



*Girl with Fish*

## SURFACE TREATMENT

What: *Oscar Alvarez: Of Beasts and Butterflies*  
Where: Lobby Gallery, McAllen Public Library, Nolana at 23<sup>rd</sup> Street  
When: Through September 10  
Hours: 9am-9pm Monday to Thursday, 9am-6pm Friday and Saturday, 1-9pm Sunday  
Contact: (956) 681-3000

### **Inside Alvarez**

This exhibit reflects the artist's mind as he covertly considers the contrasts of existence.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

This solo exhibition of paintings by Brownsville artist, Oscar Alvarez, has a heavier emotional tone than did his previous works. *Oscar Alvarez: Of Beasts and Butterflies* is a series of paintings ranging from near monumental in scale to the very small and vulnerably intimate. Self-taught, Alvarez' imagery references his own interior resources. Some paintings have the feeling of childhood memories, or even childhood imaginings that are part of the fabric of early youth. Others go further into the artist's current psyche and show us worlds that seem to be constructed with the stuff from semi-awake states, when the mind drifts from being controlled to having free rein. This exhibition is currently on display at the McAllen Public Library's Lobby Gallery.

Engaging in art as a respite from the stress of his day job as a funeral director, the paintings in this exhibition show examples of purely therapeutic passages, plus those that have moved beyond direct psychic release into thoughtfully developed abstract expressions. The two large paintings, "Spitting Flowers" and "Blue Dragon," rise above the other works in their compositional complexity and imagery through the combination of abstract shapes and imaginary beings into fantastic scenarios. "Blue Dragon" conjures a large beast, along with lesser ones and flying insects, presumably butterflies, along with parts of creatures magically born from the sides of unrelated shapes. Both paintings evoke feelings of tightly compressed frustrations with moments of ecstatic bursts. A series of paintings on the edge of the exhibition represents small and simple expressions in stark contrast to the larger works. Depicting zoo

animals and children, they return to a time of childhood where reality was ambiguous. The compositions and perceptions here recall childhood drawing practices; the earth is always beneath the feet, the sun is shining up above, and the shapes of creatures have minimal detail. All are unfettered by later conceits of the academic visual dogma beloved in our art schools. Alvarez' skies here have assumed a healing color of green often compromised by neutralized tones.

Through his painting, Alvarez leaves the daily arena fraught with reminders of mortality, terminal existence, and other stresses, escaping into a fantasy world where his images have eternal life. But he never truly escapes the darkness that accompanies contemporary life. That dark undercurrent insistently seeps into even the lightest of subjects. The initially whimsical painting, "Clown with Trout," offers several perplexing perceptions. Stereotypically a happy character, this clown's repressed expression is set against a complexion matching the clouded sky as he ends the life of the fish; in a single image gaiety and death have merged. Or perhaps he will return his captive to the ocean; is he a cause of death or a sportsman? Can we ever tell the difference?

In "Lori," the little girl and the lion share an uneasy tension. This painting struggles with a time when the darker sides of life were still unclear. The lion may well be (or represent) a danger, but the flower-gathering child is unaware of life's fragility, even as she picks the blood-red flowers.

*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)*