

FINDING FOCUS

Julio Reyes' anticipated solo exhibition at Arcadia Contemporary explores a new medium and more intimate subject matter.

BY ROCHELLE BELSITO

It has been a while since Julio Reyes had his last solo exhibition—November 2014 at Arcadia Contemporary in New York City, to be more exact. A lot has changed for the artist since then, and it has all shaped the artwork he is creating today. Reyes started a family with his wife, artist Candice Bohannon, and they recently moved from California to Fort Worth, Texas, where his parents and siblings live. Four years ago, in addition to his oil paintings, he began working with egg tempera, and the simple, archaic medium has resonated with him so profoundly it is now what he primarily uses. Even during that period Arcadia moved to Los Angeles and recently relocated back to New York.

Reflecting on that passage of time, as he continues preparing for his upcoming show, *Tender Mercies*, which will open at Arcadia Contemporary on May 22, Reyes says, “The place where I’m at with my life, I’m not this young artist on the scene anymore and I’m not in my 20s. As you’re growing and maturing into a different stage of life, priorities get rearranged. I realize how valuable it is to spend time with my kids and wife...It affects what’s in the work; how could it not?”

Reyes has often found inspiration from the transcendental thinkers, such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, because of how they observed the world, focusing on the finer details and quieter moments. “It resonates with me, this idea that you can find yourself meditating on even the simplest things around you,”

says Reyes. “Leaves on the trees, the sounds that branches make; it’s the little things that just become your whole world for that moment. They remind you of this connection you have to the deeper world. You think of the things that matter to you.”

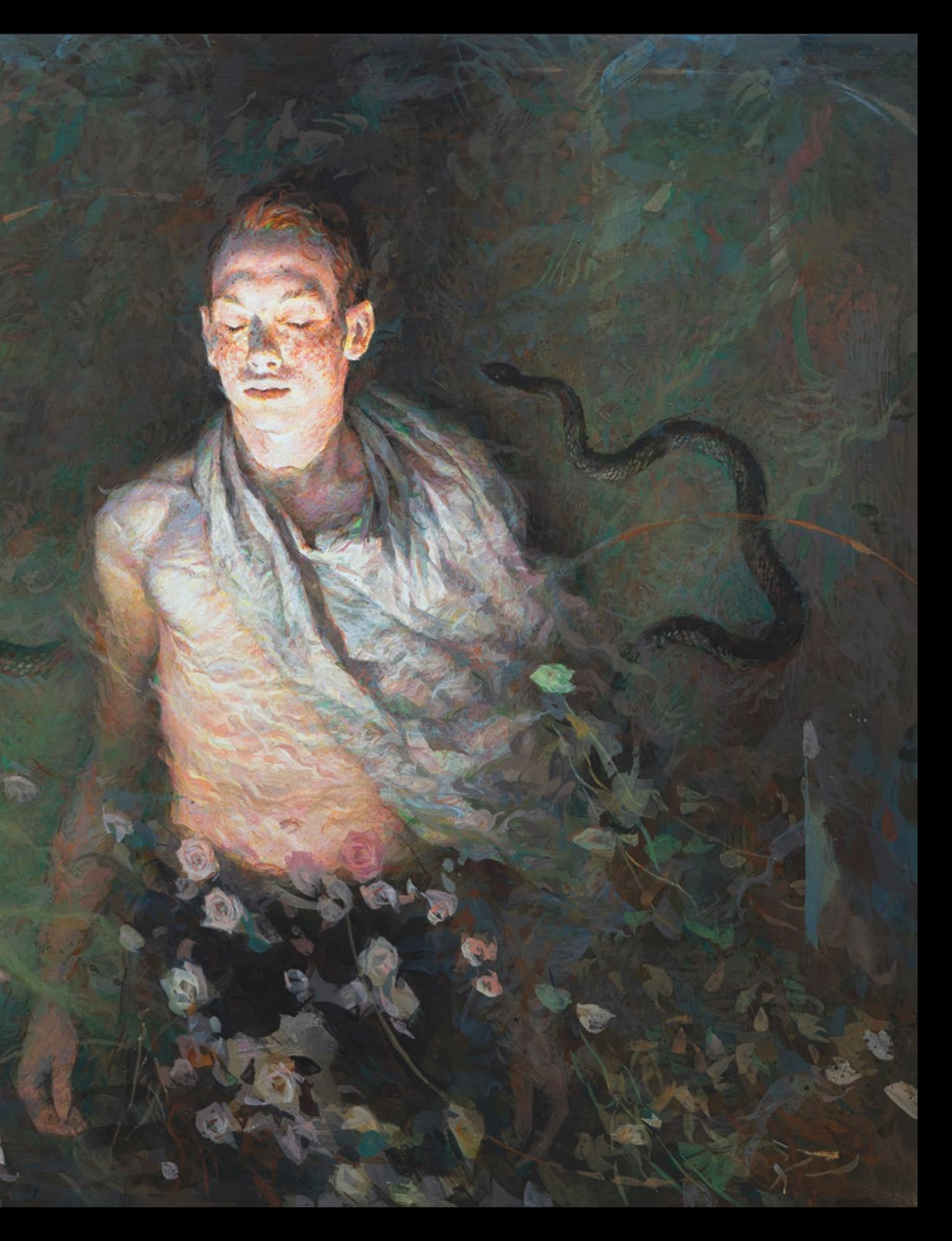
That in part is what Reyes has been trying to do as he takes the time to master egg tempera and explore painting ideas as they come. He is guided by what is meaningful to him rather than expectations of what his art should be. He says, “That is where I am right now. I want to say something that’s valuable to me, and I’m OK where it takes me. I’m trying to speak as genuinely as I can.”

He adds, “Transitioning to a medium like egg tempera, I knew the stories and subject matter were going to be smaller in scale. At first, I wondered if it would be OK, because I was doing these big cityscapes that were much grander...and there’s part of me that feels so out of tune, out of step with my own time, but then there’s another part of me that’s looking beyond. [There are writers such as] Thoreau who would encourage you to go your own way, go your own depths. To find some time alone and some time with nature, with the ebb and flow of your own life and accepting that gracefully and to just take a chance here. So I’m following my intuition.”

Reyes is open to wherever the muse takes him, and anything he finds beautiful can make its way to his canvases. Take for instance the hawk featured in *Huntress*, which he visited and learned

Laocoon, egg tempera, 16 x 16½"







Firefly, egg tempera, 14 x 16"

was one of 11 that was raised by its owner. Just seeing the bird on his arm was something to marvel at. Then there is *Whitecaps*, a view of a rock surrounded by water from high above. It is a striking image that can inspire fear or awe depending on who looks at the piece.

"Part of you, when you present the view of 3,000 feet in the air looking down, you wonder how people are going to relate to this, especially since it's a leap from what I used to do," Reyes says. "I've learned if I have a sincerity behind it, hopefully it comes through in the end...I don't want to be deliberate with what speaks to me, but I pounce on the ideas like that primordial, cathedral rock coming out [of the water] with creatures crawling over it and with seagulls. It's the power of nature, and why not depict it. Why should I fear it not fitting with some paradigm, with a rubric that people have with my art?"

Figures continue to appear in Reyes' work, but rather than the grand images of the past, they are more intimate moments. He still mostly uses friends and family members as models, but in the rare case he works with a paid model, such as the young man who appears in *Laocoon* and *Pompeii*. These works, and the others that he paints, are not meant to be archetypal or allegorical, but rather allow people to find their own interpretation or story, because there are so many ways to view the symbolism.

Laocoon is named after the sculpture *Laocoön and His Sons* excavated in Rome of the Greek myth where the patriarch, Laocoön, and his two sons are wrapped in snakes. In Reyes' painting the man is leaning back in the water and floating around him are two snakes. "Laocoön is the ideal patriarch figure. I'm not trying to convey the allegory, but it is

somewhat about this decadent idea of the ideal human but being devoured by nature." In *Pompeii* viewers will notice the golden crown of leaves floating in the water, which is another symbol with many meanings that could change how someone views the work.

Beyond the imagery, Reyes' new paintings are defined by the beautiful textures that egg tempera creates through its application. Looking at his pieces, the style is instantly recognized as a work by the artist, but there is new depth because of the layers and layers of egg tempera. For instance, in *Laocoon* and *Pompeii*, the view through the water's surface into what is below is amplified—as it gets deeper the colors get darker and the mystery of what lies below is felt.

"Using egg tempera is kind of a mix between drawing and painting, and there are some elements of watercolor in it, but



Whitecaps, egg tempera, 28 x 18"



Huntress, egg tempera, 16 x 11"



Pompeii, egg tempera, 19 x 16½"

unlike watercolor putting washes down and adding moisture, it dries instantly. Then you layer [more of the egg tempera] on top of it, and you get the added depth from building up layers of color," Reyes explains. "A lot of times in early stages, I pull out big brushes and there's a watercolor effect because I'm working with glazes, but the avenues I go down as the painting develops changes. A lot of egg tempera painters will concede that it started begging to be used almost like you would crosshatch with a pencil. But you're building things like value, color and form, and you have thousands of layers of paint underneath there. It's all different iterations of every passage of the panel that I'm painting on; it gets restated and restated. Every time you start a new layer of color it grows richer and it culminates toward the end. That's something I really love about it...I love that idea of building something up slowly over time and then it's not all contingent on nailing it on the first or second try. It's this crescendo of all these minor efforts accumulating to a major result."

Tender Mercies will be on view through June 13. ●

JULIO REYES: TENDER MERCIES

When: May 22-June 13, 2021

Where: Arcadia Contemporary,
421 W. Broadway, New York, NY 10012

Information: (646) 861-3941,
www.arcadiacontemporary.com

Bloodflow, egg tempera, 14 x 24"

