



Chestnut Hill Local

(/)

Tuesday, June 25, 2024

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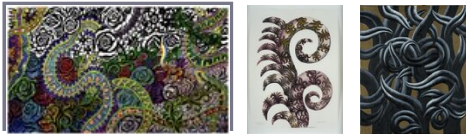
From Venezuela to Philadelphia, and the Wissahickon



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Cloud of Water / Nube de aqua, 2017, by Henry Bermudez

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Posted Thursday, February 29, 2024 12:00 am

The current exhibition at Woodmere Art Museum explores the work of Henry Bermudez, a Venezuelan-born artist who came to Philadelphia as an immigrant and seeker of political asylum in 2003. The show, which opened last week, is a “Philadelphia retrospective” that chronicles the artist’s journey over the last 20 years.

Bermudez had been working at the top of the international art world, even representing Venezuela at the prestigious Venice Biennale in 1986. Then he found himself among the millions of other citizens of Venezuela who were forced to flee the authoritarian disasters of the Chávez regime. Without English language skills and sleeping on a friend’s sofa, he said he started from scratch, gradually rebuilding his life and his art practice in Philadelphia.

Nature remained a constant inspiration for his imagination. His Woodmere show puts his own unique stamp on the Woodmere’s focus on the art and artists of Philadelphia – with its constant awareness of the magical impact of Fairmount Park, the Wissahickon

Creek, Forbidden Drive, the Schuylkill Center, the Morris Arboretum, the Awbury Arboretum and all the great private gardens and green resources that make Northwest Philadelphia a place of beauty.

For Bermudez, the inspiration of his adopted city's green character is important. While completely different from the qualities of the jungles, forests and the integration of nature in Venezuela's cities, the force of Philadelphia's natural environment remains a through-line for the artist.

In fact, on entering the show and encountering the giant paintings with faux fur, sequins, birds, snakes and mythological creatures, most visitors describe being struck with an overarching sensation that comes from the exuberance, dynamism, intensity of color and vigorous forms of nature. Jaguars "shout" with rainbows, giant roses are depicted in blue glitter and Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent of Pre-Columbian art, flies through the gallery as a protective spirit.

Through the hard times of living in Philadelphia as an immigrant, Bermudez maintained his optimism. He became a citizen of the United States in 2013, and the joy of nature remains a sustaining element in his creative vision.

And he fits right into the Woodmere galleries, with their theme of nature in the landscape painters of the 19th century, in the Impressionist and Realist artists of the 20th century, in Violet Oakley and the Red Rose Girls, and in the countless modern and contemporary artists who have chosen to call Philadelphia their home.

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