



THE
CREDENTIALIST

JOSÉ LERMA / MAY 19—SEPTEMBER 2, 2012

CAM
RALEIGH

José Lerma—*The Credentialist*

May 19–September 2, 2012

The Credentialist is a body of experimental works by José Lerma that expands the notion of painting. Melding non-traditional materials such as reflective fabrics and commercial carpet, Lerma creates monumental works that resemble portraits of bureaucratic figures while simultaneously appearing to be topographical landscapes. Central to the exhibition is the notion of rising and falling, particularly the precipitous demise of great historical figures. Swirled scribbles are reminiscent of vintage graffiti while doodles reference French political cartoons.

The exhibition features a large-scale carpet installation while the walls hold large paintings propped up on electronic keyboards. The hypnotic musical tones of the keyboards and the meditative swirls of the doodles seem to counterbalance the stiff regulations of the wiggled aristocrats and the controlled atmosphere of the museum's white walls. *The Credentialist* is a museum premiere and Lerma's first museum exhibition.

– Elysia Borowy-Reeder, executive director of CAM Raleigh

Stealing from Oneself

José Lerma in conversation with John McKinnon

John McKinnon

How did you develop your current artistic practice?

José Lerma

After school, I started exhibiting as a post-studio artist. It made sense to me at the time. Then I attended a couple of residencies where I felt that this kind of approach was more than well represented. As a reaction, I began to paint. It was just more fun to paint when others were interested in video or relational aesthetics. By default, I took something of an unnatural stance and become a painter. I guess it is more typical to follow the opposite trajectory, from painting to post-studio approaches. I now work in a hybrid mode that feels very natural to me. I'm glad that I've been able to merge the two positions. Hopefully I've become less dogmatic.

John McKinnon

You have said that your work is either about art history or your parents. Can you expand on this?

José Lerma

That was an off-the-cuff statement. Still, it was expansive, which was important, and I began to use it to describe my practice. It's a cliché, but to an extent I am my influences. I'm not just referring to art, but also biology, sociology, and so on. While it may be my job to supersede these legacies, I find that their conscious selection, fracture, and combination yields a poetic third meaning that is simultaneously honest and unpredictable. Other ideas may come to me, but they are always filtered by this nexus of influences. The point is to use my life to end up somewhere unexpected aesthetically. Paradoxically, to get there, I have to be suspicious of my taste, upbringing, education, and sense of

where the art world may be headed. It's important to ask myself "Why do I like what I like?" Or "Why did I use to like it?" Only then will the particulars of my biography yield more interesting results than generational clichés.

John McKinnon

You have used historical imagery including fountains, French bankers, royalty, and coins. Why are you drawn to these subjects? Do they have a timeless quality?

José Lerma

I wouldn't call them timeless. While anachronistic and obsolete, they retain a certain temporal stability. These images and objects don't fit into a contemporary context. That's why they interest me. I reuse histories that apply to me. I like the B-sides of art history far more than the hits. They are all relevant; one just feels more problematic in the current context. If I favor the obscure, and combine it with my biography, I may get to an interesting place. For instance, I combine paintings of seventeenth-century French bankers with keyboards from the technological present. These different modes do not fit together neatly and ultimately produce a new read.

John McKinnon

Some of your images come from caricatures that commented on topical issues from the time they were created. Are you interested in their social criticism?

José Lerma

I love the work of James Gillray. I also like William Hogarth, George Cruikshank, and Thomas Rowlandson. Also, pretty much anything in

Punch or Le Charivari. These caricaturists were brutal. I am interested in the trappings of status and power in their cartoons but I don't use it directly in my work. Sometimes a pose or a title might suffice to recast the commentary. The historical distance allows me to address ethical issues without moralizing. The viewer's ability to project a contemporary character or situation into the scene is essential.

John McKinnon

Some figures seem to recur in your work. Where do they come from?

José Lerma

I'll give you an example. Before I went to art school, I visited the Metropolitan Museum and shot about twenty photographs of Guillaume Coustou's bust of the banker Samuel Bernard. I don't know why I did it. I had no intention of making art. Years later, I stumbled upon the photographs. They seemed like a great subject. The financial meltdown happened as I was working on the series. While I had already been drawn to that subject matter, current events gave the works more urgency and direction. Another example is the Charles II series. My mother, who is from Spain, used to bring him up when I was a kid. He suffered from several genetic abnormalities and his reign was a total disaster. During the last years of the Bush presidency, I thought a lot about him.



Top image: José Lerma, *El Pendejo*, 2009, installation at Looock Galerie, Berlin, Germany. Image Courtesy: Looock Galerie, Berlin

Bottom image: José Lerma, *The Glib Decade*, 2010, acrylic, silicon caulk on canvas, oil, acrylic, urethane, pen, graphite on linen, two synthesizers.

John McKinnon

When you redraw images, you often leave out elements that would point to a specific person. Do you do this to let your materials speak or direct a viewer away from the original source?

José Lerma

Since the work is not about likeness, I can use paint less predictably. I try to use materials in such a way as to make them refer to something else. If I wanted something that looks like a highlighter, I would not use a highlighter. I would rather resize or transform another material to give the appearance of a highlighter.

John McKinnon

Do you do this to prevent the work from looking too slick?

José Lerma

I often use materials that are the complete opposite of my subject in order to make a new reading. The reflective 3M material I use can be flashy and dramatic, so I pull back a little. I create rather dull, conservative curtains with it instead of covering an entire gallery. These materials, including the carpets, have a corporate identity.

John McKinnon

Like using an airbrush to create Bic pen marks on rugs?

José Lerma

Exactly, there is no one-to-one relationship. I wanted to use bureaucratic aesthetics. But I didn't want the actual thing. The point is to open up meaning with suggestions.

John McKinnon

Are you developing a vocabulary that can be continually referenced and developed?

José Lerma

Most artists have their own lexicons. Recurring images are a form of shorthand. I occasionally steal from myself.

John McKinnon

You have also said that you have to sabotage your work if it invokes too many ideas. Why?

José Lerma

It's not the number of ideas, but rather their clarity. Clarity is a dimension of the process, but it should not be the final result. If my work is tight and clear, I have to mess it up a bit. I don't want it to appear too elegant. I want to leave room from interpretation. I'm drawn to painting because it often contains muddy ideas, like incomplete jokes. I'm more interested in things that are unresolved conceptually, or when pieces are missing.

John McKinnon

It must be amazing to use a studio formerly owned by Elaine de Kooning and John Chamberlain. How has it affected your work?

José Lerma

It's truly a fantastic space. There are two car bumpers in the basement that Chamberlain never used. When I first arrived, I imagined painting James Gillray caricatures of Elaine and Willem de Kooning. They were to be large gestural paintings over electronic keyboards playing a ro-



botic caricature of 1950s jazz. But the space is so great that I just got to work. So far, I have four or five large paintings in process without the de Koonings or robot jazz.

John McKinnon

Your show *The Lightweight*, in Chicago, includes all of the things we have talked about: a caricature of a down-and-out artists, a range of non-traditional materials such as the reflective 3M material, a Vietnam-era parachute, electronic keyboards, and so on. The themes of fall and flight came together wonderfully, leaving room for people to enter the work. *Rampant Mid-Careerism*, 2001, deftly nodded to your own career. How do you feel about it in hindsight?

José Lerma

It was a very modest show, but I am very proud of it. I decided to be brutal with myself and my art world pretensions and expectations. The first time I found any success in art was when I made fun of myself. Every time I've done that, things have turned out great.

John McKinnon is Program Director for the Society for Contemporary Art at The Art Institute of Chicago and a frequent contributor to ART PAPERS.

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ARTIST IN-GALLERY TALK

Saturday, May 19, 2012 1:00 p.m.

Meet José Lerma and join him for an informal gallery talk and tour of his exhibition, *The Credentialist*.
Tour is free with museum admission.

CAM Raleigh is collaboration between the community and North Carolina State University's (NC State) College of Design.

The Credentialist, created by José Lerma, is organized by CAM Raleigh. It is curated by Elysia Borowy-Reeder, executive director of CAM Raleigh and coordinated at CAM Raleigh by Kate Shafer, gallery and exhibitions manager and Evan Lightner, lead preparator.

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