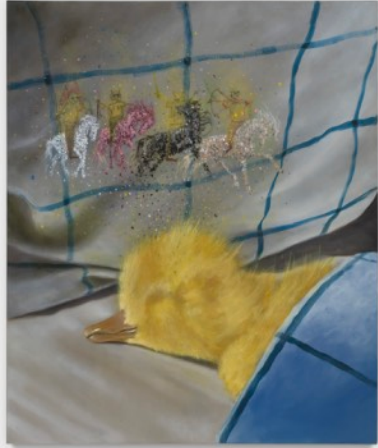


rachel uffner



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Upstairs Gallery: Elbert Joseph Perez
Just Living the Dream

March 12 - May 14, 2022

Opening Reception: Saturday, March 12, 6-8 pm

Rachel Uffner Gallery is pleased to present *Just Living the Dream*, a solo exhibition of new oil paintings and assemblage sculptures by artist Elbert Joseph Perez. Drawing upon the still life canon, philosophy, and religion—particularly Buddhist and Christian ideas of hell—Perez explores themes of living, dying, and dreaming through imagery of animals in vulnerable situations.

The worlds of Perez’s paintings are uncannily removed from what is “real”: 2D surfaces depict familiar animals, ceramic figurines mimicking them, and ominous cartoons belonging to an unknown consciousness. Everyday objects, including hammers and pool cues, signal rebirth through acts of violence. Stars, flames, sunsets, and sunrises appear as emblems of liminal dream spaces or visits from spirits. Allusions to well-known French and Dutch still lifes are recurring, as are nods to a particular type of online humor. Across all the work, depictions of suffering and levity are given equal weight. Even when the painted subjects are alive, the sensation that they aren’t quite *living* prevails.

Animals exist in isolation, appearing alone or in groups of two or three, in precarious limbo states of asleep, approaching imminent violence, or freshly dead. Some of them are cute, others less so. Each animal carries the weight of universal connotations with it: the snake is charming and not to be trusted; the deer is meek and arguably most vulnerable to being hunted and hung on a wall. The horse is a recurring subject for its locomotive associations—which to Perez, a mechanic by day, is personally resonant. As he works on bodies of cars in the light he thinks about the bodies of animals he will paint in the dark, and what is shared between them. No matter the villain, victim, or witness, a sense of shared vulnerability makes it easy to identify with and project onto the animals in Perez’s universe.

The Long Nap references French painter Jean-Baptiste Oudry’s *The White Duck* (1753), and depicts a dead duck frozen mid-descent toward a table. The duck’s head rests on draped white fabric, with a single lit candlestick nearby. A fixed to his foot is a cartoon on paper depicting how he went, a dispatch from his inner monologue: suicide. A still life, a still life. A recurring animal in the work, the duck also holds more common associations for Perez, who describes it as “light, white, blank, a game bird, a punching bag, ugly up close...”

Rachel Uffner Gallery
170 Suffolk Street
New York, NY 10002

+1 212 274 0064
info@racheluffnergallery.com
racheluffnergallery.com

Thoughts of Mercy and Grace shows a duckling dreaming of the apocalypse, or perhaps another of Perez's paintings. In *Tuning the Aeolian Harp*, a swan tunes her neck toward the bottom of the lake. The reflection of her beak forms a feedback loop with her body. One eye remains above the surface of the water anxiously gazing outward. She's stayin' alive, at least for now.

In *Duhkha Aisle*, a ceramic duck in a hell also known as The Home Depot wears a little hat and faces his grim fate: a threatening snake with an open mouth. The tragicomedy of this scene lies in the duck's little hat (an attempt to appear civil), the duck's little expression (an attempt to appear animate), and the sense that neither the duck nor the snake knows the duck is fake.

The sculptures are intimate in scale and consist of both man-made and natural materials, such as a tuft of real moss next to a cloud made of white plastic. The material juxtaposition further underscores the question of what is "real" that Perez is after. Animal figurines are arranged atop crushed ceramics, as though standing on the bones of their kin. These animals are similarly oblivious to their own suffering as those in the paintings, as a brass hammer dangles overhead, likely unbeknownst to them.

There's sadness in the simulacrum, the almost, and the in-between, a feeling Perez successfully and continuously captures. The affect of each of these works is representative of the time they were created, in the late evening and early morning hours of 2019-2022. Themes of life, death, suffering, and uncertainty all feel achingly familiar, but a sense of humor and strange calm shines through.

text by Annie Bielski

Elbert Joseph Perez (b. 1991, Brooklyn, NY) lives and works in Hudson, NY. Perez has exhibited at galleries including Babayaga Gallery, Hudson, NY; Venus Over Manhattan, New York, NY; Kimberly Klark, Queens, NY; and Basilica Back Gallery, Hudson, NY, among others. *Just Living The Dream* marks Perez's first solo exhibition in New York City.

Image: Elbert Joseph Perez, *Thoughts of Mercy and Grace*, 2022, oil on canvas, 43 x 36 in (109.2 x 91.4 cm)

Please call +1 (212) 274-0064 or email info@racheluffnergallery.com for more information.

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