



News

SURFACE TREATMENT

What: *Urban Landscape that Speaks the Hope of Humanity*
Where: Lobby Gallery, McAllen Public Library, Nolana at 23rd Street
When: Until March 3, 2016, Library hours

The Complex Life

It's a pleasure to see this large body of work by Rio Grande Valley artist, Benjamin Varela, shown in McAllen. The paintings symbolically document his life and his surroundings, and even reflect captured fleeting moments that he has experienced while simultaneously already at work on a painting. All Varela's experiences, whether sensory, physical, spiritual, or purely imaginative, become documents on his canvas. His exhibit, *Urban Landscape that Speaks the Hope of Humanity*, is currently on display at the McAllen Public Library and offers viewers the experience of this artist's work over the past few years.

Many of the paintings were inspired by unhappy incidents or points of view, but Varela says that the paintings represent the hope that comes out of misfortunes. His large painting, "Hummingbird," was inspired by the tragic treatment of indigenous Haitians who were brutalized by the conquerors of the New World. Positioned behind the magnificent hummingbird representing the people, we see three suns representing the Trinity, and in the lower foreground – a Milagros, the hopeful element that heals the pain. Varela considers himself an optimist.

The signature style of Varela combines his unique ability to create and organize an amazing amount of symbolic detail within the limits of the canvas with his brush technique of stippling upon a black background. With his black and white paintings the effect results in grisaille – gray tones that read like beautiful drawings. Other paintings rely on color, but the brush application is the same. For his subjects, Varela often begins with a single image and no idea where the painting will go. But then as information

pours into his imagination, he weaves a multitude of visual images together, much as a writer would weave words and sentences into meaningful passages of thought. “La Virgen de Guadalupe Joseph Beuys and Where is the Coyote” may be that kind of composition – a stream of consciousness freefall into horror vacui (fear of empty space for all you non-art historians). This impressive work is an exhausting convergence of imagineering around what started out as a pleasant image of the Virgin de Guadalupe. Mess with your mind as you look at this painting; where is the coyote? Human or animal?

Sometimes the paintings show more controlled expression, as in “Good Bye Traloc,” which is about his break up while living in Kingsville. We see his figure despondent and isolated as the woman leaves. The sun watches over, promising better things. “Familia” is a joyful painting about his wedding a few years later to fellow painter, Anna Maria Sanchez.

In addition to beautifully designed and richly decorated detail, there is a blatant disregard for spatial reality in these works. Images seem to be collaged over, under, and around each other. For this exhibit, we see many brick and urban structures within the mix. Born in Brooklyn and having lived in cities such as Queens, NY; Madison Wisconsin; and Chicago, cityscapes are nestled warmly in this artist’s subconscious mind.

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