



*Destination Fiesta, Green Parakeet* by Esmeralda Benitez

#### SURFACE TREATMENT

What: "Vibrant & Vivid"  
Where: McAllen Creative Incubator, 601 N. Main Street  
When: Through April 27, 2019  
Hours: 9am-5pm, Monday through Saturday

#### **Divergent Muses**

An unlikely trio of artists show paintings and prints in this McAllen Arts Council exhibition.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

"Vibrant & Vivid" is mood-lifting three-woman exhibition by Lisa Saenz-Saldivar, Esmeralda Benitez, and Wendy Gilbert, featuring oils, acrylics, and digital prints. Although these artists are highly divergent in their artistic directions and picture scale - Benitez presents avian oil paintings, Saenz-Saldivar is an abstractionist, and Gilbert is all about digital - "Vibrant & Vivid" succeeds through the quality of its art.

Due to their large scale, Saenz-Saldivar's paintings are instantly noticeable. Swirling shapes pass over and around each other against flat color-grounds; meticulously painted, they embrace their abstract identity. Bands of color are often filled with small perfectly painted circles and spaced with what seems like mathematical progression. Unexpectedly, these paintings have some serious emotions lurking beneath their decorative surfaces. "They're very decorative," insisted Saenz-Saldivar, "because I want them to emit happiness even though in my life there may be conflict and I paint what I'm going through; It maybe something joyful or it may be something that I'm struggling with." She spent three months working on "Loves Me Loves Me Not", which she considers her divorce piece. Feeling like she was drowning emotionally, we can see the shape of a vase containing swirling, water-like waves, crashing against the sides of their container. Its flowers are distorted and too big for the perimeters of the picture plane, bending

with sections of petals chopped off. Rendered in a deceptive color scheme from her state of mind, shapes crowd in and overwhelm each other.

Benitez' avian paintings are technically skillful nature paintings, but she goes a step or two further. With this series, Benitez applies imaginative personality aspects to her subjects. "The idea came to me," she explained, "as I was driving up to an intersection close to home and there was a line of lots and lots of birds. They congregate, and it was like they were talking." She began imagining their lives and what each bird might talk about. "Each of them, as I see it, has a different personality," she added. Her paintings each feature a bird portrait against a thoughtfully hued background representing its imagined personality/character trait. Her "Courage with Cause, Northern Mockingbird" depicts a fierce and protective subject against a saturated and vivid color ground ready to act in the face of danger, "The Rocker, Green Jay" is the Rock star with the glitzy performer's metal chain, and her "Destination Fiesta, Green Parakeet" places those socially raucous birds at an extended party. All are perched on a wire because, as Benitez says, "That's where the idea started."

Gilbert's art works relate technically to her exhibit last month with collages of jelly prints, drawings, and digital manipulation. There are two thematic directions – the aquatic prints, and the owl, skull, and stenciled sun prints. The aquatic prints offer lush coloration and drawing; the other group is emotionally louder. Begun during her mother's final months of life, its symbolism speaks of death and oppositions. In some work a stenciled sun occurs, reminding us of summer, "when the sun gets so hot it screams at itself," quipped Gilbert.

Curvilinear lines and bold colors are important in all these works. Saenz-Saldivar's curved lines construct entire compositions, Gilbert selects curvilinear shapes, and Benitez employs curves discreetly with her birds and the gently curving wires upon which they perch. Benitez' color suggests the imagined personalities of her subjects, Saenz-Saldivar's myriad palette is the very definition of color itself, and Gilbert relies on a primary color scheme for visual force. But aside from line and color, and due to its contradictory styles, "Vibrant & Vivid" is still best appreciated in its parts rather than as a whole.

*Nancy Moyer, Professor Emerita of Art, UTRGV, is an art critic for The Monitor. She may be reached at [nmoyer@rgv.rr.com](mailto:nmoyer@rgv.rr.com)*