



DÉTOURNED

Solo Exhibition by Melvin “GRAVE” Guzman

Exhibition on view Wednesday, January 16th through Sunday March 9th 2019

ABXY Lower East Side
9 Clinton Street
New York, NY 10002

EXHIBITION ESSAY

By Carlo McCormick

Across a landscape of desire where consumerism constitutes lifestyle and luxury in surfeit subsumes identity, there wanders a creative adventurer named Melvin “Grave” Guzman. A scavenger of our wasteful excess and an interlocutor of those discrete meanings that lay latent within our manic materialism, Guzman is watchful of our wishes and conscious of the cultural subconscious that compels the compulsions of acquisition. He understands the nature of our dream machine and moves through our dreams like an interloper whose interventions are at once a trespass, a theft and a rescue. His art, a tracing of his travels and examination of the traces strewn to the side of our perpetual distraction, is a saving grace, the best thing that can be said about all that is wrong at the moment.

Much like the cargo cults that developed in the late 19th and early 20th century where less materially advanced cultures, encountering the detritus of the modern world, developed ritualistic practices around the foreign materials that washed up upon their worlds, Guzman's retrieval and recombination of the shiny display baubles he gathers in his daily rounds of the great shopping mall that is now downtown Manhattan offers a kind of magical thinking, an alchemy of transmutation where the emptiness of a non-specific and unquenchable wanting is invested with personal and esoteric meanings. It is at once casual and relatively random yet also deliberate and definitive, built of his idiosyncratic mythologies and empowered through the modern ritual of performance art where the spontaneity of play and the inventiveness of imagination proffer a make-believe that makes belief. DIY and homemade no matter the inherent slickness of much of his found objects, the theatricality of process, captured in videos but also evident in the work itself, reveals and revels in the dual status of his art as not simply objects of contemplation but also as artifacts of a post-utilitarian purpose and as props in ongoing narrative.

Guzman's narrative, a story assembled in shards- entirety forever incomplete, conjuring like constellations where representation is a kind of connect the dots along the abject periphery of abstraction, is a shamanic storytelling befitting urban myth. His comic book reinvention of self, complete with a tragic-heroic alter ego *The Phantom* whose painful origin story based off a life-changing incident in which the artist had his face brutally sliced open in an uptown bar, is itself a cipher, a perpetual retracing of the cut, emblazoned as a sign reduced to a logo, Zorro's mark reconstituted into the vernacular of graffiti, a tag whose very I was here presence connotes a converse gesture of absence.

Guzman is everywhere in his work, just as he seems to be in the city itself, but it is an assembly of personae, the self infinitely split by some social schism, a phantom's dissembling where the revelation is guised and coded, its truth but an allegorical fiction. And wherever or whenever the Phantom appears in Guzman's art, he is intangible and ethereal, an echo or memory more than a physical being anymore, what the artist calls his life from the time he was born until the time he was scarred, something past tense yet present still, that knowledge going forward that life can be taken away at any moment. He tells us it is the flag for the survivors of our ongoing Armageddon, brought from his fallout shelter in Harlem and planted downtown where all things are bought and sold.

A century past, when the flotsam and jetsam of society first became a physical material and creative language in the arts through the post-war hysteria of Dada and figures like Schwitters, this art of refuse and refusal allowed the commonplace as something inherently wretched and anonymous, albeit spun into gold by the glory of modernism. With Grave's dedication to the discarded however one gets no sense of the forlorn. His are not the lost mementos of our attics and dustbins but the found treasures of our commercial design aesthetics, collapsed and collaged as composite mediations of our hyper-mediated landscape. Built of the incidental, the elements themselves are far from accidental, each loaded with the artist's keen sense of the attendant brands and stores that were their original source. Describing his assemblage as a way of "building narratives for the people," what is uncanny is how for whatever randomness his art embraces there is always a discrete deliberateness in composition and content. "Everything is on purpose," he tells us, "I like to make mistakes, but never by chance."

This abiding sense that Guzman wanders, seemingly lost but always with an internal map of where he wants to get to, functions as a kind of frisson within his art, a method to the madness that invisibly directs his collaborations and guides even his most informal and spontaneous of gestures within the syntax of a populist democratic spirit of communication. And though I was fortunate to meet Grave first as an artist, it is as this wanderer that I more frequently encountered him, a post-modern *flaneur* of the 21st Century whose orbits through the madding crowd mark the distance between today's city of the spectacle and the metropolitan entropy of yore, while echoing the intoxication of 19th Century *flaneur* swept up in the masses, as Baudelaire described in *Crowds* as "this ineffable orgy, this divine prostitution of the soul giving itself entire... to the unexpected as it comes along, to the stranger he passes." Rather than merely some bewitched itinerant of the streets however, Grave strikes us as an urban commando whose engagement with the urban is far more critical than acquiescent. His art stems from the Situationist's navigation of our consumerist spaces, be it the *derive* (or drift) by which this notion of the flaneur enters into a *psycho geography* of discovery, or their strategy of hijacking and redirecting signs, called *detournement*, from which Guzman takes the name for this exhibition. Discursive and without apparent direction, these travels mapped in Guzman's art are nonetheless pointed and purposefully problematic, a record of wishful and wistful wondering written in the wry tones of self-reflexive identification.



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