

Michel “Pollo” Perez

A lump of modeling clay is not a human, not when it's sculpted into a bust in likeness of someone the artist knew and less so when it's still a lemon-yellow ball of clay with a lumpy right side, as if its shaper got a bit of bad news while worrying it with his hands and pressed too hard with a stray index finger. A fragment of Aztec pottery does not look like a torso, either, not when it is balanced on two other chunks of rock, not even when it has a pink clay head with a promontory that could be a stubborn forehead and a peak that could be a pouted mouth. There are no hands, no feet. One leg is creased and pigeon-toed, the other points out. It is composed of shapes and has no physical resemblance to a person. And yet these lumps of modeling clay, represented in smooth acrylic paint on canvas, are redolent of humans. Their imperfections are alluring.

Entering a room of enormous paintings by Cuban artist Michel “Pollo” Perez feels like wandering among a pantheon of absurd, friendly humans and animals and horizons that in fact look nothing like humans or animals or horizons. The paintings look like carefully rendered portraits of sculptures made of modeling clay, rocks, pinecones, fruit, marbles, and bits of twisted wire. Characters stand before quiet, plain backgrounds, and despite their best efforts, small rivulets of paint drip from ears and haunches. Within the experience of viewing these paintings, such reminders that these are found objects make the personalities of Pollo's characters no less real. We can know that these are paintings of tiny models that Pollo has made, and yet we can feel that they are human or animal or scenic at the same time.

Pollo begins to paint without painting at all, but by crafting small models made of clay and found objects. He may spend up to a week making, say, twenty models, considering color, composition, balance, the sensory relationships between materials — old and new, hard and soft — and the emotional associations that different objects carry in the human mind. A piece of an Aztec pyramid is not the same as a chunk of asphalt from the road outside of Pollo's Havana studio, and their connotations will contribute to the surprise and personality that he seeks when he auditions his twenty models as painting subjects. One, maybe two, will be photographed at different angles and in

different lights. Eventually, Pollo will paint a likeness of this model, a portrait with color and proportions that have been weighed and considered throughout the process. He cites as influences Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, George Condo, Edward Hopper, and Italian metaphysical painters like Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carra.

Pollo's paintings capture the autonomy of imperfection, a liberation from normalcy. They evoke the contentedness of melancholy or the freedom of being trapped or the trapped sensation of too much freedom. They inspire emotions before thoughts, and questions. "What are people? What is an individual? What is personality?" Each model is an actor in Pollo's mind, playing a role in an attempt to address the unanswerable questions he poses himself. They give the sensation of looking in a funhouse mirror and seeing only that one piece of self that you have tried to bury under layers of clothing, demeanor, makeup, remembered accolades.

Pollo hopes to "generate specific sensations like calm, or emotional stability, sensations that are very useful when you live in a society like mine." His is also a society in which a generation of young Cuban painters have, after experimenting with other materials and forms of expression, landed on seemingly-traditional painting on canvas. Within this context, Pollo's work stands as a unique amalgam of process- and object-oriented art, the airbrushed and the misshapen, the sentimental and the resigned. And so, by painting subjects that are absurd and tiny, Pollo guides us toward thoughts and emotions that are authentic and expansive.