

roberto gil de montes

reverence in blue

nov. 9 – dec. 22, 2023

opening

nov. 9, 6–8 pm

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kurimanzutto is pleased to announce *Reverence in Blue*, the inaugural New York solo exhibition by acclaimed Mexican-American artist Roberto Gil de Montes. This showcase of surrealism-infused paintings explores themes of belonging and perception, drawing from a rich tapestry of pre-Columbian and Huichol iconography, everyday life experiences, and contemporary art references.

Born in Guadalajara, Mexico, Gil de Montes immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of fifteen, settling in East Los Angeles just before the 1968 Chicano protests for educational equality. A graduate of Otis Art Institute, he became closely associated with the Chicano movement, fostering an artistic vanguard. He played a pivotal role in a generation of Chicanx and queer artists emerging in the 1970s, exploring diverse artistic genres, identity intersections, and innovative ways of presenting their work. Notably, Gil de Montes profiled many of his contemporaries, including Carlos Almaraz, Elsa Flores, John Valadez, Richard Valverde, and Jack Vargas, in a magazine he initiated.

As Gil de Montes' practice developed, his psychologically intricate artworks grew to embody themes of "danger, sensuality, death, and transformation," as astutely noted by critic Diane Mark-Walker in 1991. Since relocating to La Peñita de Jaltemba, Nayarit, Mexico in 2006, his art has evolved to portray scenes of tropical opulence and sensuality while subtly questioning life, love, mortality, and the uncertainties of the present. His decades in La Peñita have both nurtured and rejuvenated his artistic practice. While the theme of queerness has been a recurring motif in Gil de Montes' work, it has only recently been widely recognized as a longstanding element of his paintings. His works often explore the human body as a contested realm of fantasy, play, desire, and humor, with his newer pieces revealing this theme vividly. In *Reverence in Blue*, visitors will encounter captivating works such as *Peculiar Intimacy* (2023), *Wrecked* (2023), and *Catch* (2023), where the blue sky, ocean, and spaces in between serve as lush backdrops for ambiguously gendered figures and male bodies captured in moments of emotion and connection. The paintings *Silvia* (2023) and *Ana* (2023) pay tribute to two transgender women the artist knew during the 1970s in Los Angeles. These life-size figures gaze out from behind delicately patterned veils, evoking a sense of anonymity and protection. The veil also serves as a shield against the

potentially discriminatory gaze in the present moment, highlighting the fragility of trans and queer existence. The use of veiled motifs in Gil de Montes' works dates back to the 1990s and often expressed themes of loss and erasure during the early AIDS epidemic. Gil de Montes acknowledges that the veil, like water or curtains, signifies transitions and shifts from public to private, known to unknown, and life to death. In *Tropical Man* (2023), an homage to Marsden Hartley's *Adelard the Drowned, Master of the Phantom* (c. 1938-39), the artist captures a man with a single flower behind his ear against a striking red background. The choice of a white flower above the ear, reminiscent of Hartley's painting, symbolizes tenderness during turbulent times, while also highlighting the parallels between Gil de Montes' life as a painter in a remote coastal enclave and Hartley's experiences in a small fishing town. Reverence in Blue invites visitors to immerse themselves in Gil de Montes' world, where memory, connection, and loss are woven into the rich details, delicate veils, and myriad shades of blue that define his recent works. This exhibition follows Roberto Gil de Montes' participation in the 2022 main Venice Biennale exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams*, curated by Cecilia Alemani.

about the artist

Irreverent and serious, purposeful and inconclusive, Roberto Gil de Montes' paintings explore the hidden images and forgotten or imagined stories of the exuberant everyday life that he sees. A black mark in the centre is a void, or an egg, a mass grave, or a dance floor, a stage, and also a veladora-flecked piece of earth for planting. The canvas is fertile terrain on which to realign the spaces between the real and the imaginary: figures float in abstraction or are laid across surfaces, misfits and explorers in their own habitat.

Roberto Gil de Montes was born in 1950 in Guadalajara, Mexico. As a teenager his family relocated to the United States where he later went on to receive a BFA and MFA from Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles. As a young artist he became involved in the Chicano art movement in and around Los Angeles, developing relationships with artists such as Carlos Almaraz. In the 1980s, he returned to Mexico City where he worked at the Museo de Arte Moderno and on *Artes Visuales*, the prestigious arts journal that explored visual culture in Latin

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America. Roberto returned to Los Angeles to concentrate on his painting practice and began to exhibit widely. He also became involved in the creation of LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions) and began to show with Jan Baum Gallery, one of the few galleries at that time to show Black, Latinx and Asian artists on the West Coast. In 2000, he and his partner, Eddie, packed up their home in Echo Park and moved, via San Francisco, to La Peñita, a fishing town on the Pacific coast of Nayarit, Mexico, where they had spent many holidays. Roberto continues to live in La Peñita and paints in a studio directly overlooking the town plaza, a block from the coast.

Gil de Montes was included in many solo and group exhibitions in the late 1980s, including the touring exhibition *Le Demon des Anges* organized by C.R.C.D., Nantes, France, and Centre D'Art Santa Monica, Barcelona, and the influential Hispanic Art in the United States: *Thirty Contemporary Painters and Sculptors*. Touring venues included The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); Brooklyn Museum, among others. More recently, in 2017, Gil de Montes was featured in another traveling exhibition, *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, organized by ONE Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries. The exhibition, presented in the context of the citywide event *Pacific Standard Time LA/LA*, mapped the intersections and collaborations between a network of queer Chicano artists and their artistic collaborators from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. In 2017, his personal archive was acquired by ONE Archives. In 2022, he presented his first solo exhibition in Mexico, *Temporada de lluvias*, at kurimanzutto, Mexico City. His work was also included in *The Milk of Dreams*, 59th International Art Exhibition at the Venice Biennale and *Raphael Montañez Ortiz: A Contextual Retrospective* at El Museo del Barrio in New York and Museo Tamayo in Mexico City.

Gil de Montes's work is part of various public collections, such as Museo Tamayo, Mexico City; Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe; Dallas Museum of Art, TX; Denver Art Museum, CO; Hammer Museum, CA; Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), CA; USC Fisher Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Oaxaca, Mexico; Museum of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA; Sifang Art Museum, China; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; and X Museum, Beijing, China.

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Roberto Gil de Montes
Marcelo, 2023
Oil on canvas
50 x 50 x 2.2 cm