

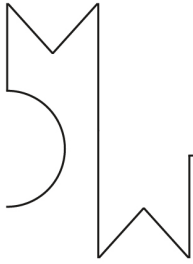
Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa
He Was, First of All, Water
26/01 – 13/04 2019

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa (1978, Guatemala City) creates dream-like images that draw on literature, folklore, magic and childhood memories. His work is playful yet also alludes to tragic or traumatic events connected with contemporary Guatemala, especially the impact of the civil war (1960–1996). Ramírez-Figueroa's performances and sculptures reference the human body and specific cultural rituals. They explore social relationships, colonialism, migration, censorship and identity, but always through a filter of imagination, humor and a powerful visual language.

For the exhibition at Mendes Wood DM Brussels, the artist continues to unpack his past as a refugee from Guatemala in Mexico and Canada in the 1980s. In the process, he focuses on a variety of forms and narratives, not all of which are linked to his personal context. The idea and history of carrying goods on the back occupy a central place. The *cacaxte* is the traditional method for this in the Americas – long before the European invasion – and is still the cheapest means of transport for the indigenous population of Latin America. The region's European rulers exploited the method in the nineteenth century as they searched for archaeological and other sites, using local people as bearers. Carrying goods in this way is therefore a taboo in contemporary Guatemala because of its association with colonial oppression. Carrying goods on the back is found in different cultures, including Europe, in the shape of soldiers' backpacks; the United States by settlers looking for land to claim; and China, where large quantities of tea were transported overland on people's backs via the 'Tea Horse Road'. In more recent times, refugees have relied on backpacks and large bags to carry their personal possessions.

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa approaches 'carrying' and the 'backpack' in this exhibition as a physical burden and as a load to bear with an identity of its own. The sculptures assume forms here that reference portable objects, such as vases, which combine elements from different cultures. Reality and fiction, history and fantasy, figuration and abstraction intertwine in these autonomous pieces.

The exhibition in Brussels presents three groups of work. *Cacaxte #1 (M-Museum)* was made during a residency in Belgium in the fall of 2018. It is both an autonomous sculptural work and one that the artist has used during a live performance. A metal backpack frame refers to the *cacaxtes* employed in Guatemala to transport fragile ceramics. The structure looks almost like a rack with ribbons for securing objects. About twenty-five small sculptures in polystyrene – a material used mainly for theatrical props – are attached to it. With their painted and varnished blue surface, the objects seem to be made from delicate faience or porcelain. The individual sculptures reference a variety of existing art objects from different eras and cultures: Mayan sculptures alongside medieval Spanish Muslim artifacts; figurines



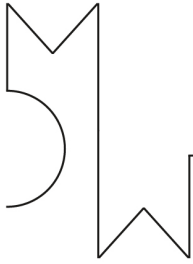
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and masks from countries like Nigeria, Egypt, Greece, China and Guatemala – each of them found by the artist in public and private collections and freely copied by him. Together, they offer an eclectic survey of cultural objects from various prominent museums, intertwining different identities and cultures. Very few valuable pieces can be seen in public museums in Guatemala: the most interesting artworks are abroad or in private hands, making it hard for Guatemalans to develop a sense of identity, of being part of a cultural history.

For last November's performance at M-Museum in Leuven, Ramírez-Figueroa walked through the galleries with this frame loaded with sculptures on his back. When he reached the room at the top of the museum, he untied the ribbons and spread the figurines around the space. The performance was documented and edited and can be seen at Mendes Wood DM Brussels as a video work.

There are also six other sculptures that likewise explore the notion of 'carrying'. Drawing on cultural traditions in different countries, in which people tie heavy loads to their backs, the artist refers primarily to water carriers, presenting sculptures derived from large vase and jug forms, including strings with which to tie them on the back. He has provided the sculptures with blue ribbons for carrying. The vase shapes are anthropomorphic and are more free or experimental, suggesting both bodies and round, natural forms. These organic shapes show some formal similarities with the hanging sculptures *Third Lung* presented at the 2017 Venice Biennial. Here, their brightly colored surface lifts them out of this natural context and lends them something artificial and contemporary. A striking element in this space is a tall sculpture in the form of a leg. An opening shows a blue cut or wound and hints that there is water inside the body. This work alludes to tension or harmony between nature and human beings. The role of water or the color blue has taken on different layers of meaning throughout Ramírez-Figueroa's *oeuvre*, reflecting both the history of his country and his own physical experiences. For the artist, the vivid colors also recall medieval artworks, which were often polychromed, but have lost their color over time.

Lastly, Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa is also presenting five large new wall works, which occupy the midpoint between painting and relief. Their grooved exterior resembles the vase forms with a ribbed surface, as if providing the pieces with a certain skin or protective layer. The artist began to work on this series of reliefs recently. The drawing on the surface initially consisted of simple patterns that hark back to traditional Latin American motifs. His approach then became freer and more experimental, playing with the idea of geometry and applying more patterns of his own design, each in a single, different color. Patterns recur in his older performances too, as a kind of contrast with the physical body. In *Print of Sleep* (2016), for instance, a bed frame is printed onto the performer's body with black paint, while



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in *Mimesis of Mimesis* (2016), the artist himself wears an elastic grid pattern on his body. A further element at play in these wall works is the interaction between the physicality of the flat expanse and the abstract approach. Together in this space, the sculptures and reliefs form a layered landscape.

- Eva Wittocx

These works were created during a residency in the fall of 2018 in the M-Space at Cas-co, Leuven, and at AIR in Antwerp. The performance Cacaxte #1 was produced and presented during the Playground festival at M-Museum, Leuven, on 16 November 2018.

Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa holds a BFA from Emily Carr University, an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and was a post-graduate researcher at Jan Van Eyck Academie in 2013. In a body of work that ranges from performance and video to sculpture, installation, and printmaking, Ramírez-Figueroa explores historical narrative (especially the effects of the Guatemalan Civil War) through the circumstances of the body. His proposition – that intimacy both marks and subverts our collective myth-making – reveals itself through investigations of dreams, architecture, abstraction, theater, and notions of the spiritual.

Ramírez-Figueroa is a recipient of a Guggenheim fellowship, a Franklin Furnace award, an Akademie Schloss Solitude fellowship, the ARCO Comunidad de Madrid for young artists, the DAAD Berliner Künstler programme and the 2017 Mies Van der Rohe Award. He has participated in various solo and group exhibitions including the *Viva Arte Viva*, 57th Biennale di Venezia, Venice (2017); 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo (2016); *Home Works IV*, Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, (2015); 10th Gwangju Biennale, Gwanju (2014); *Illy Present Future*, Castello di Rivoli Museum of Contemporary Art, Turin (2013); 3rd Internationale Kurzfilmtage, Oberhausen (2007).

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