an African-American artist is dealing with identity and the African-American experience—what they are really saying is, "We are human beings as well. See how I see the world, have empathy with me." Even conceptual art, when you first approach the work, it can seem abstract or random, but it really is in search of something sublime.

Nobody goes to the studio to make expensive things. People go to the studio to talk about something important for their soul.

Society looks at artists as capricious human beings who make expensive things. Nobody goes to the studio to make expensive things. People go to the studio to talk about something important for their soul. You go through a whole process of endurance. You have to be motivated for something larger than yourself to endure that test. My choice of profession, it was a call.

Can you tell me more about that call?

I didn't really know what sex was when I was four or five years old, but I knew that I had a terrible secret to keep. I was just an innocent kid. But then growing up, I felt the hardship that was imposed on me. I come from a very traditional family. My father was a colonel in the army; [being gay] was probably the worst thing you could be. But, I wanted to follow my call and my call was to be at the service of beauty and truth—I wanted to be an artist. I didn't know what I was choosing. I didn't know that it was going to be another even harder choice in life. But I felt that if I have to carry this heavy burden that I should have a life that was meaningful to me, and so I became an artist.

Tell me about some of the women you decided to paint for this exhibition. It seems like most people will recognize this one here.

Yes, this is Malala Yousafzai. I wanted to represent her before she was shot, probably the last day that she went to school with all her companions in a little bus, very similar to what I painted there. But you know, that idea of her coming to meet her destiny because it was through that terrible incident that she catapulted forward... and ultimately drove her to the Nobel Prize. I think that's somebody with a purpose: A young woman who sees education as a step toward freedom.

This one seems different from the rest, it's darker, more subdued.

Her name is Eleno de Céspedes, [also known as Elena de Céspedes] the first documented transsexual in Spanish history. She was born out of slaves living in Spain, in Granada. She was married, gave birth and then claimed she had a change of sex. She was inspected by a doctor—the personal doctor of King Phillip II—and was declared a male. She joined the military, she became an officer and finally she was a doctor, a physician. Then she tried to marry a woman and was declared a polygamist. She was brought back to the inquisition, they did another physical exam and they recognized that she was still a woman, although she may have manipulated her organs. She served in prison as a doctor, then she was released.

And in this painting she is less visible, more of just a sketch—

She's invisible. Being a Spaniard, I only learned about her in the past four or five years. She has disappeared from history.



"Malala" painting by Carlos Vega; acrylic on canvas, 78 x 44 inches, 2019. Jack Shainman Gallery

Moving across the gallery space, passing icons of Sojourner Truth, the Incan deity Pachamama, Mary Magdalene, Our Lady of Mercy, Nuwa and Hypatia, I bring Carlos to the painting that originally caught my eye and ask him:

Why Edith Stein?

When the Nazis came to power, she was moved to Holland for her protection. She wrote many letters to the pope, asking him to speak clearly about the concentration camps, and the killing of the Jews. And then when the Germans invaded Holland, the Bishop of Amsterdam gave a talk about the brutality of the Nazis. The next day they harvested all the Jewish converts to Christianity from all the convents and she was later killed in Auschwitz.

Then, in 1988 Saint John Paul II made her a saint in the Catholic Church and she's one of the four protectors, the patrons of Europe. And I like that. I like her. I like the idea of the brotherhood between the Jews and the Christians. We don't know how close we are. We are just brothers in faith. We aspire for the same.

What is your goal with this work?

I'm just trying to remind myself that I have a bigger call too. I want to realize that all these people were just people like you and me. I don't want to be a saint, but I want to get to the point of fulfilling my destiny. I want to bring up the subject of the soul. We are destined for greatness, too. Right here, right now, we don't have to go through metamorphosis, we can be great at any time.



"Eleno de Céspedes" painting by Carlos Vega; acrylic on linen, 78 x 44 inches, 2018. Jack Shainman Gallery

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Editors' Picks: 9 Great Art and Design Events This Week

Pioneer Works presents a new group show, and Wendy Red Star gives an artist talk at the Brooklyn Museum

by GALERIE EDITORS

FEBRUARY 19, 2019



Here are *Galerie's* picks of the must-see art and design events in New York City this week, from a new group exhibition at Pioneer Works to an artist talk by Wendy Red Star at the Brooklyn Museum.

6. Carlos Vega: Correspondences **Jack Shainman Gallery**

Taking inspiration from 17th-century Spanish painter Francisco de Zubarán's "Santas" paintings, Vega presents 24 portraits of female figures from mythology, history, and religion. The roster of heroines includes many intellectual figures whose contributions have never been widely appreciated, from the ancient mathematician and astronomer Hypatia, who is theorized to have discovered the elliptical orbit of planets more than a millennium before Johannes Kepler, to the martyred St. Teresia Benedicta, a vocal Nazi opposer who died at Auschwitz.

Where: Jack Shainman Gallery, 524 West 24th Street

When: Opening reception: Friday, February 22, 6–8 p.m.



Carlos Vega, *Lakmé*, 2019. Acrylic on canvas.

Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Galerie



Vega in his Manhattan studio with a few of the studies and sketches he used for *Who is Malala*.

Photo: Michelle Rose

Haunting Painting of Nobel Prize Peace Winner Malala Yousafzai

New York-based artist Carlos Vega pays homage to the Pakistani advocate—
and to women everywhere

by MICHAEL STEINBERG

On October 9, 2012, a Taliban gunman boarded a bus in the Swat district of Pakistan. His mission was to assassinate a 15-year-old schoolgirl named Malala Yousafzai. Her crime, in their eyes, was insisting on the right of girls to be educated. In a speech she had given in Peshawar in 2008, she had fearlessly asked, "How dare the Taliban take away my basic right to education?"

Though seriously wounded, she survived the attempted murder and quickly became one of the most famous people in the world. Yousafzai's courage inspired an international outcry against this long-time violent campaign to deprive young women of a basic right, and more than three million Pakistanis petitioned for a Right to Education Bill that eventually became the law. Two years after Yousafzai nearly died she was identified as a co-recipient of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize, the youngest Nobel laureate of all time.



Who is Malala (2016) is a mixed-media work made with oil and etched lead.

Photo: Carlos Vega. Courtesy artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

A broad range of international celebrities and distinguished public officials spoke out in outrage after the Taliban's attempt to suppress Yousafzai's voice. Among them were such diverse figures as Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton, Angelina Jolie, Madonna, and Barack Obama.

And New York-based artist Carlos Vega was deeply affected by the story of the Pakistani teenager's life and near-death. Speaking of his painting, titled *Who is Malala*, Vega noted that, "In this work, I represent the instant before the violent moment in which Malala is shot by a member of the Taliban on the bus riding home from school. This is an 'annunciation.'"

Born in Spain in 1963, Vega has, in recent years, increasingly concerned himself with issues of cultural and religious toleration. A 2015 solo show, *Faith Need Not Fear Reason*

(<http://www.jackshainman.com/exhibitions/past/2015/carlosvega/>), featured works that reflected upon a unique moment in history—Spain in the 12th century—when Christianity, Judaism, and Islam briefly coexisted. The values of that golden era are in stark contrast to the fanatical intolerance that propelled the attacks on a young woman seeking education in our time. There is also a poignant appropriateness in the materiality of Vega's work: the surface plates he frequently engraves and pierces are made of lead, a material that sometimes shields but is also the material from which bullets are made.

ARTNEWS

HABITAT: CARLOS VEGA

BY Katherine McMahon POSTED 02/19/16 1:57 PM



Carlos Vega photographed in his studio on February 4, 2016.
©KATHERINE MCMAHON

Habitat is a weekly series that visits with artists in their workspaces.

This week's studio: Carlos Vega; Midtown, Manhattan. "I like the idea of humanity going through a process of unstoppable enlightenment," Carlos Vega told me recently in his studio. Late last year Vega exhibited work at Jack Shainman Gallery in a solo show called "Faith Need Not Fear Reason," which celebrated a brief period of time in 12th-century Spain when Christianity, Judaism, and Islam peacefully coexisted and philosophers freely pursued enlightenment, unbound by religious dogma. "Many of the pieces in that show were about the cosmos," Vega said. "In our secular society, we look to the cosmos as being a kind of structure that rules the order of things."

Vega's work has an underlying sense of positivity and has long examined humanity's relationship to faith, philosophy, and popular culture. His recent studio practice has explored these themes using lead, vintage postage stamps, and gemstones, which he shapes into intricately layered forms on wall-hung panels.

“I’m in a moment of recapitulating, evaluating, and also trying new things,” he said, adding that he is about to begin a new body of work. “After a show,” he continued, “you have kind of a quiet time. I like to give myself the chance to go back to basics. Sometimes it’s very important for me to do work that only stays in private.”



All That Is Hidden, a piece from 2012 made with stone, stamps and oil paint on lead, hangs in Vega’s studio. “The piece depicts an imaginary baobab tree where the branches are inhabited by stamps with faces,” he said. “The core of the trunk is hollow and reveals the crystallized remnants of droplets of water falling next to one another for some thousand years.”

The artist splits his time between his Manhattan studio and a place in Kinderhook, New York, which he’s been going to every weekend for the past 15 years. “I love the countryside but I also like the simplicity of New York City,” he said. “I have an almost monastic life in Manhattan. It’s very convenient, and a good place to disappear from the world.” While working, he often listens to classical music and compared the life of an artist to that of a writer. “Artists spend so much time alone trying to make something out of nothing,” he said, looking at a large panel that took three months to complete. He considers his time in the studio to be meditative.

With his work, he wants to highlight a sense of optimism. “Material things are too shallow,” he said, “and you find that there is this disappointment even when you are blessed with plenty, it doesn’t really help to carry the load—because we all carry a load, one way or another... We are here on this journey of being alive and hoping to make the best out of it.”

Vega’s work is currently featured in a group show at [Rennie Collection](#) in Vancouver. He is spending time in the studio, after recent solo exhibitions at [Shainman](#) and the [Orlando Museum of Art](#). Below, a tour of Vega’s Manhattan workspace.



“This is a current experimentation of wrapping lead over different objects. In this case, it is a geode – I made an opening to reveal its crystals.”



“Lead is so soft and beautiful,” Vega said. “I think humans have been in love with lead since the beginning of industry. Maybe because it’s the easiest metal to melt.” Due to the softness of lead, he uses a wood-carving chisel for mark making.



“I use oil paints because it’s richer and it acts very well with the metal”



A solid ball of yam that Vega found in a flea market. “I decided to play around with it,” he said. “I fell in love with the piece, thinking about the amount of time that is needed to create those ten inches in diameter of filaments.” But also, the modesty of the material really intrigued me. It felt therapeutic. A lot of outsider artists have worked with similar technique, given that these strings were discarded, and then repurposed.”



Vega filling in a lead carving with oil paint.



“Oxidation starts as soon as you start making incisions,” Vega said, adding that old newsprint is the best material for smoothing oil paint into the lead crevices.



Two works made as a study for two of the main characters in Vega's last exhibition, Faith Need Not Dear Reason. "The one on the left is Alphonse the Wise, King of Spain in the 11th century. It was my first attempt at incorporating a three-dimensional figure, welding with the medium. The one on the right came as a result of wanting to pay homage to Malala Yousafzai."



A woodblock cutting board in Vega's studio.



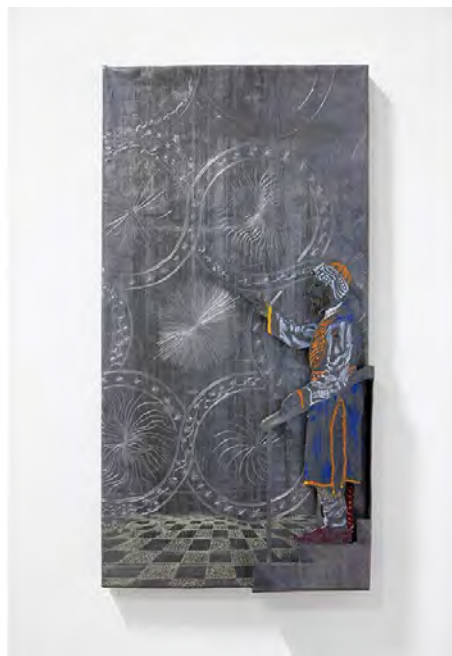
Excess carvings of lead that Vega keeps on the windowsill

Faith Need Not Fear Reason

By Carlos Vega

December 1, 2015

The artist on his current New York solo exhibition, inspired by the religious coexistence of a more peaceful era.



An exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, on view through December 5, offers a timely and thoughtful counterpoint to the tremendous turmoil of recent weeks. Faith Need Not Fear Reason, a solo show by Carlos Vega, presents a series of mixed-media works inspired by a more peaceful era of religious coexistence. The pieces take as their starting point a brief period during the twelfth century in Spain, when a number of influential Jewish, Muslim, and Christian philosophers pursued their studies, guided by science and reason above all, and whose commitment allowed them to transcend their cultural and religious differences.

The exhibition largely focuses on three great thinkers of the time: Averroes, an Islamic philosopher; Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher; and Alfonso X, king of Castile, Leon, and Galicia. The works variously take the form of portraits that reflect on the philosophers' legacies, creative renderings of their personal spaces, and meditations on their lives and deaths.

For Vega, this interest in the past is deeply rooted in the present. “In the twelfth century, the religious harmony was only present for a few decades,” he said. “My emphasis on the past and present is to point out how fragile peace and ‘brotherly love’ are. We have had a semi-sustained peacetime since the Second World War, and it’s our responsibility to disarm this argument that religion and faith are insurmountable obstacles. In every interaction, we must look for points of commonality in humanity rather than the instinctive fear for the stranger or foreigner.”

To this end, his works also reference modern-day figures, like Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani activist for female education and teenage Nobel Prize laureate, who, when faced with injustice and inequality, risked everything to fight back. “Education is the key to embrace diversity, and that is why people like Malala are such important role models,” said Vega. “The forces of conservatism are so ingrained in each of us that every generation has to build the argument for empathy and compassion and thinking beyond the small group we all belong to.”

Through the exhibition, Vega not only explores an often-overlooked age of cultural and religious enlightenment, but also encourages visitors to engage with our present moment through the lens of these figures. Below, he shares the thinking behind a selection of works in the show.

—Abby Margulies for *Guernica*



Carlos Vega, *Averroes*, 2015. Mixed media including lead, wood, collage, and linen on panel
120 x 84 inches.

The philosopher and legal scholar Averroes is best known for spurring the revival of Aristotelian thought by rescuing it from the forgotten libraries in Babylon, translating it, and developing extensive commentary on Aristotle’s writings, which was then disseminated to Christian Spain and to universities throughout the rest of Europe. Aristotelian thinking privileges reason above any other quality as a means to discerning truth. Averroes died in exile, and his body was returned to Cordoba strapped to a donkey, with bundles of his writings serving as a counterweight. Later, these

same works were burned as Spain fell to a conservative caliph. Here, I depict the sad irony of this great thinker brought to burial in such a plain manner. Blue rocks mark the philosopher's grave and the distant hills are collaged with pages from Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*.



Carlos Vega, *Alphonso in Exile*, 2015. Mixed media including UV film, aluminum tape, linen, paper, acrylic, collage, tiles on panels, and oil and metal on linen. 84 x 145 inches (in two parts).

Alphonse the Wise was king of Castile, Leon, and Galicia. His diverse court included Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scholars who founded the Toledo School of Translators, in which thinkers from all three faiths worked together on translating religious, astronomical, medical, and historical texts. Ultimately, Alphonse's governing principle of brotherly love did not bode well with the aristocracy and civil war forced him to find a safe place in Seville where he remained until the end of his life. Some historians speculated that he lost his mind.

In this piece, I represent the dualism of Alphonse on one side, and on the left the urban planning of the cities where religious coexistence took place. My portrait of Alphonse has a visual catch: his feet are turned backward while he is facing the viewer, and his arm is coated with an engraved sheet of lead. Alphonse was involved in urban planning and that side has small canvases with universal themes such as death, the cosmos, or diagrams of relationships. In this work, I have employed materials often used in construction—glazed tiles, aluminum tape, and an ultraviolet coating. For the past year and a half I was involved in several renovation projects and these materials found a way to my worktable.



Carlos Vega, *The Maimonides Wall*, 2015. Wood, lead, linen, collage, paper, coins, ceramic, mylar, glass turtle shell, aluminum tape, nails, UV film, acrylic medium, watercolor. 96 x 260 x 12 inches.

Born in Cordoba, Maimonides and his family left the city when he was ten to escape from invading armies from North Africa. He and his family found temporary refuge in the house of the Averroes in Almeria before crossing the Mediterranean for the coast of Africa, and finally settling in Cairo. A Jewish philosopher, astronomer, scholar, and doctor, Maimonides worked as the physician to the Egyptian royal family, but also gave back to the poor. He was so hardworking—a doctor during the day, and then spending his free evenings doing charity work for the Jewish community—but he still had time to write theology and poetry. This work is me imagining Maimonides's creative space. I like to think of people like Maimonides as artists, and their studios, with such a broad range of sources, as a metaphor for global learning. This work takes the form of a freestanding wall, with a view of the cosmos on one side, and a kind of interior with figures and symbols of food and drink—my conceptualization of Maimonides's studio, or the place where he came to write and focus.



Carlos Vega, *Ziauddin's Pride*, 2015. Mixed media including digital images, Spain 17th century glazed ceramic fragment, oil on lead on panel. 58 x 39 inches (framed).

I grew up in North Africa and my nanny was a Muslim woman who did not have a formal education. I discovered how difficult her life was as a widow who had to provide for her five children without any male help. Her influence early in my life sensitized me toward the role of women, especially in rural areas of the Arab world.

This work is a portrait of Malala, who is not a philosopher, but is the daughter of Ziauddin Yousafzai, a teacher in Pakistan, who brought attention to the unfairness of limiting education only to men in Pakistan. The world has witnessed this young girl evolve from an idealistic child to a world force, advocating for education for girls by creating the Malala Fund, which aims to provide girls with twelve years of free, safe, and quality primary and secondary education. Here I portray Malala studying with the help of a propane lamp, which gives off fumes that take the shape of portraits of women (depicted in the form of stamps) who have trailed before her: suffragettes, Eleanor Roosevelt, Indira Gandhi, Jane Austen, Oprah Winfrey, the virgin of Guadalupe, Rosa Park, and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, among many others.



Carlos Vega, *Dance*, 2015. Mixed media including stamps and oil on lead on panels. Triptych: 72 x 58 inches (each panel).

I have long been interested in postage stamps because they serve as little time capsules of the aesthetics, values, history, and aspirations of each nation. I like tracing how the subjects evolve from kings, presidents, and political figures to represent the broader cultural role models of every society, becoming a platform for integration, social justice, popular culture, or even slogans promoting “love” or “give.” Stamps mimic human intentions and how humanity moves from generation to generation. They are a means to track human aspiration and intentions of the soul, which are as countless as the stars.

Stamps are like stars in that I only have access to a small amount of all the stamps that have circulated in the world. In this composition I wanted to experiment with movement spreading, converging, and synchronizing like a cosmic dance. The title references this constantly moving

process. The works are made by force—impacting the lead sheet with a chisel to expose the stamps on the canvas underneath. Often people interpret these marks as bullet holes and I like that association; when new thinkers first shared their work, they were all too often shocking and sometimes violently received.



Carlos Vega, *Boom*, 2015. Mixed media including mirrored glass sphere, stamps, oil on lead on panel. 73 1/4 x 59 1/8 inches (framed).

For this work, I have organized the stamps by gender, arranging the male and female collections to appear as interacting galaxies in a harmonious integration. This may sound easy, but it is a real achievement, as most stamps of women have only been produced since World War II. They are now produced more frequently than they used to be, but there is still not enough representation of women on stamps. Placed on the canvas is a glass ball, which was once used for fortune-telling, and now magnifies a picture of a white pigeon, a symbol of the Holy Spirit and peace. It represents the whisper of God that has a place in all of us, making Him sometimes visible.

ARTNEWS

‘CARLOS VEGA: FAITH NEED NOT FEAR REASON’ AT JACK SHAINMAN

BY *The Editors of ARTnews* POSTED 11/17/15 4:26 PM



'Carlos Vega: Faith Need Not Fear Reason,' 2015, installation view.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY

Pictures at an Exhibition presents images of one notable show every weekday.

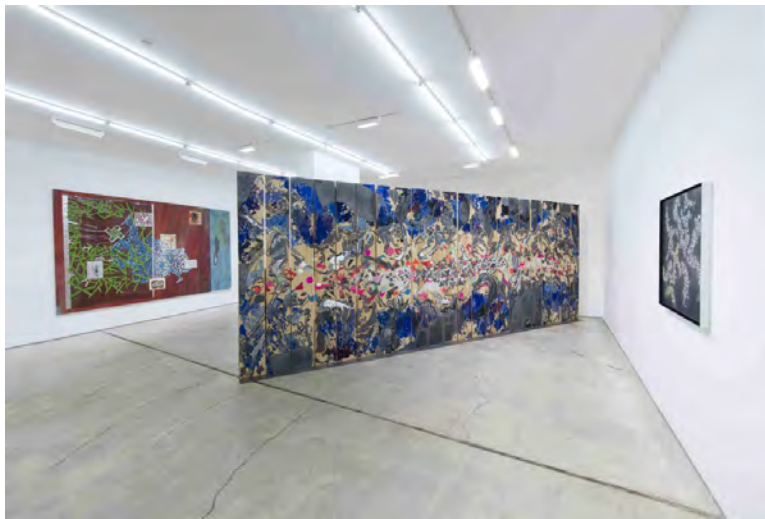
Today's show: “[Carlos Vega: Faith Need Not Fear Reason](#)” is currently on view at Jack Shainman's West 24th Street location in New York. The exhibition is on view until December 5.



ARTREPORT

Carlos Vega on 12th Century Intellectuals, Donkeys, and Working with Lead

By [Sehba Mohammad](#) -
Nov 6, 2015



Installation view of Carlos Vega at Jack Shainman gallery

Carefully treated sheets of poisonous lead are punctured to reveal vibrant cosmoses made from stamps of Mickey Mouse and Benazir Bhutto, as if bright bursts of consciousness are exploding through cold, metallic reality. Over the last decade [Carlos Vega](#) has perfected the technique of overlaying mixed media collages with etched and perforated lead sheets to create relief-paintings. But Vega's preoccupation with the human condition, religious enlightenment, and historical documentation dates back much further to 1990 when the 20-year-old artist first left Spain for the U.S.

Vega's latest works are on view at his longtime New York dealer Jack Shainman's newest Chelsea outpost in the show [Faith Need Not Fear Reason](#). The ten works, all created this year, include the artist's most refined lead pieces, as well as more experimental works such as drawings on UV window film and 21-foot wooden walls. We caught up with Vega to discuss 12th century Spanish intellectuals, donkeys, and how awful artists really are.

Art Report: How long have you been working with lead, and what draws you to the medium?

Carlos Vega: I've always been interested in lead. As a little child I used to collect lead pellets with my brother, melt them and turn them into things. I've been using lead in my art since 1987, but eight years ago I had a dream about making something really big with lead. I think humans have this magnetic attraction towards lead. Its surface, like a pearl, has a natural iridescence.

AR: The gallery show, *Faith Need Not Fear Reason*, explores history and society's evolution into a more enlightened form. Why do you use stamps to illustrate these ideas?

CV: I use stamps because they document the history of the last 140 years that is how long they've existed. Stamps are a snapshot, a square inch of graphic design that capture the aesthetic and ideals of the time in which they were produced.



to be titled (detail views) | 2015 | mixed media including mirrored glass sphere, stamps and lead on acrylic wood panel | 73 1/4 x 59 1/8 inches (framed) | CV15.010 | Jack Shainman Gallery, NY.

AR: Do you have any favorite stamps from the ones included in the show's artwork?

CV: I love stamps from the 1970s, when people were becoming idealistic and progressive. There are stamps that advise giving to the poor, energy conservation, alcoholic therapy, and environmental awareness. All these things first bubbled to the surface in the 1960s

and 1970s. Even in our lifetimes society has evolved so much, this progression can be read through stamps. We are on this inexorable path to a more enlightened society.

AR: The gallery show was inspired by three intellectuals: the Islamic polymath Averroes, Jewish scholar Maimonides, and King Alfonso X "The Wise." These men coexisted, for a brief time in 12th century Spain and created a truly enlightened society. Who are the modern day counterparts of these three intellectuals?

CV: For the oppressed I think it would be Martin Luther King, and maybe Barack Obama. But I really think Malala Yousafzai can change the world. That is why I made that piece about her.

The piece about Malala, *Ziauddin's Pride 2015*, is punctuated with stamps of powerful women from Oprah Winfrey to Queen Victoria. Why did you use these particular stamps?

It is wonderful to see stamps illustrate women's rise into civil society. In the beginning of the 20th century Mrs. George Washington was the only woman on stamps. Women didn't become visible till around the Second World War. In general I think women should hold more powerful positions in society. It creates a counterbalance. Men don't think the same way as women do.



Ziauddin's Pride (2015), Carlos Vega

AR: How do men and women think differently?

CV: They have different priorities. Man's priority is to win and conquer, woman's is to coexist and prosper. Girls today have forgotten their great grandmothers fought their fathers, brothers, and husbands so women could vote. Women still struggle throughout the world, especially in the Middle East and South Asia. Malala is liberating women in those regions, so they can break from oppressive social and religious systems.

AR: The donkey is the central image of *Averroes*, 2015. The animal seems to recur in your art in pieces including *Don't Tell Me You Can't* (2012), *My Practice* (2007) and other works. What do donkeys symbolize?

CV: Until I was 20-years-old and left Melilla, I saw donkeys on a daily basis. They were always in front of my house carrying and moving things. Spanish artists love donkeys because they are a metaphor for the human condition.

LIKE DONKEYS WE DON'T LEARN, WE ARE BLIND TO WHAT CAUSES US TROUBLE, WE MAKE THE SAME MISTAKES, AND WE SPEND THIS LIFE WORKING EVERY DAY. WE HAVE TO BE MORE THAN THAT.

AR: Even though your work comments on humanity today, it is steeped in history. Does this yearning for a former place come from being an immigrant?

CV: When you leave your country and go abroad you carry around this difference. There is that sense of not being fully understood, and having all this other knowledge nobody can see but you. So yes, I draw from my past.

AR: Your recent works have a more abstract bent, compared to your previous figurative works. They also explore different formats and mediums. What inspired you to diverge from your trademark style?

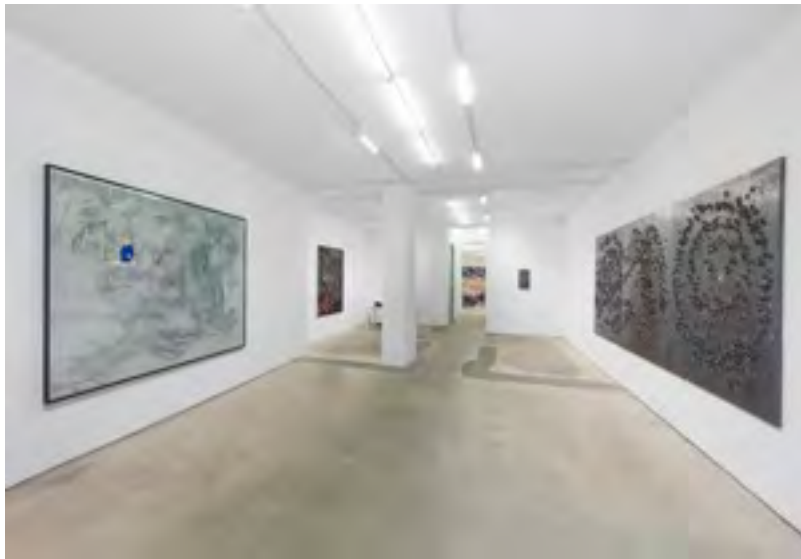
CV: I always try and catch my viewer's eye. Artists are awful like that: we want to keep people's eyes attached to what we just made, so we use tricks. From this desire to be eye catching I've experimented with different techniques. I try and seduce the viewer in every possible way.

Friday, November 6th, 2015

The Eternal Question: Carlos Vega on the ecumenical sources of his new work

by Jessica Holmes

For a fleeting moment of time in 12th century Spain, a period of enlightened thinking prevailed. Three leaders, each a representative of one of the Abrahamic religions — the Christian Spanish king, Alphonso X “The Wise”; Muslim philosopher Averroes, and Jewish scholar Maimonides — peacefully fostered a period of intellectual advancement in medicine, science, literature, and the arts that was not dogged by religious constrictions. At Jack Shainman Gallery (through December 5), artist Carlos Vega pays tribute to these three broad-minded thinkers, and asks the viewer to contemplate what their ancient harmony may have to teach us in the contemporary moment, in his current show, “Faith Need Not Fear Reason.” A couple of nights before the opening, Vega took a break from installation to spend some time speaking to me.



Installation view, “Carlos Vega: Faith Need Not Fear Reason,” 2015, at Jack Shainman Gallery.
Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery.

JESSICA HOLMES: Tell me about Melilla.

CARLOS VEGA: I grew up in this little place in North Africa. It’s been a Spanish city since 1497. In order to safeguard the coast of Spain, Queen Isabelle and King Ferdinand took this little piece of land on the Moroccan coast that is next to a natural harbor. Then, at the beginning of the 20th century, it became a hub for mining in the Atlas Mountains, and suddenly became a prosperous place with a multicultural community. A lot of the Sephardim from Morocco and Turkey, who had left 400 years prior, came back to do business, and there was a very wealthy Indian community and of course a very large Muslim community. And I lived there for my first 20 years.



And it's always been Spanish?

It's been Spanish for 500 years, and my family has been living there for 100-plus years. Growing up, I had friends who were Muslims, who were Jews, who were Christians, and in a funny way I was not aware of how unique this was because that was my reality. When you come to New York, you find that's common in American metropolises, but it's very unusual in a city of 60,000 people.

Can you talk about the historical moment that inspired this body of work?

While studying the history of Spain I learned about the Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who was a theologian, a doctor, an astronomer, a religious mystic—

He was radical in his time, wasn't he?

Today he is a pillar of Judaism, but in his time his own people persecuted him. Then there was Averroes, to whom we owe the proliferation of Aristotelian thinking, and the idea of achieving the knowledge of God through reason. Then, King Alphonse the Wise had the idea of creating this encyclopedic compendium of all the knowledge of the world. It was a time of prosperity, and they all got along together more or less, though there is a lot of myth about that. This opening lasted only briefly and then the world collapsed from within. Feudal mentality allowed that you were only as powerful as your land holdings were big, and how much you had inherited. Today, it feels like we are in the same crossroads — what to do with our future.

Your materials even seem to have a historical bent. How did you come to use lead in so much of your work?

I think that we humans have been in love with lead for thousands of years because it's soft, easy to melt, easy to carve.



Carlos Vega, *The Maimonides Wall*, 2015. wood, lead, linen, collage, paper, coins, ceramic, mylar, glass turtle shell, aluminum tape, nails, UV film, acrylic medium, watercolor; 96 x 260 x 12 inches.

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Lead has such a specific feel to it.

Doesn't it? It has that coolness, that pliability. I think the idea of alchemy still plays on lead. By applying color to it, by puncturing it, it's an act of enriching the lead, in a metaphorical way. I find it very satisfying. There is that contemporary wariness about lead because of danger of poison but growing up I used to melt lead pellets with my brother and then pour the liquid in a sink filled with water and watch the beautiful flowers and explosions erupt.

How long does one of your lead-based works take to complete?

I approach like an engraver. Because although you can fix your first imprint, once you subtract material you've already done injury to the virgin lead plate. Sometimes things are very fluid or very organic, but because of this profound idea of permanence or precision it takes time for me to find the courage to begin. I have worked on pieces for up to two years. I don't have a large production; I don't do more than 15 to 20 pieces a year. And with the best of my abilities I try to impregnate those works with a whisper to the viewer, to make them a vessel for thought.

What has drawn you to using postage stamps?

My feeling is that we are better people than our parents, our grandparents, and our great-grandparents. We are more compassionate and more accepting of difference. I use the stamps as a reference because stamps make a quotation between today and the 175 years since they first came into use. You can see how the stamps evolve from Queen Victoria, kaisers and kings to social ideas and aspirations, humanitarian causes, popular culture, the arts. And although they are so humble, stamps are really ambassadors of our aspirations and hopes; and at the same time they are becoming extinct.



Carlos Vega, Averroes, 2015. Mixed media including lead, wood, collage, and linen on panel, 120 x 84 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

I think they are beautiful time capsules, and it sounds funny but I spend hours in front of them just trying to make connections. I find them in the flea market, on eBay, or friends give them to me. I rarely pursue them in a scholarly way. I think it would take away some of the ludic act of the collage, putting one next to the other, playing with color, playing with genders, playing with random association of ideas. I want to leave that story untold, so the viewer has that act of discovery.

How much do you plan out a work, or is it an intuitive process?

When I approach something representational normally it's very meditative. I need to gather courage, or do a bunch of studies and transfer the drawings to the lead. I'm still learning how to attack, and am trying to be looser and more spontaneous because sometimes it places me in a very uncomfortable psychological place. The act of creation sometimes makes me question everything. In a funny way, this exhibition is one where I feel that I am freer and more accepting of my limitations, embracing accidents and playing with chance. I think what's happening in this show is a large step forward because there is not only lead, and the stamps, there is work on paper, there is canvas, there are freestanding pieces. It's been a year and a half of personal growth and planning what I want to be when I grow up, as an artist. How much suffering I want to do, and I want to stop suffering.

I don't blame you for that. When you are working on a piece for so long, how do you know when it's finished? Or do you know?

That's where the suffering comes in!

[laughs]

Has spending time with, and meditating on this intersection of Alphonse, Averroes and Maimonides influenced your own spirituality?

I think that now I'm at a point where the big question is the survival of consciousness, of awareness. It's an important part of what I'm searching for in my dialogue through art. How can it be done without being preachy? Are we done when we die or does the soul, our self inside of us, survive? But I think that's the ultimate, eternal question — the last frontier.



Carlos Vega, Alphonso in Exile, 2015. Mixed media including UV film, aluminum tape, linen, paper, acrylic, collage, tiles on panels and oil and metal on linen, 84 x 145 inches (in two parts). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.



The best painting shows in NYC this fall

Check out the fifteen best painting shows that are opening and closing soon in New York City's galleries

By Howard Halle Posted: Wednesday October 21 2015

For a medium pronounced dead on countless occasions, painting is alive and kicking, especially in New York. First off, [museums in NYC](#) are filled with [paintings](#) by modern and contemporary artists, as well as by Old Masters. And that beautiful bounty is reflected in the scores of gallery exhibits showing the same. No matter which art neighborhood you go to—Chelsea, the Upper and Lower East Sides, midtown—you will find scores of painting offerings. To prove the point, we offer our selections of must-see [art shows](#) that are soon to open—and close. See the list below in chronological order by closing date.



Carlos Vega, "Faith Need Not Fear Reason"

Collage, bricolage and shifts in surface texture are hallmarks of the work by this Spanish artist, who often incorporates found objects and materials into his paintings. Mixing allegory and abstraction within compositionally dense canvases, Vega sifts through various forms of cultural detritus to explore the vagaries of the human condition.

Carlos Vega, *School of Translators*, 2015

Photograph: Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

An abstract painting of a face, rendered in soft, blended colors of blue, green, yellow, and red. The face is the central focus, with a slightly blurred and ethereal quality. The background is a mix of these colors, creating a textured, painterly effect.

carlos vega

see you now

The awakening of conscience
(the place in you that aches)
The day before the new world

O R L
A N D
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ORLANDO MUSEUM ° ART

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Produced by the artist on the occasion of the exhibition
CARLOS VEGA: SEE YOU NOW
organized and presented by
Orlando Museum of Art
March 14 - June 14, 2015

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Written content provided by the artist, Carlos Vega.

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Museum of Art.

Cover:
Carlos Vega
Alphonso the Wise (detail), 2014
Oil on canvas
83 x 25 inches
© Carlos Vega
Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, the Orlando Museum of Art is a Blue Star Museum supported
by the Museum's Board of Trustees, the Ambassadors, Council of 101, Friends of American Art, Acquisition Trust,
earned income, contributions from individuals, corporations and foundations; and is funded in part by Orange County
Government through the Arts & Cultural Affairs Program, sponsored in part by the State of Florida, Department of
State, Division of Cultural Affairs and the Florida Council on Arts and Culture, the Chesley G. Magruder Foundation,
the Martin Andersen-Gracia Andersen Foundation, and by United Arts of Central Florida with funds from the United
Arts Campaign. Additional support is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, which believes that a great
nation deserves great art.





INTRODUCTION

by Hansen Mulford, Curator

The Orlando Museum of Art is pleased to present this thematic exhibition by the contemporary Spanish artist, Carlos Vega. The exhibition celebrates a period in Spanish history when Christianity, Judaism and Islam coexisted and flourished on the Iberian Peninsula. Vega explores this dynamic period of intellectual exchange and spiritual tolerance in complex works that are both beautiful and rich with symbolic meaning. *See You Now* is a call for exhibition visitors to consider the aspirations of this golden age of humanism and embrace them again today.

Vega expresses these philosophical ideas in paintings and relief works that are poetic and visually seductive. His distinctive works involve the use of a wide range of materials and a creative practice that combines elements of craft, sculpture and painting. Included in the exhibition are a number of his large scale wall reliefs that are fabricated with sheets of lead. The lead is cut through, punched and etched with evocative images of figures and natural forms. Through the cut areas the viewer glimpses a second layer of painting and collage. This technique allows Vega to present layers of images that form relationships underneath and across the surface of the work. Other works also present densely layered iconography in assemblies of canvases, wooden planks and transparent plastics.

The exhibition presents sections that focus on three leading intellectual figures of medieval Spain: Averroës, an Islamic philosopher; Maimonides, a Jewish philosopher; and Alfonso X, King of Castile, León and Galicia. Each of these individuals advanced knowledge in such fields as mathematics, science, law and philosophy; and were widely influential throughout Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. What is perhaps most important for Vega, however, is that their search for knowledge transcended their cultural and religious differences. For a short period, prejudice and bloodshed was set aside. Vega believes we are at a new crossroads where cultures can chose to rise above strongly held differences or sink further into the morass of hate and conflict.

Vega was born in Melilla, a Spanish city on the coast of north Africa. He studied at the University of Fine Arts, Seville; the University of Fine Arts, Madrid; the Talleres de Art Actual, Madrid; and completed graduate work at the Art Institute of Chicago. His work has been included in numerous exhibitions in the United States and Europe. He is represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

This exhibition has been organized by the Orlando Museum of Art.



ARTIST STATEMENT

by Carlos Vega

In the twelfth century in Spain, three major religions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity – coexisted peacefully for a short time, during a period of balance and prosperity. This historic moment allowed philosophers to flourish in their studies in pursuit of enlightenment, independent of the bounds of religion or the laws of states. The Greek classics were studied through Arab translations, and knowledge spread across borders.

Three thinkers of that era who experienced their neighbors as equals in their search for knowledge, love and good are Averroës, Maimonides and Alfonso X "The Wise." This exhibition is dedicated to them.

Following the Middle Ages, the achievements and advancements of these philosophers brought to light lost questions and speculations about the human condition. Their intellectual curiosity created ripples that endure to the present, helping to bring the wisdom of the Classics to the uneducated masses of Europe, with the commentaries of Plato and Aristotle helping to create the foundation of medicine, mathematics, religious law and the first attempt to summarize all human knowledge.

The openness and religious tolerance of that era in the twelfth century did not last long, and conservative forces and extreme religious views threatened the pursuit of knowledge. Now, in the present time, we see a mirror of those conditions, and we are presented with a choice to embrace our differences in common pursuit of enlightenment, or allow those in power to dictate knowledge and exchange of ideas.

See You Now is an attempt to tilt the balance towards a universal awakening of the human consciousness.



Images on pages 2 and 5:

Carlos Vega

The Maimonides Wall (detail), 2015

Wood, lead, linen, collage, paper, coins, ceramic, mylar, glass turtle

shell, aluminum tape, nails, UV film, acrylic medium and watercolor

48 x 48 inches each

© Carlos Vega

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.





Averroës, the Latin form of Ibn Rushd, was a Muslim philosopher born in 1126 in Córdoba, located in what is now present-day Spain. He studied and wrote on many topics including mathematics, jurisprudence, logic, politics, astronomy, medicine, grammar, and Islamic philosophy, but was perhaps best known for his defense of Aristotelian philosophy, which was considered controversial by the Ash'arite Muslims. Prior to 1150, Aristotle's work had been largely forgotten, and only a few works were translated to Latin. It was the Latin translations of Averroës' work that led to the Aristotelian revival in Christian Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries. His most defining original work was *The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, a direct rebuttal to al-Ghazali's *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. He thought that philosophy and revelation were not at odds with one another, but were merely different means to reach the same truths.



Statue of Averroës, Córdoba, Spain.



Maimonides, also called RaMBaM in Hebrew, which is an acronym for Rabbeinu Mosheh Ben Mainom, "Our Rabbi/Teacher Moses Son of Maimon," was born in 1135 or 1138 in Córdoba (present-day Spain). He was a Jewish scholastic, educated largely by the works of Arab Muslim philosophers. He was a Jewish scholastic, educated largely by the works of Arab Muslim philosophers. He was a rabbi, philosopher and physician in Morocco and Egypt, and is known for his codifications of Jewish law and ethics as defined in the popular Mishneh Torah, which set a standard for future codifications. He was also an influential figure in Jewish philosophy and gained recognition for his adaptation of Aristotelian teachings. He strove to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy and science with the teachings of the Torah, explained in his work, *Guide for the Perplexed*. His ideas were controversial in Spanish and southern French Jewish communities, as it spurred intense debate between traditionalists and those that sought to apply his Aristotelianism to Biblical faith. The Catholic Church intervened on grounds of heresy and confiscated rabbinic texts. As a result, the more radical interpretations of Maimonides were suppressed.



Statue of Maimonides, Córdoba, Spain





Alfonso X, also known as Alfonso the Wise or Alfonso the Learned, was born in Toledo in 1221 and was the King of Castile, León and Galicia from 1252 until his death in 1284. He was one of the greatest royal patrons of learning in the Middle Ages, and cosmopolitan study was central to his court. Alfonso X valued the contributions of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scholars, and employed them in translating many Arabic and Hebrew works into Castilian. Thus Latin was replaced as the primary language of higher learning, and instead Castilian vernacular was used in the courts, churches, books and official documents. This change promoted advancements in Spanish science, literature and philosophy, and allowed for an evolution of the Spanish language. In 1265, under the personal direction of Alfonso X and a commission of the court, Libro de las Leyes, later called Siete Partidas, was penned. It was a comprehensive code of rules for the kingdom, that incorporated philosophical, moral and theological topics as expressed by Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian and Islamic beliefs. It was sometimes referred to as a "humanist encyclopedia." The work became prominent in Latin America, and remained a significant influence on civil law until the 19th century.



Statue of Alfonso X, Córdoba, Spain
Image by Michel Wal





Carlos Vega
Siete Partidas, 2015, linen,
Acrylic and collage on wood
stretcher
70 x 90 inches
© Carlos Vega
Courtesy of the artist and Jack
Shainman Gallery, New York.



Carlos Vega
Second Day, 2015
Charcoal, sharpie, aluminum
tape, paper, UV film, fabric,
acrylic and linen on wood panel
73 x 96 inches
© Carlos Vega
Courtesy of the artist and Jack
Shainman Gallery, New York.



Carlos Vega
Exile, 2015
UV film, aluminum tape, linen,
paper, acrylic, collage and tiles
on wood stretcher
84 x 120 inches
© Carlos Vega
Courtesy of the artist and Jack
Shainman Gallery, New York.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

from Carlos Vega



I would like to thank everyone involved in making this exhibition happen.

Thank you to the Orlando Museum of Art Board of Trustees; Glen Gentile, Director and CEO; Hansen Mulford, Curator; Azela Santana, Associate Curator; and additional staff involved in making this exhibition possible.

Thank you to everyone from the Jack Shainman Gallery: Tamsen Greene, Zoe Stal, Jeremy Kaplan, Chris Davison, Brian McCamley, Ruth Phaneuf, Jess Pilar, Meriwether McClorey, Daniel Tsai, Clark Griffin, Abdi Farah, Mike Nicholson, Francisco Santiago and Leticia Lopez.

And Adrien de Monès, Bertha Garcia Vega, Elliot Melk, Lorne Dawes, Farid Tawa, Theo Lotz at Flying Horse Editions, Marc Boyea and the whole team at Door to Door.

Special thanks to Bob Feldman and Jack Shainman, and to all my friends and family who endured long months of grumpiness to make this happen.

Images on pages 6, 9, 10, 18 and 22 are details of works from Carlos Vega's studio.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

from Glen Gentele, Director and CEO

On behalf of the Board of Trustees and the entire staff of the Orlando Museum of Art, I wish to extend my sincere thanks to Dr. Robert Feldman for his support of this project and for generously lending works of art to the exhibition. In addition, I want to share my sincere gratitude to everyone at Jack Shainman Gallery for offering their assistance each step along the way. Additional thanks go to Flying Horse Editions at the University of Central Florida for their collaborative spirit and for their work to support the production of new art. Extra special thanks go to Carlos Vega, the artist and the man, for producing such a beautiful exhibition and for sharing his ideas, his humor and his work with us all. The Orlando Museum of Art is grateful to the many individuals and organizations whose on-going support has helped to make this exhibition possible.



Left:
Carlos Vega
Just Discovered, 2012
Stamps and oil paint on lead
83 x 81 inches
Collection of Dr. Robert B. Feldman
Image © Carlos Vega, courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.







Carlos Vega's rigid education in Spain contrasts with the artistic freedom he embraced in America

Carlos Vega with pieces of his art at Lux Art Institute in Encinitas, where he will be in residence through Feb. 2. BILL WECHTER • U-T

Two schools of thought

JAMES CHUTE • U-T

Carlos Vega's father was unequivocal. He wasn't going to allow his son to go to art school. So Vega spent an unhappy year studying pre-med before his father finally relented. ■ But more than three decades later, Vega realizes his father had a point. ■ "Now that I'm about to turn 50, it's just a crazy thing to become an artist," said Vega, who was being a little ironic, but not much, as he took a break from a new work he was creating at the Lux Art Institute in Encinitas. "Nobody should do that. Every father and mother should be against their kids (wanting) to become artists."

Even with considerable talent and absolute dedication, it's too difficult, too frustrating.

"And in the end, you are always measuring yourself with yourself," Vega said.

"You can go a little nuts thinking about whether you've met your own aspirations for yourself and your art."

Vega, who lives in New York and the Spanish city of Granada (but mostly New

York), has no regrets about his irrational profession. As he approaches the half-century mark, he's excited about the art he is making. He exhibits regularly at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York and the Palacio de los Condes de Gabia in Granada, and he has works in a number of private and institutional collections, including the Columbia Business School in New York and the Harvard Business School in Boston.

Now he's in residence through Feb. 2 (with his art on view through March 2) at the Lux Art Institute.

"When I first arrived, I called my best friend from the Art Institute in Chicago and I told her, 'You have to come and visit me for a couple days,'" Vega said. "And in the back of my mind was this feeling, 'Maybe I have arrived. ... Maybe I am an

artist that somebody would treat me like this.'

"It is wonderful what Lux does for artists. It's such a sense of validation. They trust you. They give you this (a studio and an apartment downstairs). I was in here until late at night. ... Do you know how wonderful it is to sleep downstairs and have this fantastic place to come play? This is amazing."

High spirits

Vega exudes a charm and generosity of spirit reflective of his native Spain. He has lived and worked in the U.S. for more than two decades, but he still considers himself a Spanish artist.

"It's embedded in me," said Vega, who was born in Melilla. "I'm a Spaniard, but SEE VEGA • E9

Artist Carlos Vega | **When:** In residence through Feb. 2; on exhibit through March 2 | **Where:** Lux Art Institute, 1550 S. El Camino Real, Encinitas | **Admission:** \$5 | **Phone:** (760) 436-6611 | **Online:** luxartinstitute.org

THEATER FESTIVAL PUTS TEEN VOICES CENTER STAGE

PAT SHERMAN
SPECIAL TO THE U-T

Before her immersion in San Diego's Playwrights Project, the closest thing to theater Kimberly Bell had experienced was the occasional Tyler Perry comedy or the all-too-real drama of inner-city streets.

That changed the day writing coaches from the nonprofit theater-arts organization visited her and fellow wards at juvenile

hall in San Diego — where the fallout of her disadvantaged youth served as inspiration for her script, "A Broken Promise."

The play was selected for inclusion in the Project's 28th annual Festival of Plays by Young Writers, Feb. 1-9 at Lyceum Theatre downtown. The festival highlights the best work from budding California playwrights.

"I've been through a lot," said Bell, who was released from juvenile hall

Nov. 29 and hopes to study public relations in college. "It inspires me every day waking and knowing that I wrote a play and it's going to be produced professionally — and that I have people cheering me on to keep going."

One of those cheering her on is Bell's drama-turge, Playwrights Project founder Deborah Salzer. Over a period of months, Salzer helped Bell revise her script and develop

SEE FESTIVAL • E9



Kathleen Calvin and Chris Murphy rehearse the play "A Day in the Life." K.C. ALFRED • U-T

Festival of Plays by Young Writers

When: Friday through Feb. 9

Where: Lyceum Theatre, 79 Horton Plaza, downtown

Tickets: \$20 adults; \$15 students, seniors and military; group discounts available

Phone: (619) 544-1000

Online: lyceumevents.org

CULTURE + BOOKS

TALKING WITH ... LISA O'DONNELL

IN DEBUT, NOVELIST EXPLORES SISTERLY STRENGTH

JOHN WILKENS • U-T

Scottish-born author Lisa O'Donnell's debut novel, "The Death of Bees," opens with two young Glasgow sisters burying their dead, not-beloved parents in the backyard — and then doing everything they can to keep it hidden, lest the authorities separate them.

The story is told in the alternating voices of the girls — Marnie, 15, smart but reckless, and Nelly, a volatile 12-year-old violin prodigy who speaks like the Queen of England — and their neighbor, Lennie, who begins to care for them when he senses something is amiss.

O'Donnell, who lives in Los Angeles, will be at Warwick's at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday. She answered questions by phone about her own upbringing, what it means to be a family, and the power and pitfalls of secrets.

Q. What was your own childhood like?

A. I lived in a council A-estates; you call them the projects over here. It was a poor area. A nice community, people stuck together, but everybody was broke, unemployed. My own father was unem-



Lisa O'Donnell

ployed. When people are in a sad situation like that, they lean on their vices. Mostly on the island they turn to alcohol.

Q. Poverty and its effect on kids is a big part of the story. How did that affect you growing up?

A. More than I should have. I remember one time when I was around 9 and I was with a friend who was put in charge of a little girl who was 3. Her mother was in the pub. We played with her like she was a doll, dressing her up. When my parents caught on, they were furious. My dad went into town and dragged her out of the pub. Things like that happen in an impoverished community.

Q. What did all that tell you about family?

A. If there's no one looking out for you, that's when tragedy happens. If there is someone around who can lend the slightest kindness, it makes all the difference. My parents were young when they had

me, 16 and 17, but they had their mothers and fathers around to help them figure things out. If that hadn't been the case, who knows how I would have turned out.

Q. What does alternating the voices of the sisters enable you to do as a storyteller?

A. When I first started writing, the only voice I had was Marnie's. I played around with her, got bored. It felt like I was just writing the same thing over and over. To move the story along, to jump up the jeopardy, it needed other perspectives. A vulnerable younger sister is a jeopardy. I wanted to hear that other sister's voice. Once I had both those set down, the book seemed to take off.

Q. You're 40, so it's been a while since you were a teen. How were you able to make those voices authentic?

A. I never forgot the voices around me when I was growing up. The funny girls, the strong girls, the able girls — I never forgot those girls because they made me laugh. I was frightened of them and I never was part of their circle, but



"The Death of Bees"

Lisa O'Donnell
Harper; 320 pages; \$25.99

if they saw me around town they'd let me in. I had really long legs and they called me Lanky Lisa. They were always really nice to me.

Q. You started out as a screenwriter. Where did you get your ear for dialogue?

A. I think I've always been a keen observer. I am someone who from a very early age knew when to stay in a room and when to leave it. I had volatile parents who were always arguing. That made me watch things carefully. Now I love to meet people, observe them. I sort of hoard information about them. I can't help it.

Q. The book is pretty grim in places. Were you worried it would be too difficult for readers?

A. I was worried. But one of the things I do in my writing is bring comedy into it. People are more willing to pay attention to difficult subjects if they are promised some laughs. They are willing to go through parents being buried in the backyard. In "Macbeth," when things start to get too intense, Shakespeare turns our attention to the porter. In my book, it's the dog.

Q. One of the themes here is the resiliency of children. Why did you want to explore that?

A. I remember my sister sent me a docudrama one time, and there's this scene of a girl talking to a journalist. She's debating whether her father is going to come home with the welfare check or just go to the bar and drink all the food money. She says she thinks he'll come home, but she's also made plans to go to her grandmother's house. She's lined up her ducks and looked at her options. The hopefulness in her, and the loyalty she has to this person who is probably going to disappoint her just really moved me. You know, children are

born into love. They belong to you and will do almost anything to stay loyal to that.

Q. This book is also about secrets. What do you find compelling about secrets?

A. I don't know. My next book is about that, too — about a big secret that everybody keeps. I remember in the small town where I grew up how impossible it was to keep secrets. They're such powerful things. Information is powerful. In this story, the power of the secret drives the story. The sisters have to keep their secret. Lennie keeps their secret. I guess a secret represents loyalty to me. Someone who keeps your secret cares for you.

Q. What do your own kids (ages 8 and 5) know about your book?

A. They know their names are inside it. (The book is dedicated to them.) They ask me what it's about, which is a really difficult thing. My son, he sees the cover and says, "The Death of Bees? It's about bees!" And I say, "Sure, baby. It's about bees." I don't want to give them any ideas.

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VEGA • Chicago challenged him to think about art

FROM **ES** being a Spaniard living in another country, it gives you a (different perspective)."

Vega came to the U.S. in part to escape the rigidity of his art education in Seville and especially Madrid, where he studied at the University of Fine Arts and the Talleres de Arte Actual, Circulo de Bellas Artes, where he studied etching and printmaking in addition to painting and drawing.

"I went into the classroom founded by Goya, but the teachers were monsters," Vega said. "They were small-minded remnants of Franco's time, and they tortured me for two years."

He went to Chicago in 1990 with \$6,000 in his pocket and a room at "the apartment of my sister's ex-boyfriend." On the strength of two recommendation letters, he persuaded the Art Institute faculty to let him attend classes, even though he wasn't officially enrolled.

"Being in Chicago was a great complement for me," he said. "(In Spain) I had an education where I had spent time painting in front of a naked body, or still life, and I have to make it truth. Because in Spain in the '80s, in the '90s, there wasn't an intellectual dialogue about art. Nobody really questioned why, what do you mean, what do you want to express? It was about drawing, precision, color — all those kinds of things."

"Then I suddenly landed in Chicago, where it was all about, you know, sexual identity, conceptual art. There were no material art works. ... It was tough. It was wonderful."

Elemental tendencies

In Chicago, Vega was challenged to think about art, and he's been thinking ever since. Most of his works employ narrative and contain multiple subtexts, created in part through his use of collage.

"It was invented by Braque and Picasso in 1906-07, but we live in a time of collage," Vega said. "It's everywhere. It's in writing — everybody plagiarizes from people. It's in movies, music, art. It's now. It's us."

Vega's sources range from pottery shards (in "One Eye Shut") to old letters (in "El Barranco de los Pies Negros" — "The Black Feet's Ravine"). But he tends toward elemental materials, and over the



Carlos Vega works on a piece called "The Flying Donkey" at the Lux. Several of the artist's works involve donkeys. BILL WECHTER • U-T PHOTOS

past five years, he's been working with one of the most elemental materials of all: lead.

"There is something really sensual about the material," he said. "I don't know. Maybe it's that every scratch you make becomes shiny and like silver, or there is something about the malleability and softness of the material that makes you almost believe that you can be like Midas."

Both of the pieces he is creating at Lux involve lead, which he etches and paints. He is working on a "Pacific Tree" (over the past several years, trees have been a recurring theme in his art), and he is completing a large-scale panel, "The Flying Donkey."

"I love donkeys," Vega said. "Growing up (on a farm), every day you would see donkeys. But it also has to do very much with the Spanish iconography. Donkeys in Spain are human condition. ... We are



Vega cuts shapes into a sheet of lead.

donkeys. We never learn. We follow the same path over and over."

Another of his donkey works, "Don't Tell Me You Can't," is on display at Lux and was one of the pieces on exhibit earlier this year at Shainman Gallery. His shows at Shainman prompted one website reviewer to call his work "magical and idiosyncratic" and offering a "much-needed and very vivid optimism."

Indeed, Vega wants to

uplift, intrigue and even entertain his viewers. But he has little concern for what the art world thinks about him.

"That's something I learned turning 50," he said. "I've spent all these years trying to achieve something, and now I'm just happy with who I am."

Maybe this artist is not so crazy after all.

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Caitie Grady and other actors rehearse the play "A Day in the Life." K.C. ALFRED • U-T

FESTIVAL • Project has put focus on disadvantaged teens

FROM **ES** her play's pregnant teen protagonist, Rosie.

Bell said watching actress Kathleen Calvin portray Rosie at a recent rehearsal brought tears to her eyes.

"She (brought) life to my words, which I never thought would happen. Like, it felt real," said Bell, who turned 19 in December, the same age filmmaker Josefina Lopez was when she penned her satirical comedy "Simply Maria, or the American Dream" for Playwrights Project. Lopez went on to write the script for the film "Real Women Have Curves." Other alumni include playwright Annie Weisman ("Be Aggressive," "Surf Report") and Emmy Award-winning television writer-producer Meredith Stiehm ("Cold Case," "NYPD Blue").

In recent years, Playwrights Project has shifted its focus to work more with foster children, disadvantaged teens and English-language learners, said executive director Cecelia Kouma.

"They'll often say, 'Why does anybody want to hear my story?'" Kouma said. "The actors tell them how important their ideas are and that they have truths that the general population doesn't understand, and that they need to share those experiences."

This year's 149 play submissions also included works by teens from elite college preparatory institutions such as The Bishop's School in La Jolla and Pacific Ridge School in Carlsbad.

Students who don't win can still receive a critique from a theater professional with suggestions for further development, Kouma said.

Westview High School sophomore Owen Stone explored what happens

to a family when they lose a child in his drama "The Family Table."

Working with his Playwrights Project dramaturge, Owen used the mother's loss of interest in gardening as a metaphor for her "inability to nurture and care for her own children the way once she did."

"I'm really happy with how the show's going and really excited to see it," said Owen, 15.

Mesa Verde Middle School eighth-grader Matthew Maceda, 13, twice had plays accepted to the festival. His first, "From Underdog to Top Dog," co-written with classmate Eric Pak, received a staged reading during last year's festival (readings are offered to younger winners in lieu of full productions).

This year, Matthew's "The Trial of Wolf vs. Pig" was selected. A twist on the Three Little Pigs, the script finds the Big Bad Wolf suing the pigs for defamation of character. Matthew's mother, Rebecca Cerince, said her son sat in on all the rehearsals for his play last year, as well as this year's auditions.

"Sometimes the actors would even ask him questions, saying, 'Well, what if we changed this?' There was truly a creative exchange, and my son was surprised to think that his opinion mattered," she said.

The festival also will include a staged reading of 11-year-old San Diegoan Gilare Zada's "Help! There's a Stranger Living Upstairs!" as well as full productions of 16-year-old Sherman Oaks resident Elana Zeltser's "Arc" and 18-year-old San Franciscan Mimí Nicole's "A Day in the Life."

Pat Sherman is a San Diego writer.

pictures retain an aura of discovery reminiscent of the medium's dawn.

—*Elisabeth Kley*

Carlos Vega

Jack Shainman

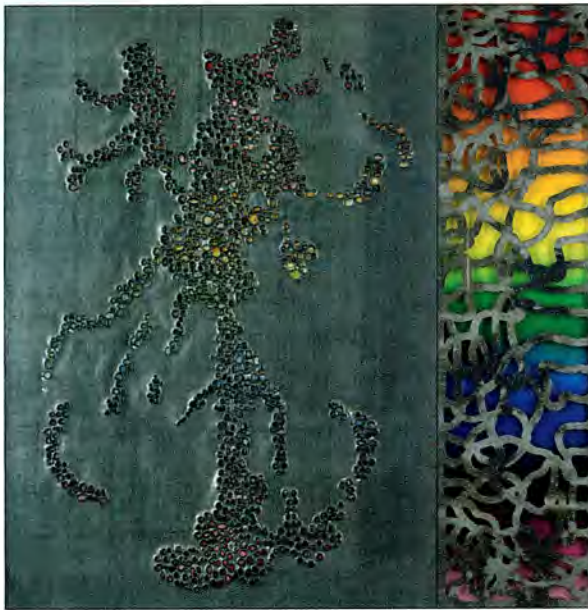
Carlos Vega creates scenes of the natural world using an unlikely material: lead. He etches, embosses, paints, and shears sheets of the pliable (and poisonous) metal into decorative trees, underground root systems, jaunty animals, and even far-distant nebulas.

He also composes geometric abstractions in lead, with cut-away views of solid swaths of paint, recalling the latticework screens found in Vega's hometown of Melilla, a Spanish territory within Morocco.

For the diptych *Eight Feet Above Ground* (2012), shallow gouges and light swirls of oil paint atop the lead form a happy-looking portrait of an elephant with wispy hairs on its raised trunk. *Not Loud Enough* (2012) has ten different-colored birds mingling on the surface, but it's what's beneath the lead that attracts the viewer. Clusters of postage stamps visible through cutouts give the birds their various shades: an orange stamp of a monarch butterfly, a green one of John F. Kennedy talking on the telephone, a black one of Queen Elizabeth, and so on.

Vega's use of stamps was even more effective in his depictions of fanciful trees, featuring little windows where leaves would be. Behind the openings was a kaleidoscopic mix of kitsch, pop, sports, history, and politics, with figures such as Calvin and Hobbes, Abraham Lincoln, Bozo the Clown, Martin Luther King Jr., and Beetle Bailey immortalized on the stamps. The same goes for *Just Discovered* (2012), a portrayal of the Eagle Nebula, where the nostalgic stamps reside behind starburst cutouts and are arranged in a spectrum. This piece was a celestial highpoint in a solid show.

—*Trent Morse*



Carlos Vega, *Just Discovered*, 2012, stamps and oil paint on lead, 83" x 81".

Jack Shainman.

'À rebours'

Venus Over Manhattan

The title of this gallery's inaugural show, "À rebours," curated by dealer Adam Lindemann, was inspired by the 1884 French novel by J.K. Huysmans translated as *Against Nature*. It was considered the ultimate statement of the fin-de-siècle esthetic movement. The installation suggests the mood of the novel by spotlighting 45 works in the darkened gallery. A pair of elegant bronze assemblage candelabras from 1994 by César and the flaming overturned *Bergen Chair* (2006–7) by Banks Violette provided the illumination.

In the novel, the aristocrat and esthete Duc Jean des Esseintes uses his wealth to create a self-contained world of art at its most refined. But,

paradoxically, his artificial heightening of the senses defies nature and rejects life, provoking a physical and moral quest for death.

At the entrance hung Gustave Moreau's jewel of a painting *Apollo Receiving offerings from the shepherds* (ca. 1885), in which the haloed god stands above a multitude of drunken satyrs, establishing a dialogue with all the other artworks—historical, ethnic, and contemporary. These included Hope Atherton's gaunt, deathly *Untitled (Sphinx)*, 2011, Odilon Redon's portrait of a desiccated des Esseintes (1888), and George Condo's bulging-eyed voyeur des Esseintes (2012). Redon's exquisite drawing *Head of a Martyr* (1877) foreshadowed Damien Hirst's photograph of himself, *With Dead Head* (1991). Meanwhile, Salvador Dalí's painting of a Spanish comb in the shape of a skull, *Peineta* (1949) echoed the Jivaro shrunken head circa 1890, the Papuan bone daggers, and the Mbulu Ngulu reliquary dated between the late 1800s and early 1900s. The erotic was a recurring theme in works such as the pastel of a soldier with a savage woman by Felicien Rops (ca. 1878–81), and Jeff Koons's 1991 glass sculpture *Violet Ice (Kama Sutra)*.

While in the 19th century des Esseintes used art and drugs to heighten the esthetic experience and create an "artificial paradise," in modern times, artists break the conventions of art to deliver an immediate raw experience.

—*Charles Ruas*



Salvador Dalí, *Cartel des Don Juan Tenorio*, 1949, gouache and watercolor on card, 11" x 14". Venus Over Manhattan.

ON THE GROUND

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MAY 11, 2012, 1:34 PM

Carlos Vega Revives the Alhambra at Jack Shainman Gallery



"The Bent I," 2012, Mylar, acrylic, oil paint, and lead, 67 x 85 in.

"Tearing and Lifting," an exhibition of paintings by **Carlos Vega** on view at **Jack Shainman Gallery** through May 26th, is an opportunity for some short-term time travel. On first look, the show brings to mind the 14th century, in particular the building of the Alhambra Palace in southern Spain. Given his roots in Melilla, a Spanish city in North Africa, it's hard to miss the non-representational aspects of Moorish and Berber art in Vega's work: a dizzying assortment of vines, shoots, and geometric patterns played out across the lead surfaces.

This is in addition to the postage stamps incorporated into collages that date as far back as 1890, and the paint fixed onto lead plates – whose overall harshness harkens back to industrial times. Fixated as he is on the history of civil rights in America, Vega's mindset is well-adapted to the aesthetics of the social movements seen at the end of the Gilded Age.

— Reid Singer

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FACING PAGE: Actress Hilary Swank with her dog, Kai. **THIS PAGE:** In the living area of her Manhattan apartment, which was designed by Mark Zeff, the sofas, tables, and rug are by Calvin Klein Home. See Resources.





MANHATTAN TRANSFER

WHEN SHE'S NOT IN HOLLYWOOD, ACTRESS HILARY SWANK HEADS TO A SPARE, SERENE APARTMENT OVERLOOKING DOWNTOWN NEW YORK WHERE THE VIEWS TAKE CENTER STAGE

TEXT BY CELIA BARBOUR · PHOTOGRAPHY BY
SIMON UPTON · PORTRAIT BY WILLIAM WALDRON
PRODUCED BY ANITA SARSIDI



A wall in the living area is clad with planks of reclaimed barn wood; the photograph is by Jackie Nickerson, and the painting is by Carlos Vega. **FACING PAGE, FROM TOP:** The dining table and chairs are by Calvin Klein Home, and the floor lamp is by West Elm; the kitchen is outfitted with quartz countertops, sink fittings by Kohler, and a Viking cooktop. In the entry, a console by Calvin Klein Home holds a vintage lamp and a brass vessel, the mirror is by Restoration Hardware, and the photograph is by Malick Sidibé. See Resources.



AS A GIRL, Hilary Swank could see the whole world from her bedroom—at least in her mind's eye. Living in a trailer park with her mother, she devoured books, which she checked out by the armload from the bookmobile that made the rounds of her Bellingham, Washington, neighborhood. By 15, an age when the average girl's most fervent fantasy is to kiss some silly pop star, Swank had envisioned a rich and important life for herself.

So perhaps it's no surprise that this lauded actress (she was one of the youngest women ever to win two Best Actress Academy Awards) is content to inhabit a New York apartment that is modest in size and chicly understated in its decor. For Swank, a home needn't be as extravagant as a dream. "I feel comforted in smaller spaces," she says. "They're more nurturing."

Her tranquil 1,400-square-foot New York City nest also has practical benefits. It came in handy, for example, during the filming of *New Year's Eve*, a sprawling ensemble project directed by Garry Marshall, opening December 9, in which Swank plays Claire Morgan, the woman in charge of making sure the Times Square ball drops on time. (Other cast members include Robert De Niro, Michelle Pfeiffer, and Sarah Jessica Parker.) "It's a funny movie with a lot of heart," says Swank, whose character is afraid of heights—unlike the famously daredevil actress, who has played both a boxer and Amelia Earhart. "It's about second chances and forgiving yourself and life as a journey."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In the study, a Calvin Klein Home sofa is topped with vintage Moroccan pillows, the stools are by Tucker Robbins, left, and Oly, and the light fixtures are from Circa Lighting; the custom-made paneling and shelves are painted in Benjamin Moore's Dark Olive. A floor lamp from Design Within Reach stands next to custom-made metal-and-wood shelving; the ottoman is by Calvin Klein Home. The master bath's walls and floors are sheathed in travertine, and the shower is tiled with Cipollino tumbled marble.



A wall of the master bedroom is covered in a silk by MDC Wallcoverings, and the bed, bedding, bedside tables, and rug are by Calvin Klein Home; the side table and lamps are vintage, and the painting is by Carlos Vega. See Resources.



For Swank, whose primary residence is a rambling villa on the West Coast that she shares with her boyfriend and his son, retreating to her Manhattan hideaway doesn't mean shutting out the world. "I feel like I'm in a tree overlooking the city," she says. Though her building is situated close to the Hudson River, her view takes in only a thin slice of that mighty waterway; mostly, she gazes out on the intriguing rooftop tableaux of downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn, and Queens beyond. "I have started collecting art," says Swank, "but there's no piece of art that can compete with the cityscape. I love New York."

To help her craft an interior worthy of the view, she hired designer Mark Zeff, with whom she'd worked previously on a New York brownstone and her California house. The two have a natural sympathy. "Hillary is very intense and also very pure," says Zeff. "She knows what she likes. She doesn't live in fantasy. I wanted to create a place that would give her a sense of grace and harmony."

His options were limited, however, as Swank didn't want any demolition or reconfiguration of the apartment, which is in a new building on the site of a former printing plant. Walls had to stay where they were; kitchen and bathrooms remained largely as is.

Zeff's first step was to furnish the rooms with serene, clean-lined pieces, many of which he chose from the Calvin Klein Home collection. "Calvin's furniture has a strong modern sensibility without any tricks," he explains. Then he layered in elements—historical, cultural, emotional, symbolic—to offset any sterility. Softly weathered barn wood reclaimed from a Pennsylvania farm clads one wall of the living

area. The study's shelves—custom-made built-in cabinetry designed by Zeff—are lined with artifacts: African headrests, hand-forged scissors, and sculptural Indian molds.

"I like Mark because his work has a worldly feel," says Swank, who once spent a month doing community service in India as a break from the pressures of Hollywood, and who has a particular affinity for Africa and its peoples. "He's from South Africa and has traveled all over, so he brings that sense of culture to his work. That is huge to me, to have those elements in my home."

When it came time to select art for her apartment, Swank turned to the Jack Shainman Gallery, known for championing artists from around the world. In her foyer, *Nuit de Noël* greets visitors; the 1963 photograph was taken by Malick Sidibé, a Malian artist who documented Bamako culture in the 1960s and '70s. "They seem so innocent and happy," says Swank of the dancing couple. In her bedroom and living room are dreamy, metaphysical paintings by Carlos Vega.

For both Zeff and his client, collaborating on every decision was important. "I'm very hands-on," says Swank. "I've worked with people who roll their eyes when you make a suggestion. Mark doesn't do that. He knows that it's your living space, your home, and you need to have an energy in there that feels right to you."

And their nearly decade-long alliance has paid off handsomely in the actress's new retreat. "My home is my safe haven, where I can rejuvenate and rest," Swank says, "so I can get up the gumption to go jump out of an airplane again." ■

Deborah Luster and Carlos Vega: The Pleasures of a Great Two-Artist Exhibition

Benjamin Sutton / January 20, 2011 <http://www.thelmagazine.com/>



The West 20th Street gallery Jack Shainman, with its two large galleries and series of smaller rooms, generally shows works by two artists simultaneously. But rarely do its parallel exhibitions work together so well as the current pairing of Deborah Luster's circular black-and-white photos of murder sites in New Orleans and Carlos Vega's etched, punctured and painted sheets of lead (both through February 5). The two could not be more different, whether materially, stylistically or in terms of their temperament, and the extreme juxtaposition adds immensely to the impact of each.

Deborah Luster's large-format circular photos, the shape of which is the result of her 8x10 Deardorff field camera, evoke portholes to a different world. The first few pieces in her show, *Tooth for an Eye*, sustain this sense of dislocation, and it's only gradually that the time and place pictured becomes clear: post-Katrina New Orleans. The images are incredibly forceful and eerily beautiful, even without reading the exhibition description and discovering that each was the site of a murder. The all-encompassing emptiness of the city after the flood takes on spectral tones in light of the homicidal theme—Weegee-style crime scene photography this most definitely is not. Luster manages to convey that desolation with great sensitivity, an impressive accomplishment considering the restricted and often cramped compositions of circular images. The format lends these photos an unexpected softness, the broad curves playing against the rigid diagonals of trash-strewn streets in undeveloped subdivisions, train tracks under elevated highways, narrow alleys

and concrete sidewalks. Knowledge of the locations' criminal past renews the sense of devastation: not only was this city abandoned to a natural disaster in 2005, most of its citizens remain in a state of perpetual abandonment. Luster melds notes of unsettling beauty and intense sadness—a "Fuck You" tag at one murder site seems directed at the viewer standing safely in the Chelsea gallery. The massive series, which can be perused in its totality in large bound ledgers in the main gallery, punctuates a metropolis in mourning with more personal and specific death notes. An unfortunate decision to include two screens framed in kitschy lockets marked "Friends" and "Family" on which photo-portraits of the deceased pass in a looping slideshow detracts from the ghostly absence felt throughout Luster's photos.

Carlos Vega's etched, perforated, painted and collaged lead sheets substitute grayscale for the black-and-white of Luster's photos. One piece in particular, the epic "Nebula" (2010), looks minimalist from certain angles where the light doesn't catch the grooves marked on the malleable lead surface. Getting closer one picks out the scene: a huge Broadway-sized theater filled with spectators looking towards the stage, which we can't see. Above them, an explosion of color has ripped through the metal, allowing us glimpses of the colorful collage beneath. As with Luster's photos, the presentation creates the experience of looking in, of peeking onto a concealed or rarely glimpsed scene—not quite voyeurism, more like being in on a secret. In other pieces Vega paints the marks he makes on the matted gray surface in sparse, bright hues, conveying brushstrokes that are wispy and delicate in appearance, but thick and heavy in dimension. He moves between figurative etchings and collages—a tree, a tuft of grass filled with strange insects—and abstract patterns of objects and carved notches, like the Tomasellian set of concentric rings rippling outwards from rocks embedded at the center of "Worn Out" (2011). Aside from the intrigue of this highly tactile and rarely used material, Vega's collaged, painted bas-relief sculptures are incredibly rich and sensitively composed, the subtle work on the metal surface contrasting with the elaborate found materials layered beneath, all assembled into sometimes-jarring, sometimes-organic relations. Each piece demands close, detailed inspection, whereas Luster's photographs require distance, and work well in great numbers as one flips through the whole series.

The interaction between the two—with the large-format photos hung generously in groups and series while the lead pieces are gathered in small rooms that invite close inspection—made for one of the few memorable viewing experiences during a recent tour of Chelsea. Vega's bright, magical and idiosyncratic pieces provide much-needed and very vivid optimism to play off the documentary harshness of Luster's arresting photos. But there's also a good deal of violence in the way Vega carves and punctures each sheet of lead, which can't help but evoke the acts of human violence that make the locations Luster shoots more significant than the vacant lot around the corner, or the deserted bit of sidewalk down the block. Both artists draw our attention to one little bit of activity in a larger field of possibility—the gleaming lead sheets, the devastated New Orleans cityscape. This set of overlapping contrasts and parallelisms makes the juxtaposition of these two exhibitions improbably enriching, their force amplified by their proximity.

(images courtesy the artists, Jack Shainman Gallery)

Carlos Vega - In Plain Sight



January 2011 - Jack Shainman Gallery
513 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011

From January 6 to February 5, 2011

Carlos Vega, in this solo exhibition of new work, *In Plain Sight*, explores his inability to identify and answer social and spiritual questions. He formulates his paradoxes without closure.

Using lead, collected objects, oil paint, stamps and printed material, Vega maps out a surreal and wondrous reality where social and metaphysical spaces are intertwined. Vega has adopted lead as a physical and conceptual support, playing with its malleable and mercurial nature. With each punctuation, the lead grows and swells and with every marking, the surface takes on a newly reflective position.

Carlos Vega was born in Melilla, Spain and lives and works in New York City. Recent exhibitions include a solo show, *Apocrofos*, at the Instituto de América (Centro Damián Bayón), Granada, and group exhibitions including *Chelsea visits Havana* at the 9th Havana Biennial; *De Granada a Gasteiz Un Viaje de Ida y Vuelta*, the Fundacion Artium, Alava, Spain; and *Black Panther Rank and File*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, traveling to Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, Winston-Salem, NC.

Image: Carlos Vega, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil paint and newsprint on lead. Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, NY



By REGINA HACKETT

Carlos Vega's "Better say...B...Beauty" features a ripe peach of a skeleton with a curlicue "B" pouring out of his mouth. It's an acrylic, pencil and collage on canvas, 11 by 15 inches.

Paintings by Carlos Vega and Eric Elliott are a must-see at Harris Gallery

History floats in the collages of Carlos Vega, borne along on receipts, invitations, letters and fragments of literary texts, presided over by figures who flout the laws of gravity.

WHERE: James Harris Gallery, 312 Second Ave. S.

WHEN: Through Aug. 23. Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 11-5

That's why a donkey weighed down by a motorcycle strapped on its back bears no burden. The donkey is made of colored air, and the bike is smoke. Even a monster that turns his head to gaze at the audience, modeled after Goya's giant, conveys no threat. He's a colored field within a colored field.

Born and raised in Spain and now living in New York, Vega carefully choreographs his figures but likes them to appear to be tossed off. His graces are casual and his claims large. His paintings are at home in the wide world, the old with the new in its arms. Even when he works small, his scale is wide open.

Vega's English was uncertain upon his arrival 10 years ago. He marks that memory with death exclaiming across a page torn from the artist's improve-your-English handbook, "Better Say."

Language failed him, but beauty carried him along. "Better say...B...Beauty" (11 inches high by 15 inches wide) features a ripe peach of a skeleton with a blue curlicue "B" pouring out of his otherwise empty mouth.

Recently, Vega has been working with lead, a material most artists gave up years ago as a health hazard. "The Deluded Mind" (58 1/2 inches high by 179 1/2 inches wide) is a painting on three lead panels, with forms carved into the surface and paint spilling from their creases.

As in traditional Chinese landscape painting, where sky becomes water and water becomes ground by means of a few spare paint strokes, Vega inflects his lead space into a watery expanse. Figures bob across his stream, and their identities are not fixed. A face becomes a turtle and a snail a rock. The horizontal fissure of blue could be a heron and clouds behind it mountains.

History is what we say it is. Vega tugs at our understanding of it, and carries us, painlessly, along.

ARTINFO

Deals and Steals at the Armory Preview



© Andreas Gursky/ARS, New York, image courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

By **Judd Tully**

Published: March 26, 2008

NEW YORK—The fair looked like a ghost town before the 3 p.m. VIP entry and exhibitors were puzzled as to where the very very special VIP's were hiding during the noon-to-3:00 p.m. early-access preview.

.....

Corridors away in the vast expanse of Pier 94, **Jack Shainman** didn't seem to be in mourning. He'd already sold Gupta's untitled lilac-hued painting from 2008 for €225,000 to a European collector; **Kerry James Marshall's** *Untitled (Painter)* from 2008 for \$150,000; and another fresh-from-the-studio Bindi-dot painting on fiberglass by **Bharti Kher** for €175,000.

Scanning his stand, Shainman ticked off a few more transactions, including **Ed Ruscha's** super-cool 1984 print from 1967, with a painted fly executed on the lower portion of the image (edition 11 of 60), for \$24,000, as well as gallery artist **Carlos Vega's** elegant, 40-by-40-inch oil-on-lead painting *What a Wind* from 2008 for \$15,000. "Nothing's changed (in the market), as far as I can see," says Shainman, "I just don't feel it."

Carlos Vega

Jack Shainman

The Romantic impulse and the impulse to appropriate aren't usually found together, but the New York-based Spanish artist Carlos Vega marries them elegantly. In one of his small canvases, *Untitled (History)*, 2007, the caption "history" is ap-

pendent to a magazine photograph of a man shoveling documents into an incinerator. In *It's Getting Late* (2007), the painted figure of a performer, wearing a top hat ringed with candles, emerges from darkness to point at a collaged scrap of paper bearing the titular words.

Vega is a resourceful stylist, and this new work bears the influence of a multitude of modes and mediums, from folk painting and amateur photography to architectural drawing and moderne design.



Carlos Vega, *Untitled (History)*, 2007, acrylic and collage on canvas, 8" x 10".

Jack Shainman.

He is essentially a postmodernist, and while he is intrigued by the poetic contrasts that his different sources create, he also seems to regret that such resonant traces of history may be losing their importance.

This was Vega's fourth show at the gallery, and these collages demonstrated his assurance with the medium. But he has also produced some startlingly novel works by incising images into lead plates and staining them in places with pigment. The plates culminated in the extraordinary 14-foot-long tableau *The De-luded Mind* (2007), which unfurls an intimate, starlit landscape broken up by faces that seem to reside in the undergrowth like sculptural reliefs. The style of the lead-plate pieces derives from the spare linearity found in old Japanese prints. However, Vega has updated the images

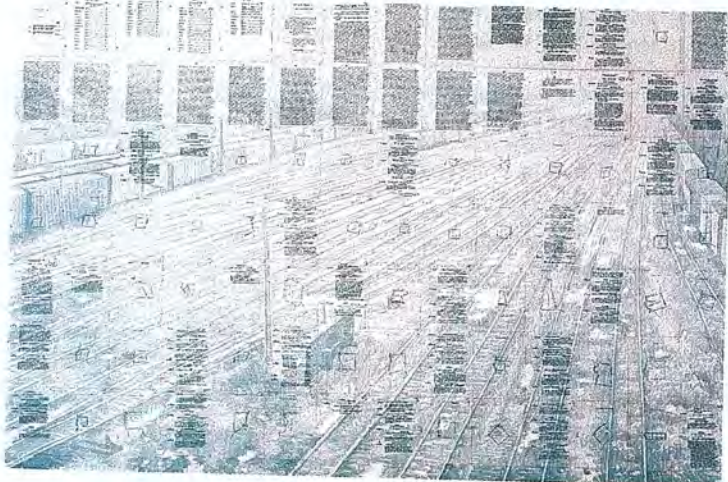
with surrealistic motifs. In these gray mysteries, light glances off the surfaces and conceals whole portions of the picture, leaving the viewer happily hunting for every incision. —Morgan Falconer

PHOTO CHARLIE SAMUELS

Art in America

February 2004

Carlos Vega: *Vermont vs. New Hampshire*, 2003, oil, gouache and collage on canvas, 80 by 120 inches; at Jack Shainman.



Carlos Vega at Jack Shainman

In his second solo exhibition at Jack Shainman, Madrid-born, New York-based Carlos Vega again combined original antique documents, unearthed in flea markets,

with painted passages in large-scale works on canvas. The most noticeable difference between Vega's 1999-2001 output and these new paintings is that the literal, almost didactic relationship that formerly existed between the texts and the painting has been discarded in favor of a more fluid, poetic convergence of the two. In these current pieces, Vega's paint handling is loose, almost sketchy, in contrast to the stiffer, graphic nature of his earlier paintings.

In the nine works shown (all 2003), images of highways, cities and rail yards are laid down in delicate washes on the canvas. Then, found notes or pages from ledgers are covered with medium and affixed in fairly regular grids on top of the painted scenes. The paper becomes translucent, allowing a ghostly image to materialize from beneath.

One of the most arresting of the new works is *Avenue Lorenzo Cardenasi* (85 by 67 inches). In this piece a handwritten manuscript of a land grant made by the King of Spain to his brother, Luis

Infante, is laid over a painting of a modern boulevard in Mexico City. Mauve and yellow pigments show through the pages, which are applied in a grid of approximately 8 by 10 sheets. They are marked with a sepia water stain that divides the paper three-quarters of the way up, creating a serendipitous horizon line. Vega's process creates a palimpsest effect: both sides of the pages have writing on them, and the reverse side of the text can be seen through the thin paper. The handsome, calligraphic script corresponds visually with Vega's unfettered strokes of paint, adding to the formal interest of these works.

A work titled *Who's Who* differs slightly in mood: a grid of unused business letterheads belonging to, for example, wedding shops, funeral homes, lawyers and accountants is pasted onto a painting of a U.S. highway interchange. The letterheads have a conspicuous 1950s graphic design style. They can be seen as dismal reminders of businesses long ago shut down, or they can be read as symbols of hope: blank pages waiting to be filled with new orders.

Perhaps Vega's project is best summed up in *Total of Circumstance*. The romanticism of the railway is captured in a depiction of arteries of track heading out of a city, painted in evanescent tonal grays. Layered on top are typeset pages documenting 18th-century New England land disputes. Delicate sketches of the plots in question interrupt the bureaucratic text, adding another layer to Vega's lyrical and captivating take on history.

—Melissa Kuntz

Rereading the Past

Omar Lopez-Chahoud

During my past visits to ARCO in which I have participated as a curator for the *Futuribles* and *theblackbox@arco* sections of the Fair, I noticed how artists from different social/cultural and geographical backgrounds investigate similar issues in their work. This recent tendency towards a more universal visual language in contemporary art has to do with the development of new technologies in which information travels fast from country to country.

This year, as ARCO celebrates its 25th Anniversary, I noticed the work of three artists whose concerns in artmaking are very similar. They all base their work on making references to the past by incorporating found materials in their work through *collage*, painting or photography.

For the last few years Andrew Sendor (Caren Golden Fine Art) has been collecting late 19th- and early 20th- century photographic portraits in flea markets, state auctions, and antique shops. Sendor then uses them as models for his paintings. Initially he started drawing them because he felt that they were charged with emotions and spirituality due to the long exposures the sitters had to endure. Because of the long sitting sessions the camera was able to capture the essence of the person, creating a strong personal connection and individual character. Sendor's paintings provide a new home for the spirit of these individuals from the past. The backgrounds for these portraits are constructed either from urban scenes or naturalistic situations taken from travel photos, postcards, nature, or books, among other sources. The play between fiction and fact is a significant factor in Sendor's work. Does the character dictate the setting or the setting dictate the character?

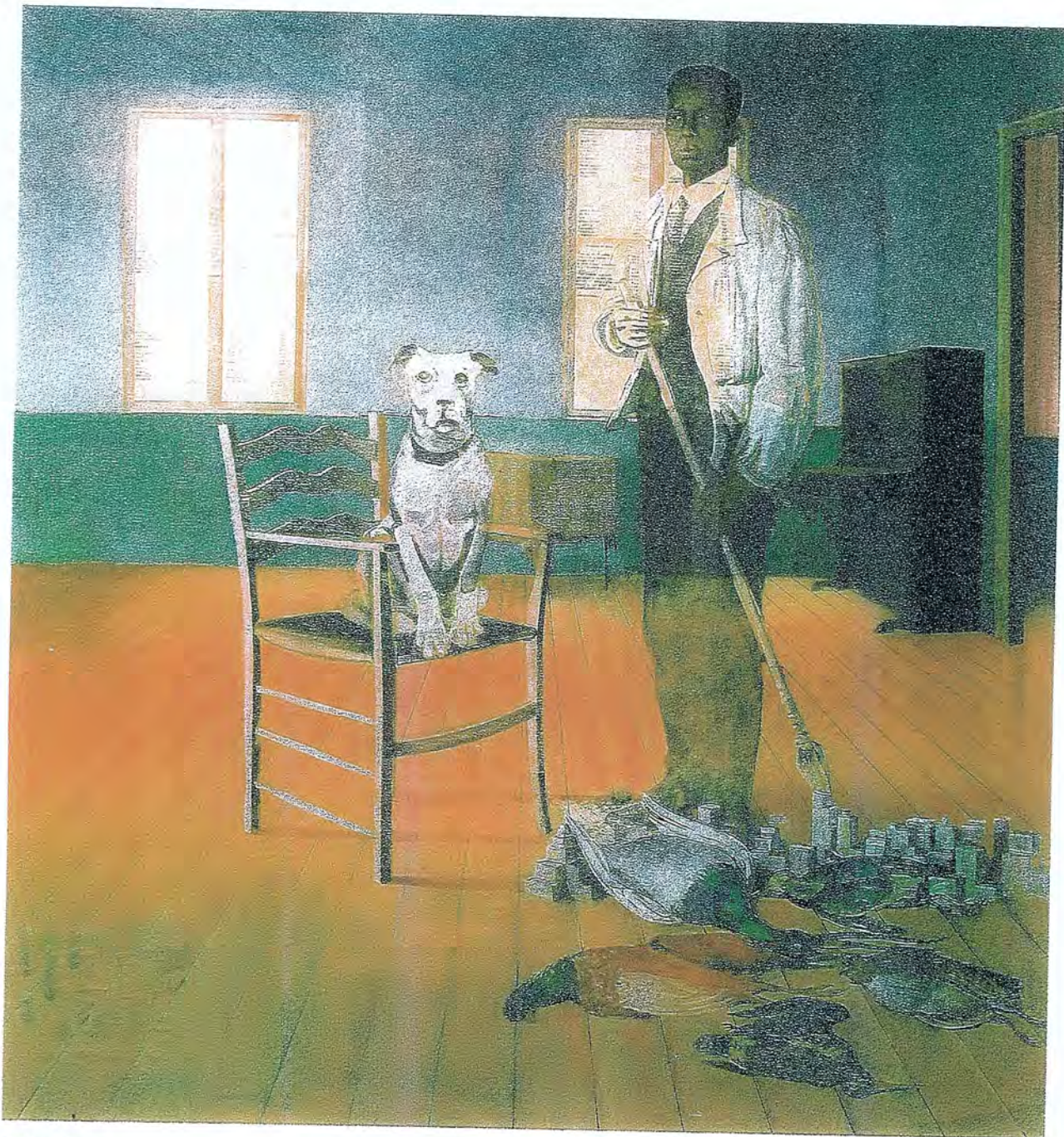
Sendor's characters dressed in Victorian costumes are brought to life as they are transported into a contemporary setting. This brings into question the idea of change and the evolution of portraiture over the last century. The historical references in his work function as a catalyst for an inquiry about the relevance of societal evolution. Technically the portraits are painted the way a portrait would have been painted at the time the pictures were taken. In contrast, the background is painted in a semi-realist approach in which the brushstroke is barely noticeable. The picture functions as a constructed reality versus an objective reality. The artist's choice of Plexiglas as a foundation for his work creates a dialogue between the organic and the synthetic, the synthetic being a contemporary material that has sculptural qualities. By letting the plastic appear in some parts of the paintings, Sendor plays with the idea of the viewer's own reflection.

Carlos Vega's (Jack Shainman Gallery) work also has a direct connection to the past. Vega *collages* old documents, legal papers, and letters as a support for his paintings. The viewer is forced to project meaning to his work because of the literal information presented in the form of found materials. Mood, time, and place play key roles in how the story is constructed. The painted ghostly images integrate with the *collages* to create a composition with a non-linear narrative. The smaller works perform an iconic role, similar to flash cards, telling stories that entertain. The viewer uses the material presented as a key to unlock and imagine further meaning. Old paper is used as a metaphor for the passing of time. It functions as a mirror image of ourselves. Vega plays the role of an archeologist trying to make sense of what remains from times past. As society changes into a paperless era, Vega's work documents the traces left behind. Nostalgic and poetic, his work also functions as a record of an anonymous life.

Leslie Hewitt (Samson Projects) has a different interest in the mundane. Hewitt's installation vignettes incorporate photographs, old school textbooks, and architectural interior spaces from the 1960s and 1970s. Sometimes they become backdrops for her photographs. Hewitt likes to play with the notion of mystery. The images in her work combine autobiographical and found material. Social and political context are also very important in her work; for example, Hewitt makes it possible for the viewer to make connections between the civil rights movement and contemporary social and political issues. Hewitt's photographs transcend personal meaning by providing us with a window onto a particular moment in time. Like Andrew Sendor and Carlos Vega, Hewitt is in charge of creating a cultural construction of our own experiences. All three function as artists/curators of a much larger museum - humanity.



2006



Carlos Vega

Frai Escoba, 2005

Óleo y collage sobre lienzo *Oil and collage on canvas*
200 x 180 cm

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2006

a surrealist turn, their backsides were inconceivably hidden behind the tree's slim trunk. Vega depicted flora and fauna with loving detail, staging scenes where man found himself seeking enlightenment in the wilderness.

In *The Deluded Mind*, the only large-scale lead painting in the show, Vega elaborated on the small-scale works to compose a dramatic tableau of natural and fantastic forms. In this image, a woman's head floated Ophelia-like on water, surrounded by animals, vegetation, and, inexplicably, the artist's own disembodied profile. Strands of hair and ripples of water curved around the woman's face, pine needles reached out over the water, and grasses and dandelions covered the shore. A cat crouched next to the ominous head of a swamp beast, while a dragonfly with the head of the artist buzzed among the grasses.

In all of Vega's lead paintings, the physical qualities of the lead sheets both delayed one's understanding of his narratives and heightened one's viewing pleasure. The lead's tone and its beautifully buckled and abraded surfaces vied for one's attention. Looking at the lead paintings, especially on a large scale, involved a process of visual accumulation as one discerned the figures inscribed onto the metal surface.

The technical bravado and narrative whimsy that Vega exhibited in his lead paintings made for easy viewing in comparison to his collage and acrylic works. Vega was at his most enigmatic in these small paintings, where he juxtaposed collage and painted figures and forms to befuddle his viewer, sometimes with a humorous subtext. But in all of these works he widened the gap between the found images and texts that formed his collaged elements and the painted aspects of the works.

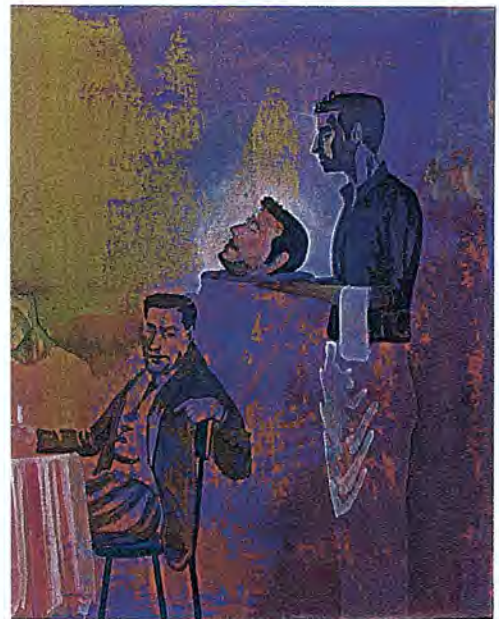
Vega combined collage and painting to call attention to the uncanny congruities of form. In a painting entitled (*How Big is the World*) *The World*, he repeatedly collaged an image of a parakeet perched on its cage around the edges of the canvas so that the bars of the cage began to suggest a grid in the center of the canvas, which Vega filled-in. The totally banal photograph of a bird in a pet shop thus acted as the armature for the artist's beautifully painted modernist grid.

In a number of works, Vega juxtaposed texts and imagery to suggest propaganda in which the politics were aggressively ambiguous. Bold block text reading "Pure Science" served as a caption for pencil sketches of a bald eagle, and the word "History" appeared as similarly bold text beneath a photograph of a man burning letters in an incinerator. In a painting entitled *Clean-up Site*, a political slogan had been covered over by a blob of black paint so that only its last three letters, PLE, were visible. One could, however, see the edges of two figures wearing berets, one wearing a gun belt and carrying a rifle. Was this a revolutionary slogan ending in the well-known phrase, "the people"? If so, whose revolution is it?

The blob of paint that obscured the figures and text in this painting appeared in a number of Vega's paintings and was one of the many ways he used paint to indefinitely delay comprehension. Vega exhibited a Richter-esque ability to competently paint in a repertoire of styles. Sometimes he painted in realist styles appropriated from historical periods. At other times, Vega adopted kitsch forms of commercial illustration, such as paint-by-numbers or the drafting-style of an architect or designer.

Vega's conceptual proposition was strengthened by his keen sense of color and design. Explicit references to the enigmatic figures of James Ensor and Gerhard Richter appeared in all of the paintings in this show, and Vega no doubt channels Ensor's

Carlos Vega. *Dining Out*, 2007. Acrylic and collage on canvas. 17 3/4 x 16 3/4 in. (45,4 x 42,6 cm.).



dystopian fantasies as well as Richter's trickster stance as a painter. Taking cues from these mischief-makers suggests a promising direction for Vega's painting.

Carlos Vega

Jack Shainman Gallery

In his fourth show at Jack Shainman Gallery, Carlos Vega's paintings had become irreverently enigmatic to good effect. The artist spun strange stories using willfully inconsistent techniques. Presenting two distinct bodies of work, the exhibition featured ten lead "paintings" and almost thirty small-scale collaged paintings. While the lead paintings were new for Vega, he has long practiced a technique of overlaying texts collected from flea markets and other sources with paintings of landscapes, architecture, and figures.

The lead works engaged the viewer with their whimsical imagery and sensual surfaces. Using printmaking tools, Vega incised lead plates with intricate line drawings of scenes in the wilderness. Among the nine small-scale works on view, in works such as *The Last Gypsy* and *This Is Making Me Crazy*, a man warmed himself at a campfire and struggled to pitch a tent in the wind. In another work, two stags appeared behind a tree, but, in

Myth and nature do the wild thing

24 Sept. 28 - Oct. 4, 2007



Carlos Vega, "Just Looking III," 2007

Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

ART REVIEW

DEVIL'S PIE

Chris Ofili

David Zwirner

Through November 3

525 & 533 West 19 Street

(212-737-2070; davidzwirner.com)

PURE SCIENCE

Carlos Vega

Jack Shainman Gallery

Through October 6

513 West 20th Street

(212-645-1701; jackshainman.com)

BY JEFFREY CYPHERS WRIGHT

If there's one thing Rudolph Giuliani did right, it was castigate the Brooklyn Museum for showing Chris Ofili's *Madonna with dung*. It made the British artist of Nigerian descent an overnight sensation.

After an exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2005, the 38-year-old is back in a New York solo gallery show for the first time in twelve years. As Britain's rep at the Venice Biennale (and a husband and new father) he's been very busy anyway as this debut at David Zwirner's shows. It's the first exhibition to bring together Ofili's painting, sculpture, printmaking and graphite drawing.

The long-awaited blockbuster filled two gallery spaces and a room between them. In a departure from his trademark use of dung as well as sequins, this show is pure, excluding mixed media. The results are a mature tour de force of color, line and figurative abstraction.

Mythic identities pose in pauses of fluidity as they appeal to us like sirens. Couples are caught in dances that celebrate eroticism. Long fronds place the action outside in a kind of Eden recalling Gauguin. Ofili's broad, color-saturated sketches of fetching demi-gods furthers this association. Matisse and Picasso also rustle.

In "Confession (red)", a nude female lies diagonally on a green hill. A mountain hulking under a purple sky silhouettes her profile. Ofili uses the *abozzo*, or underpainting to great effect. He often swipes a slightly dry brush across the shaded surface.

allowing it to show through, adding depth and darkening the overlaying color.

Of several sculptures, the 84-inch-high bronze "Annunciation" is arguably the *Pieta* of our times. Two winged figures — a shiny, smooth female and a rough, black male — are perfectly bound in a hot embrace.

The title "Devil's Pie" refers to singer/songwriter D'Angelo's 1998 lyrical postulations on desire and redemption. In keeping with Ofili's own allusions to scripture, many of the titles are Biblical characters. Does the title "Lazarus" have to do with the guy's wang sticking straight up? True to form, Ofili continues to push the boundaries in his spiritual expressions of human nature.

Known for painstaking collage full of documents and fancifully painted, Carlos Vega breaks out in his fourth show at Jack Shainman. Here he includes straight painting on canvas with no additions and impressive etchings on lead plates.

The collages are winning with their mix of letters and ledger sheets, cut up books and diagrams. In "Just Looking III," a la Goya, a giant sits on the horizon. Vega handsomely invests the composition with an old look, roughing it up with pencil smudges. In a skillful play on negative space, the notepaper lines interface with cut-out paper to form the figure.

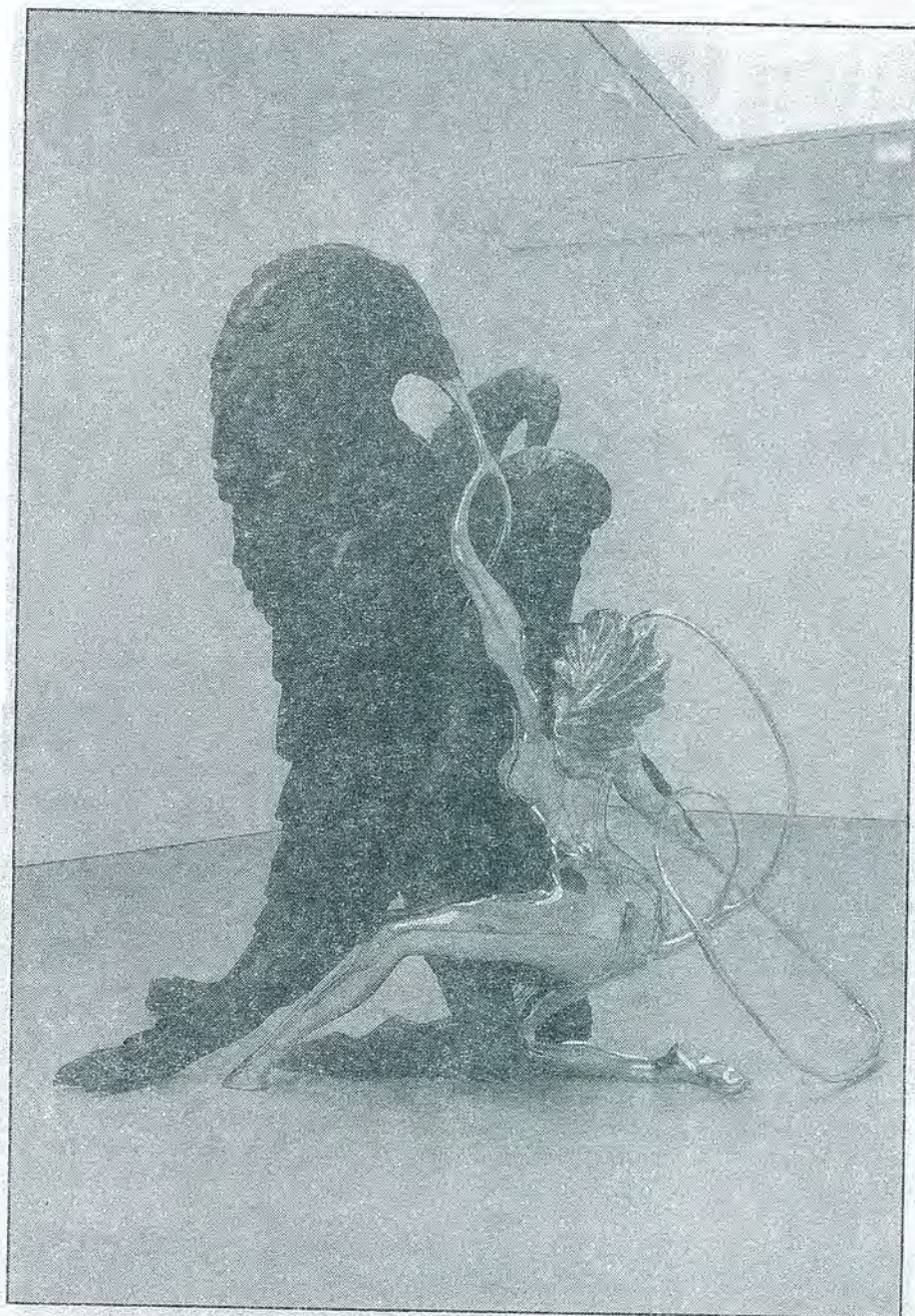
The title piece "Pure Science" is spare. The Helvetica words cut from a textbook or magazine cross the bottom. Three triangles are skillfully splayed above like helicopter rotary blades or more ominously, a fallout shelter sign. Over this, Vega has drawn the side and front of an architectural eagle, providing an unfinished, hence private quality.

While the collages provide a sensuous subtext, Vega's drawings on lead highlight his allegorical concerns. In a large triptych, we see an aquatic pastoral. Delightful figures of otters, dragonflies and irises emerge from a dark surface.

Black stars in the sky reflect in silver. In the center, a nymph's face floats. Her hair spreads out mimicking the ripples. An orange beaver paddles along. Rust marks replace brushstrokes.

On the right side things start to get dicey. Some forms are less identifiable although we can delight in a blue fern and a green mushroom. A face with tears breaks the surface and below it another. The lower face is holding something in its mouth with a disturbing grid like a grenade.

Vega should keep exploring that dark side in order to fully balance those big lead sheets.



Chris Ofili, "Annunciation," 2006

Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, New York

Carlos Vega

JACK SHAINMAN

Spanish artist Carlos Vega brought a bit of painterly legerdemain to his second solo show in New York, where he now lives. In each of nine new works on canvas and paper, he collaged together found documents and pale, elaborately mapped landscapes. These pastel scenes, initially apparent only as texture, revealed themselves gradually, in the manner of invisible ink exposed to the proper light.

To make them out, the eye first had to accommodate different, usually competing, levels of visual information and meaning that embraced minimalist strategy with picaresque narrative. Top layers—which include forgotten trial transcripts, accounting records, or hotel stationery and the like—allude to roads taken and not, through time as well as space. In *Total the Circumstances*, for example, Vega blends the image of a train yard, rendered in perfect one-point perspective, with a typewritten, circa-1920 court brief that details a two-century-old land dispute between New Hampshire and Vermont. *Hybrid*, which has references to both early Ellen Gallagher and late Agnes Martin paintings, places a surreally bucolic Cross Bronx Expressway interchange under pages of a school composition book.

In *Avenue Lorenzo Cardenas*, which is the loveliest painting of this very companionable group, four pairs of serendipitously water-stained columns from the calligraphic record of an 18th-century Spanish land grant take on the character of rail lines, while the painting's eponymous Mexico City boulevard seems to seep up to

Carlos Vega,
Stage Coach Road
(*Tierra Amarilla to Taos*),

2003, oil and collage
on paper,
47" x 62".

Jack Shainman.



the surface from a subterranean well.

If technique were all it took to make a great painting, Vega would be king of the world. As it is, his dreamy panoramas do repay the patience they demand without making too big a deal of it. —Linda Yablonsky

SPAIN IN NEW YORK

**Calendar of
Cultural Events
November~December 2004**

**Consulate
General of Spain**



Carlos Vega

A solo exhibition of this renowned contemporary Spanish artist, based in New York, featuring two compositions that each include over 40 small-size paintings. His latest work is a break from the past, focusing on new themes, a change in the size of the canvases, and, for the first time, including the human figure. The result is a laborious, meditated, and exquisite work characterized by superimposed scenes and collages, a diary of images and experiences that the artist observes each day in New York—a homeless person dragging a cart full of papers, two friends talking, a quiet urban park, a man in a Superman costume surrounding by children.

November 19-December 23
Jack Shainman Gallery
513 West 20th Street (212) 645-1701
www.jackshainman.com

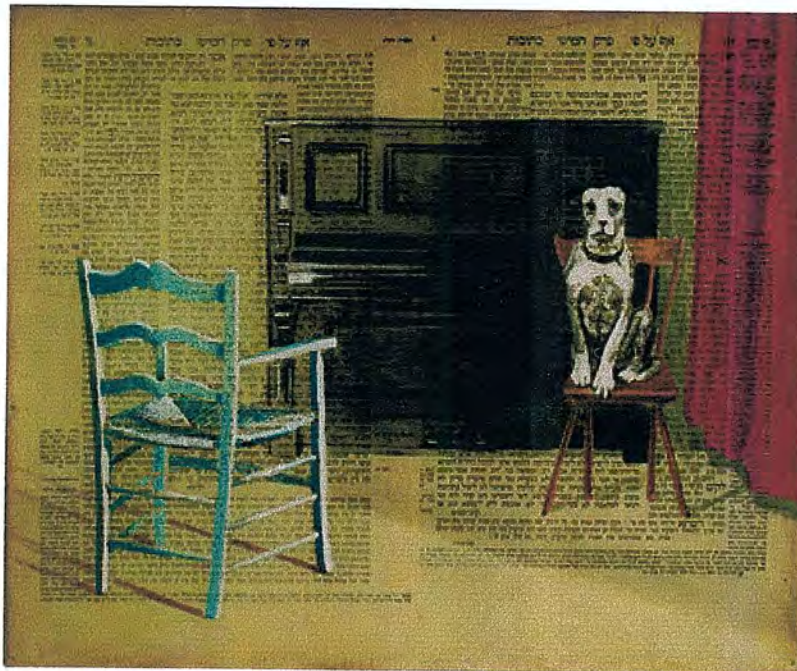
Art Forum Critics Pick December 2004

Carlos Vega

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY
513 West 20th Street
November 19–December 23

Superimposing found documents—notes to self, algebraic equations, French vocab lists—onto painted images, Carlos Vega's small canvases imply a context he never quite provides. Three shabby boots dominate one, moose stare sleepily toward the viewer in others, and still others depict people schlepping large objects or heaps of junk. Sometimes the stuff of fantasy (a humungous elderly couple sitting atop snowy mountains in an otherwise empty landscape) but just as often illustrations of the utterly mundane (highway overpasses), "*Fábulas/Fables*" reads like a lovingly compiled travelogue of "typical" lives, complete with requisite ups, down, dreams, and boring realities. Vega merges the images with the texts by painting over his found scraps of paper with a translucent medium. In many of the works, the paper dissolves but the scribbled notes or evidence of painstaking penmanship practice remain behind, proof of something once thought valuable enough to write down. While the relation of image to text is never explicit, Vega's project—archiving the easily forgettable memories of strangers he's presumably never met—illuminates the human pathology that drives us to categorize and systematize, to scavenge and collect, to desperately grasp at order.

—Nick Stillman

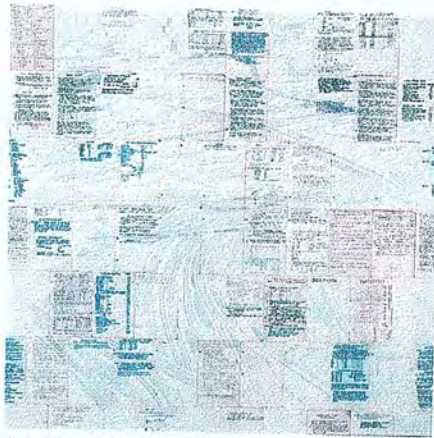


contemporary

no 55
2003

NEW YORK:
JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY
CARLOS VEGA: THE IDLE TRAVELLER
16 April – 17 May 2003

Carlos Vega scours flea markets from Madrid to New York for scraps of paper that tell forgotten stories: love letters from the Spanish Civil War, legal papers from a nineteenth-century border dispute between New Hampshire and Vermont, decades' worth of careful notes from the journal of an air-conditioning technician. Over these documents Vega paints contemporary scenes – of rail yards, Aspen trees, highway crossings – that are linked to the text underneath. An image depicting the present-day Avenue Lorenzo Cardenas in Mexico City, for example, is painted over a manuscript from the King of Spain granting the land to his younger brother, Luis Infante. Pages of an ornate nineteenth-century Spanish dictionary lie under a scene showing a New Mexico forest, through which a stage coach trail ran in the 1800s. The intent is plain: Vega makes apparent the stories that are hidden within the spaces we now inhabit. *The Idle Traveller* teems with a sense of loss and



Carlos Vega, *Peak Demand*, 2003, oil and collage on canvas.
Courtesy: Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

remorse, as if eulogising a centuries-old city that is now overgrown with trees and covered by roads, and whose literature is scattered or lost.

The two layers of Vega's works set up a number of oppositions in addition to past and present: the appropriated versus the fictional, the two-dimensional versus the three-

dimensional (which Vega draws attention to by either flattening or exaggerating the vistas' sense of perspective). Most notably, Vega carefully argues a contrast between the originality of the historical texts and the banality of the painted images. While the technically intermediate landscapes are reminiscent of amateurish watercolours, the documents, embellished with detailed ornamentation or full of arcane specifics, point to an elite: the Spanish royals, the air-conditioning expert in Los Angeles, the lawyers in New England. And where the texts explicitly concern claims to ownership, the paintings depict prosaic scenes familiar to anyone who's ever stepped outdoors. Vega suggests that in today's mass sameness we risk losing not only the individual stories of the past, but also the individuality and authority these stories project.

Vega hides this implication within his poignant canvases, so that despite the fun of the initial 'a-ha' moment – when one's gaze turns from the landscapes in the foreground to the text underneath – the real epiphany comes days afterwards.

MEISSA GRONLUND

The Stranger's online blog

SLOG

Currently Hanging

Posted by Jen Graves on June 22, 2008

http://slog.thestranger.com/2008/07/currently_hanging_161



Carlos Vega's *How Quiet* (2005), acrylic and collage on canvas, 17 by 16 inches

At James Harris Gallery. (Gallery web site [here](#).) I almost hesitated to post this piece at full size, feeling like a tiny version of it would align more with its internal volume (reflected truly in the title, *How Quiet*). But I wanted you to be able to see what I saw when I came across it in the gallery the other day: the lined paper with numbers on the top corners, the unfussiness of the thinned paint, the way the artist turns a page ready for a list into a scene of incredible modesty, with the window-washer reaching just as far as she can without making the ladder tip. To me, it's absolutely beautiful. And it makes absolutely no demands.



Painter Carlos Vega conjures up the spirits to relay complex family tales. by Lauren Parker

open house

Carlos Vega *The View*, 2000
oil & collage on canvas, 96" x 8"
Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

● ● ● A curious moment occurs when you visit an old house. It's the instant your attention shifts from its ornately carved staircase and long-gone artistry and reconnects with the family histories surviving under the creaky floorboards. It's

ponder your life far in the future while simultaneously directing the movers where to put the couch. A man's house, after all, is his castle—or Tara, condo or flat—and such issues of house, home and nonpossession are not to be taken lightly. Spaniard

takes it all very, very seriously. "It's about leaving your mark behind, either physically through tangible remnants, or spiritually through a memory," he says about his work, which fuses paintings of architectural spaces and collages of old documents



Carlos Vega *Jacob's Ladder*, 2000, oil & collage on canvas, 64" x 64"
 Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

cultivated relationships with dealers of aged papers—wills, legal documents, ledgers, journals and the like. Curious about the stories submerged within each brittle page, Vega embarked upon a quest through Madrid for the aforementioned homes. He then honored their histories with lush oil paintings of stairways, courtyards and rooms—both real and imagined—upon which he layered pieces of the original documents. So begin the tales.

Vega walks us through physical and spiritual space, with stairways representing surviving structures, and steps portraying ascensions heavenward—a life after life for the former, now-deceased inhabitants. And like M.C. Escher's

look up to the next world and down to the last, presenting varied and simultaneous vantage points. After all, there are multiple stories—and multiple sides to every story—particularly regarding the home/family unit. As Tolstoy writes in *Anna Karenina's* opening line: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." It's hard to be in an old house and not wonder what became of these families. Were they happy? Tormented? Doomed? Why did their personal and legal documents end up in a box at a flea market? Makes you wonder where your precious things will end up.

As every good detective story needs a red herring to throw the protagonist off the trail, Vega had the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s to make things more difficult. "Of the owners mentioned in the documents, many of the families and their descendants have disappeared, making it difficult for me to trace them, although the buildings remain,"

same family, painting buildings they lived in, or homes they requested to have built upon their deaths, painted over their collaged wills. He isn't just concerned with what was, but with what people wished for; what they go through to leave their mark on the world. An example is a wealthy Spanish patriarch who died in Rome in 1887, leaving properties all over the world, requesting that a particular building in Madrid be sold after his death to pay a church for 1,500 masses for his salvation. The elevator shaft of that building is what Vega painted.

Over on this side of the Atlantic, the U.S. has its own issues regarding family legacy and heritage. In a culture where kids fly the coop as teens and change addresses as often as they change their favorite brand of jeans, neighborhoods and towns, incur frequent personality shifts. It all puts weight behind the phrase, "You can't go home again." Vega was intrigued by America and ultimately came to explore the dichotomy that is New York State's Hudson River Valley. "Now, that region is a haunting image of what the American dream was, says Vega. "There are a lot of ghost communities and many people are now on welfare, despite the area's dignified past." The 1880s Plumb-Bronson house in Hudson, New York, and its beautiful spiral staircase caught Vega's attention. It is currently on the grounds of the Hudson Correctional Facility. "They give public tours once a year to show the past, yet the present is so dismal with all these incarcerated kids." To add to the dichotomy, onto the painting Vega collaged pages from the journal *The Rural New Yorker* (dating from the 1930s) showing ads for pest control, farming technologies and equipment and ways to increase chicken production. How things change.

Vega also mixes up various countries, ages and languages. One work fuses pages from an autograph book belonging to a young girl in Connecticut ("When you are old and you cannot see, put on your specs and think of me, Your father, Oliver," and other such cherishable inscriptions) and pages from a nineteenth-century Hebrew-language Torah from Krakow, Poland. The pages were collaged beneath a painting of a stairway in Spain, mixing three disparate souls and histories from three disparate countries around the globe. "My paintings make a hybrid that represents the path—the transitions throughout life," says Vega. Perhaps you *can* go home again ●

Lauren Parker is smock's executive editor. She has various dreams.

terns can be flipped and repeated like Rorschach blots and transformed into semblances of embalmed landscapes, mandalas, water imagery, and so on.

Pearson investigates the methods and meanings of painting now, beginning with the sheer physicality of his thick, grandly scaled panels, a concreteness that was lacking in the gouache drawings.

As you look, everything starts to jump around; Pearson's plasticized op art and text hybrids—part painting, part sculpture, part abstract, part representational—continue to pack a provocative punch as they push back the boundaries of painting, making us question at least part of his title: "Rock and roll is dead, the novel is dead, god is dead, painting is dead." —*Lilly Wei*

Carlos Vega

JACK SHAINMAN

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'Nevelson—Vari: A Dialogue'

NOHRA HAIME

The coupling of Louise Nevelson with Sophia Vari



Carlos Vega, *Stage Coach Road (Tierra Amarilla to Taos)*, 2003, oil and collage on paper, 47" x 62". Jack Shainman.

here was a curious match, especially since it was called "A Dialogue," a feature that was notably absent. Nonetheless, this deliberate blurring of esthetics entertained with its incongruent forms and rhythms. Here was the thoughtful Nevelson, with her arresting meditations in wood, paired with Vari and her playfully secular bronzes. It was like stepping through Alice's looking-glass into two events inhabiting one space. Any show that provides as dizzying an experi-

ence can be commended.

And any show that displays Nevelson's works from the 1960s offers a transcendent experience. Her black wall pieces filled with everyday objects—bowling pins, wooden blocks, chair slats—looked even more elegant today than when they were made, as did her freestanding cubistic constructions. Since her work is devoid of personal history and emotional baggage, her inventive array of materials, of various shapes and sizes, seemed wondrously timeless. Included was the architectural *Ice Palace I* (1967), a glistening, geometric Plexiglas conception that scissors the light in the manner of a model for a skyscraper in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, looking back to the 1920s vision of cities of the future. However, Nevelson doesn't ask for interpretation. Her vision was rooted in the strategic order of her components, thereby giving relevance to the most irrelevant object or design.

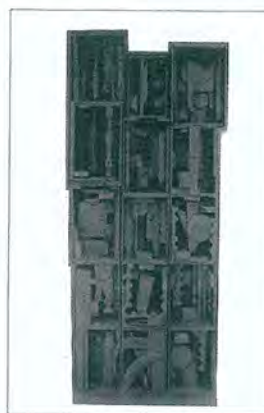
Alongside Nevelson, the bemusing shapes of Vari tended to take a secondary role. Her sleek, swervy, curvy painted bronze figures often shine with a black patina and red

accessory adorning them. Some, such as *Le Roi* (2001), evoked giant-size chess pieces, redefining the game of life on a teasing scale. They also carried the savory allure, sometimes with bright cherry eyes and chocolatey body parts, of succulent sweets.

—*Paul Gardner*



LEFT Sophia Vari, *Le Roi*, 2001, bronze, black patina, and red oil, 60 1/2" x 21 1/2" x 19 1/2".



RIGHT Louise Nevelson, *Sky Chapel V*, 1960, wood painted black, 94" x 42" x 14". Nohra Haime.

EL artista granadino afincado en Nueva York Carlos Vega presenta en la Sala B de Condes de Gabia la muestra 'Si las paredes hablarán'. Beneficiario de la beca Manuel Rivera de la Diputación de Granada, Vega es uno de los más internacionales artistas emergentes de Granada. Sus obras se encuentran expuestas en el corazón de Manhattan, en una céntrica galería de Chelsea, uno de los barrios más artísticos de la metrópoli estadounidense.

Los trabajos que presenta en la sala granadina continúan su línea neoyorquina de estudio de la arquitectura y de las palabras, esos documentos que bien encuentra en la calle o adquiere en los mercadillos de antigüedades. Con esos textos autógrafos insertos en espacios arquitectónicos construye en sus obras una estética particular.

Su proceso creativo comienza a partir de los documentos que encuentra allá donde va. «Vivo con esos documentos, los leo, los memorizo y algunos tienen una imagen que es una traducción literal de lo que refieren, y otros son un híbrido, donde uso las imágenes y los texto buscando un lenguaje metafórico», comenta el artista.

La muestra presenta dos grupos de trabajo distintos. Por una parte, se encuentran las obras relacionadas con Nueva York y con su arquitectura, y por otra parte, aquellas más españolas en las que «hay una mayor relación entre la página y el espacio físico real».

En cuanto a Nueva York, el artista comenta «que cuando uno busca en los rastros de esta ciudad suele encontrar cosas económicas como libros de balances, gastos e inventarios». Estos papeles son los

El artista granadino afincado en Nueva York relaciona en sus obras los documentos que encuentra con los paisajes que crea

Las paredes de Carlos Vega

JUAN LUIS TAPIA / FOTOS: RAMÓN L. PÉREZ / GRANADA

EXPOSICIÓN

- ▶ **Título:** 'Si las paredes hablarán'
- ▶ **Autor:** Carlos Vega.
- ▶ **Contenido:** Obras del artista Carlos Vega, en las que relaciona documentos con paisajes arquitectónicos.
- ▶ **Lugar:** Sala B de Condes de Gabia.
- ▶ **Horario:** Lunes a viernes de 18 a 21 horas. Sábados de 11 a 14 y de 18 a 21 horas. Domingos de 11 a 14h.

que integra en una arquitectura determinada, «ya que los elementos arquitectónicos los utilizo como un símbolo de optimismo».

Cada lienzo de Carlos Vega contiene una historia, «y cada obra tiene su propia lectura y narrativa». Es el caso del gran cuadro que refleja un almacén plagado de cajas, cuyo fondo está construido con hojas procedentes de albaranes y balances con el debe y el haber. Para el espacio arquitectónico se ha inspirado en un almacén militar granadino. Otro de los lienzos

muestra un patio de vecinos, una escalera que asciende entre los papeles de una niña, en los que sus padres y familiares le desean lo mejor en el futuro. «Es un cuadro muy sentimental, donde he jugado con la escalera y los buenos deseos para el futuro de la niña, que reflejan los papeles», comenta Carlos Vega.

La 'charla' de otro de las obras expuestas recoge los documentos de una mujer española de comienzos del XIX estudiante de 'agrónomos'. Los papeles se insertan en la escalera de la Facultad madrileña de Agrónomos, en ese juego de documento y arquitectura.

Uno de los lienzos que más llaman la atención es el titulado 'El borde inferior de la luz', donde documentos bancarios plagados de cifras conforman el centro de unas ascendentes Torres Gemelas, pintadas meses antes de que desaparecieran estos edificios, que eran el centro financiero. Un nuevo curso en esta muestra de lienzos para ver y leer.



METÁFORAS. El artista Carlos Vega ante una de sus obras.

*If Walls Could
Talk:
On the Paintings
of Carlos Vega*

ON THE MORNING of September 11th, 2001, as the World Trade Centers collapsed in Lower Manhattan, a rain of papers born by a strong East wind fell over Brooklyn. The charred remains of wedding pictures, accounting books, and Japanese computer manuals landed in quiet backyards, witnesses to lives that had disappeared in an instant.

For several years, Carlos Vega, a remarkable young Spanish painter living in New York, has mined the souls of documents for inspiration. Haunting flea markets in Madrid and Manhattan for notebooks, wills, personal correspondence, and theological disputations, he uses these fragile records as keys to past lives, opening up the hidden recesses of memory. He collages these archival bits of paper into multi-layered, lush and large-scale oil paintings that eerily evoke specific architectural spaces, often abandoned by men and history.

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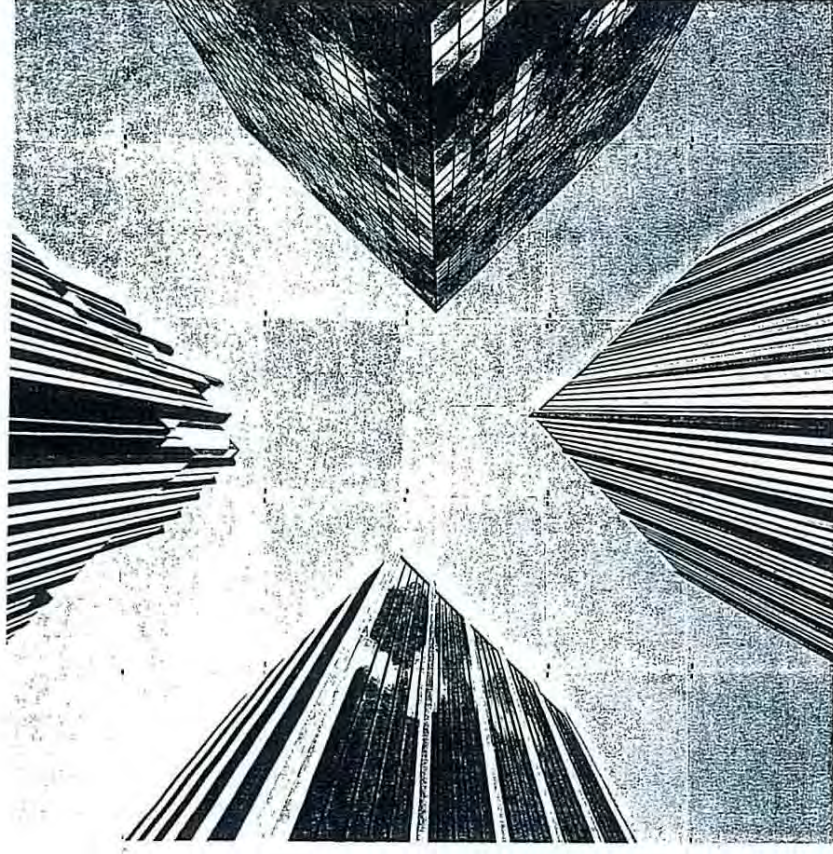
The corridors and staircases of apartment buildings, the offices and storage rooms of busy estates – do they retain some vestiges of the people who pass through them daily? Marrying architecture, the most lasting of our monuments, and paper, the most fleeting of our traces, Vega teases out their hidden relations. For a monumental series of recent paintings, he followed the daily itineraries from home to office of the late Ferdinand Goldberg, a banker and the grandfather of a friend in New York. The towering caverns of Manhattan skyscrapers, seen from the strangely exaggerated perspective of an ant on the street, assume God-like dimensions, stretching toward a celestial blue heaven in the center of the canvas, which is papered over with pages from Goldberg's ledger books. Vega's merging of worldly and divine accounts lends his entire enterprise a metaphysical dimension.

Many of his other works evoke Old World interiors and the intimate recesses of Spanish history. *El Testamento* (2000), a luxuriant canvas which he painted while holding the Manuel Rivera Fellowship for study in New York, shows the empty foyer of an ordinary Madrid apartment building. The curtains on the concierge's door are drawn aside, as if for peeking, and a letter box tilts open mysteriously. Plastered along the walls are the letters that a Spanish soldier fighting in the Republican army during the Civil War sent to his girlfriend, who lived at that address. "My dearest Elvirita", he wrote. "I am waiting for your letter. Don't worry about the Revolution. Nothing will happen." The ghost of their conversation haunts this image of the hallway where she received his words impatiently, keeping her joy a secret even from her neighbors.

Vega found their correspondence in the flea market, along with Elvirita's other papers. She never married, and he speculates that her boyfriend may have died in Franco's assault on Madrid in 1938. Vega's grandfather, an officer in Franco's army, also died in the battle for Madrid, executed by Republican forces. Yet, though deeply moving, his painting's pathos is restrained and introspective, the image of a deserted movie set where people once rehearsed the trauma of a nation.

Three highly suggestive paintings of Madrid apartment houses tell the story of successive generations in a single family. Each canvas incorporates a will in which a building changed hands. A winding bannister carved in dark wood adorns the stairwell of a house deeded to a rich man's stepdaughter, "in commemoration of her love and obedience". Vega's picture summons up a feeling of stifled lives and general constriction. A wealthy Spaniard who died in Rome in 1887 requested that his home be sold to pay for celebration of 700 masses for his soul's salvation. Vega painted a mole's-eye view of the building's elevator shaft, looking toward a luminous heaven.

The brilliant lighting, unusual angles, and attention to architectural detail in these paintings evoke the visual vocabulary of modernist photography, while their rich, painterly surfaces and philosophical density recall the early work of De Chirico. At the same time, their linking of place to personality draws upon a tradition stretching from the strategies of contemporary Conceptual artists such as Sophie Calle and Vito Acconci



PUNTO DE ENCUENTRO, 2001

back at least to the 19th-century critic John Ruskin, who imagined an ideal home where the very bricks would be inscribed with the autobiography of its inhabitant. In fact, Vega's work belongs to the convention of *Vanitas* paintings, visual commentaries on the ephemeral nature of existence. But there's no morbidity in his canvases, no bitter commentary on life's folly, only a sense of loss, and a hope for illumination. "Very little separates us from these people, really," the artist told me recently, as the afternoon sunlight filtered through the windows of his 29th Street studio. "We will be them in no time. In 60 or 80 years, we will be something of the past."