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Angel Otero's Digs On Frayed Canvases and Crumbled Sculptures
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Ruins are the remnants of man-made architecture: once-complete structures collapsed into timeworn bits through lack of upkeep or deliberate destruction. Think of Pompeii, Herculaneum, Tikal—or the burned carcass of 20th-century modernism, for that matter. A grandiose pile as dystopic as downtown Detroit, this last stone-cold junkyard yields green shoots for only a few of our era's most persistent and inventive young artists.

One such figure is the painter Angel Otero, a creator whose second Manhattan show of frayed canvases and crumbled sculptures is currently on view at Leh-mann Maupin's Chelsea space. A baby-faced 32-year-old who hails originally from Puerto Rico, Otero has matured from exotic painting prodigy into full-blown, locally sourced creative phenomenon. A sly, protean figure as unlikely as he is gifted, Otero made a tremendous splash when he arrived in New York from Chicago in 2009. Galleries fought over him like stylists over a celebrity mane; his sophisticated near-abstractions—featuring hieroglyph-like texts and figures—quickly became catnip for finicky collectors and curators, landing in a number of important national and international exhibitions. (Full disclosure: I included several of his early paintings in a small-scale European show a half-decade ago.)

A self-confessed outsider whose "parents didn't know anything about art," Otero readily admits to catching the art bug late, after a friend showed him reproductions of Abstract Expressionist paintings in a textbook—dog-eared images of Pollocks, Rothkos, and de Koonings. "It felt very liberating," he told a reporter two years ago, "that the world accepted that as art." Later, after time spent selling home insurance by day and making paintings by night, Otero won a free ride to Chicago's School of the Art Institute. There he experienced both the deep-freeze of Midwest winters and the cool-school cynicism enervating the most competitive American MFA programs.

Asked in class to name his favorite contemporary artist, Otero blurted out "Jackson Pollock." His fellow students laughed while his instructor gibed, "How does it feel to live in the 1950s?" Six years later, Otero was awarded a coveted Leonore Annenberg Fellowship (it comes with up to $100,000). Proof, if more were needed, that a final laugh not only lasts longer—it can also help transform the most earnest greenhorn (like Otero past) into a seasoned artist (such as Otero present), even during a creatively blasé, hyper-jaded, culturally unimaginative time. Today, most MFA grads remain practically convinced that art begins with Warhol's soup cans. It's the rare young artist—in our age of genre-grazing and sample-browsing—who commits to a real give-and-take with the 20th century's gods and monsters, never mind those inhabiting the caves of Lascaux.

What Otero managed to do in Chicago was remarkable for an artist at any age. He reinvented the practice of painting for himself by learning to excavate volatile new meanings from the medium's most essential materials: paint and cloth. Using a now-signature method in which he lays oil paint onto glass panes in order to subsequently peel off their "skins," the artist then devised a way to reattach his flayed sheets onto waiting canvases—thereby crafting finished works that look partly like spontaneous 1950s abstractions (of the Art Informel variety), but also like torn, graffitied posters found in outer borough subway tunnels.

Otero's complex process composes images backward, as if made while looking nervously in the mirror, like the lead character in the movie Memento. Another narrative match with the neo-noir thriller: Otero's method carries a powerful whiff of existential dread. Every move in the studio with his delicate paint skeins is made fraught with the possibility of failure. You can almost smell the struggle inside Lehmann Maupin this month—it's mixed liberally with turpentine, linseed oil, and the scent of fresh paint.

The effect of Otero's paintings, put simply, is that of a crumpled picture that has been smoothed out roughly and scrawled on. It's similar to a collage, or more precisely, a décollage, which in French means a collage's opposite—the tearing away or removal of an original image. It's remarkable, therefore, to see Otero shift proportions, from high relief paintings to the buckled sculptural totems that commandeer this latest show, "Gates of Horn and Ivory" (the cryptic title comes from The Iliad). Otero's five standing steel-and-glazed-porcelain structures dominate Lehmann Maupin's space and the exhibition's three large paintings. Containers and columns for larger superstructures, they resemble ancient, microwaved versions of our present-day data towers—unearthed repositories, perhaps, or photon-broiled supports for a mysterious but ruined civilization.

Take the three upright rectangles Otero refers to as Slots #1, #2, and #3. Filing cabinets for pieces of bone and vermilion-colored porcelain, these towers channel Giacometti's spindly sentries; another look suggests that they could also function as holders for the treasures of some anonymous Tutankhamen. A second oven-fired sculpture, titled Veranda—it's worth pausing to consider the contradictory qualities of baked mud and metal—presents two bent plinths shaped from steel bars. Made from the sort of arabesque-laden fences found on Brooklyn residential blocks, these twin stumps also feature chunks of porcelain enclosed within like turkey stuffing. Otero's largest sculpture, Portón, is perhaps his most eloquent: A hulking, seven-foot-plus sentinel, the structure strikingly embodies the violent paradox of Otero's earthy sculptural ingredients. In a phrase, his base materials wrestle like Cain and Abel inside a heavy-duty cinch sack.

So it is with the artist's three abstract paintings, mute sufferers of the series of upheavals its creator puts them through. There are the free-flowing gold-tinted folds that obscure the black-and-white schematics contained within Untitled (SK-MS); the looping, chalk-like markings scratched on the melting slate of Untitled (SK-MZ); and, finally, the blood-red bandage draped over the newsprint-like background of Untitled (SK-MY)—a favorite for those who like their painterly drama rare. Each canvas combines a cool process with a hot palette, while suggesting secrets unearthed, even a Rosetta Stone for pictorial abstraction. The order and beauty found in their arrangements casts back not just to the moderns' sense of history, but to the resourcefulness of Renaissance art. Ruins are not just impediments to modern life; they can instead be ideas to build on, models to live by.