

## Art speak

# Magic and mystery

*Luis Delgado, Dee Hood, and the art of the unknown*

The unknown is the star of the show at the Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art / Mira Mar Gallery. Its latest exhibit features art by Dee Hood (a full time instructor at Ringling School of Art and Design) and Luis Delgado (a Cuban-American expatriate). While their art is very personal and very different, it shares an obsession with the unknown. It's art about the limitations of art; communication about what cannot be said.



by Marty  
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What you don't know *can* hurt you.

Delgado's art is proof of that — it's filled with rage and pain. His figures are primitive and unformed — if not mutilated. (There are lots of missing arms.) The oversized stylized face in "Anger" screams. Most of the other faces — as Harlan Ellison might put it — have no mouth but want to scream. Delgado gives no explanations for what's causing all this rage and pain, who did it or why. Something has been lost; something has been ripped away. It doesn't make sense.

This brings us to the first big mystery — why is there so much suffering? (Theologians are still working on that one.) More specifically, why has there been so much Cuban suffering? Delgado is clearly wrestling with his former country's bloody history — and in "Rafter's Nightmare," an image of a severed, mouthless head, he makes the reference explicit. Delgado's free-standing figures ("Garden of my Secrets" and others) are also very Cuban, and also filled with pain. They're filled with religious symbols— sword blades, a repeated crown of thorns motif, God's all-seeing eye. The iconography derives from the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria, but it's a surrealistic echo, not a rip-off. He's implying some imagery cult of suffering in a Cuban House of Pain. There is nothing like these figures in the real world and he doesn't pretend otherwise.

The second big mystery is — how could human joy even exist in a world like this? Delgado shows the joy without explaining it. There's a beautiful angel figure ("Angel I"), a

serene miniature of a garlanded woman ("Brides I"), an oversized portrait of his daughter ("Geovanna"). All the beautiful faces belong to women. Perhaps women are the answer — or the question.

Why all the suffering — why all the Cuban suffering? He doesn't know. How can joy be possible in the face of so much pain? He doesn't answer this one either.

Delgado's images express honest raw emotion, but not the whole story. You know how he feels — at the same time, you don't know how he feels. What does it feel like inside his head? What has he gone through? What has he lost?

Even he doesn't know.

Dee Hood's work, mainly mixed-media assemblages, is comparatively gentle and childlike. She likes to take fragments of symbol and sign systems and put them out of context. In her two dimensional pieces, the background often resembles a jumbled map — as if a kid had cut out a page from a geography textbook and pasted the French coastline over another bit from the Middle East. She also uses snippets of architectural plans and diagrams, but it's always very flat — there's no sense of depth whatsoever. Against these flat backgrounds, she puts cutouts or her own painted images that still look like cutouts. "Saw Only the Moon" contains a dancing couple with a sad-looking man; "The Monkey Tree" shows a pair of naughty monkeys (in what may well be Eden's tree), along with a crouching angel stealing grapes; "Holding my Own" presents the silhouette of a child in free fall against a background of blurred symbols.

Hood's art evokes the point of view of a child looking out at a world that doesn't make sense. *Why does that man look sad? Where were the monkeys in the Garden of Eden? What does that sign say? Like Odysseus, every child is thrown into the middle of the story. One day you become conscious and there's all this history you're supposed to catch up on. Adults promise it'll all make sense one day; kids grow up and pretend it does.*

This show makes no such pretense. You walk away from it with more questions than you came in with. What you don't think is "I get it" — at least all of it. It's all about confronting the unknown.



Luis Delgado's "Anger"



Luis Delgado's "Vincent"



Detail of Dee Hood's "The Monkey Tree"

Photos by Marty Fugate

The unknown can insult your intelligence. It makes stupid people feel stupid and smart people feel like they're faking it. The unknown can also be fearful. Here there be monsters, as it used to say on the old maps. But it's also where all the magic and mystery is. Delgado and Hood are explorers of that realm. Kudos to the Allyn Gallup Contemporary Art / Mira Mar Gallery for bringing us its reports. □