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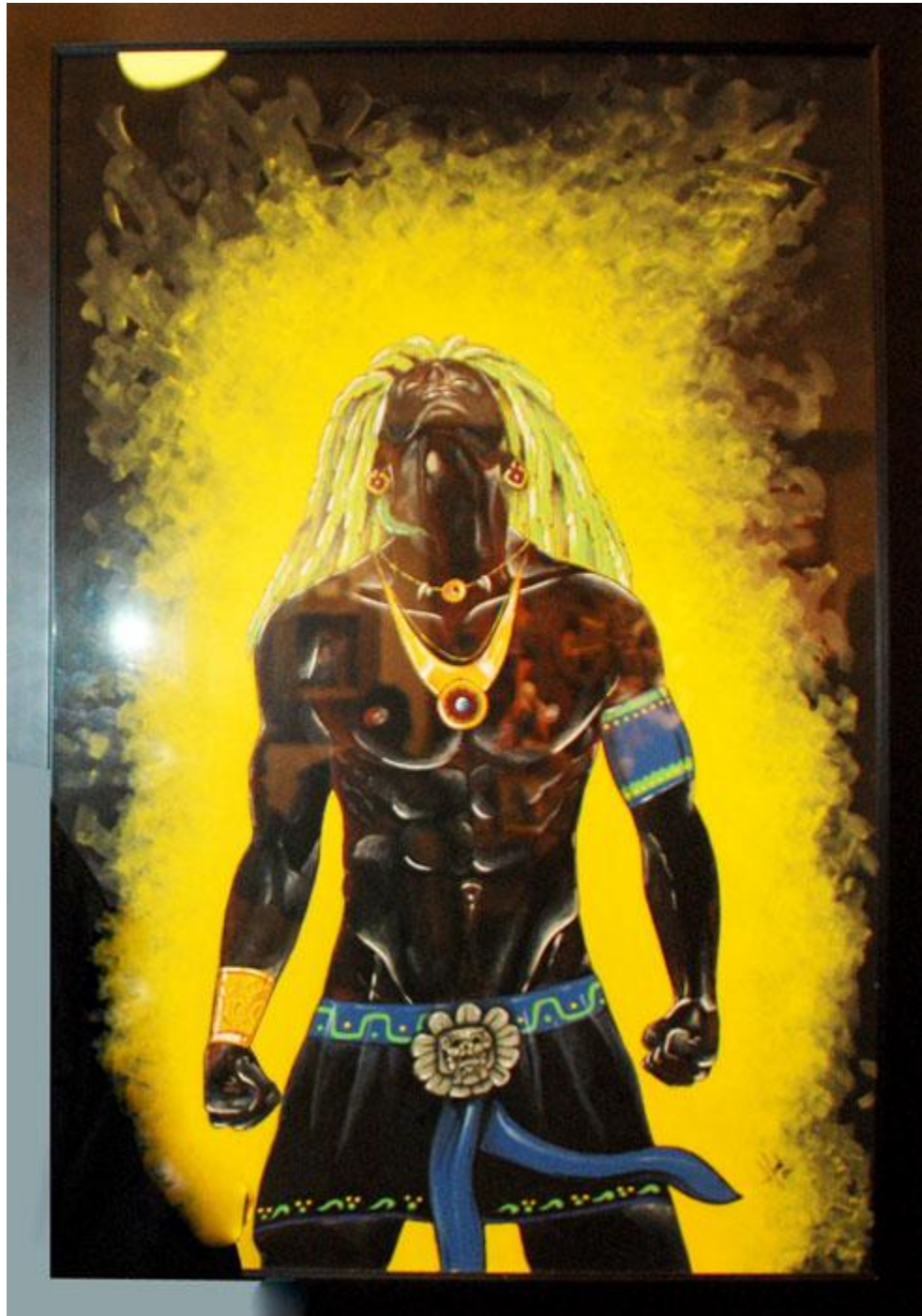


SEARCH



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Hector Perez, *Power*, acrylic paint.





Jacory Deon Harold, *The Golden Saint*, photograph.

Variations on 'The Tree of Life' and 'The Plumed Serpent'

Mattie Rhodes Art Gallery
919 W. 17th Street, KCMO 64108
816-221-2349
Quetzalcoatl and the Tree of Life
December 2, 2011-January 21, 2012

By **BLAIR SCHULMAN**

The Gods of the Underworld have morphed from a mystical and spiritual world of Mayan lore into dizzying physical manifestation at Mattie Rhodes Art Gallery. The audience should pause and reflect on these interpretations by the dozen or so artists whose work traces the veneration of this spiritual juggernaut.

Literally meaning “feathered serpent” Quetzalcoatl is a God of Creation. With a title like that, its cult was widespread through Mesoamerica, a region and culture in the Americas, where pre-Columbian societies flourished before the Spanish colonization in the 15th and 16th centuries.

The legend is that before the present one, there were four suns or worlds. Each of these created and destroyed in different ways. When the fourth sun was extinguished by floods, the gods wished to create a fifth world and a new race of humans. The Mayans believed as the year 2012 approaches, our world will end and a new one emerge. To hold this exhibition now is entirely punctual.

Zuni altars from Gene Emerson Friedman are very much an inclusive presence; chameleon-like, with soft elements of kitsch, they blend into the background while remaining boldly distinctive. Friedman sees an association with the Kachina of Zuni Pueblo as more than coincidental in their relationship to the subject of Quetzalcoatl. The Kolowisi Kachina is also a feathered serpent and most Zuni believe their traditions are closely related to those of the Aztecs.

Inspired by cast-off or damaged statues, Friedman seeks the divine in all things. In *Tree of Life*, he cut up several “rather awful” plastic picture frames to enhance the sanctity of the individual pieces through their relationship with other found elements, including women’s belts. In an attempt to capture the beauty of both Aztec foliated crosses and Spanish Baroque decoration he is successful.

Quetzalcoatl descended to the Underworld, tricking Mictlantecuhtli, the god of the dead in Aztec culture, who retrieved the bones of those perished from the fourth sun. These bones along with his blood gave life to the humans of the present world. It takes stamina to overthrow an underworld god and his potency is aptly portrayed by Luis Merlo’s *Duality* (digital print) and Hector Perez’ *Power* (acrylic paint). An undeniable fertility and dominance in each shows a sexualized containment of the spirit, its machismo coming through loud and clear. To swipe a line from a play by performance artist Penny Arcade, “Sex sells candles.”

The canvases, photos and Friedman altars contain not a single color or lone idea. Instead, they are an unending loop of stories that swirl and push breath into the lungs of the legend of Quetzalcoatl, which seems to be the



Thomas Woodward, *Non Est Ad Astra Mollis e Terris Via*, mixed media print.



Gene Emerson Friedman, *Altar Of The Santu Of Zuni*, flanked on the left by *Santo Of Father Grey Robes Who Lives Among Us* and on the right by *Shrine for the Nuestra Senora La Limpia Concepcion*.

point of his existence.

Prominent Mexican artists have presented depictions, affirming the legend with their own interpretations and establishing the Mexican Mural Renaissance, beginning in the 1920's. Diego Rivera (1886-1957), whose series of murals were painted in the National Palace in Mexico City between 1929 and 1945, includes *The Legend of Quetzalcoatl*. It depicts the feathered serpent bringing a blond-bearded white man to the Aztecs whom they believed was a god, but turned out to be Hernan Cortés, the Spanish Conquistador, which led to the fall of the Aztec nation.

Jose Clemente Orozcos' 1932 fresco, *Civilization – The Arrival of Quetzalcoatl* and David Alfaro Siqueiros, (1896-1974), whose art and politics were frequently intertwined, are among Los Tres Grandes (the Big Three) of revolutionizing Mexican art. Ruffino Tamayo (1899-1991) also painted Quetzalcoatl as the bright feathered serpent locked in battle with the dark jaguar Tezcatlipoca in •*The Devil of Mexico*• (1952).

Alisha Gambino's *Consciousness* (acrylic on canvas) and Jacory Deon Harold's photographs reveal hidden interpretations of confusion and clarity. A theological imprint is placed on their meaning, leaving your mind open to concepts related to mysticism that accompany life itself.

Artisans replicating imagery from the prohibited sacred grounds of Aztec and Mayan cultures, comprises what social historians Eric Hobsbawn and Terence Ranger call "invented traditions," thereby creating an invasion of these sacred territories. It can be construed that as the desire for tourists to possess these hand-crafted symbols of ancestral spirits increased, the government had greater difficulty holding back the boundaries of what was once off-limits and thereby speeding its demise. These intrusions could be held as the very thing that allows a disintegration of ones culture while making room for a reborn symbolism.

Thomas Luna's *Mandala and Pathway to the Sky* (mixed media) manifests an imagined language that unearths a catalyst to a higher dimension. Using gold-trimmed black lettering on found table and wood plank, it appears as a confusing and beautiful hieroglyphic.

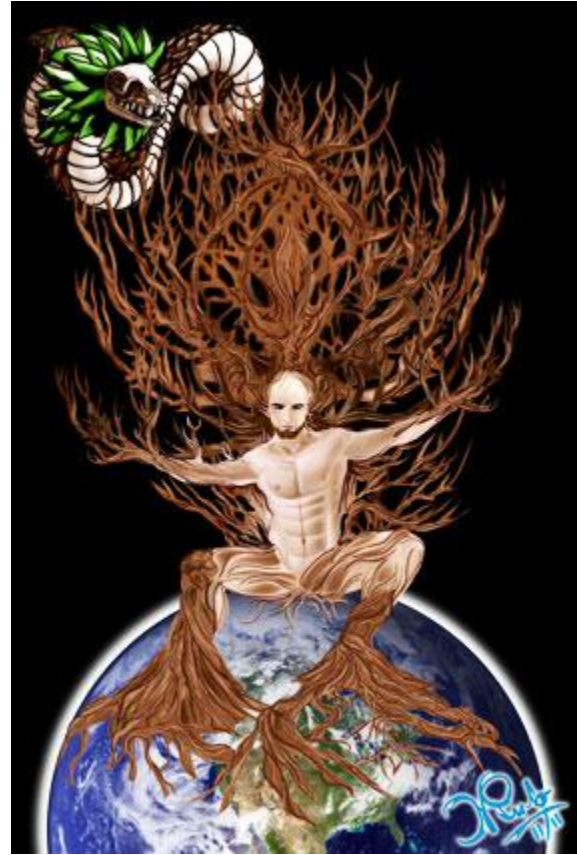
Bridging modern thinking and the ancient Maya/Aztec iconography found throughout the gallery is Thomas Woodward's' Abstract mixed media prints *Non est ad astra mollis e terris via* (There is no easy way from the earth to the stars). His Robert Delaunay–style, recurring gestures, and forms keep in mind an open-ended interpretation of ideas and destinations. These pieces, along with William Wilmotts' *Neon Nicodemus* (aerosol and oil paint on wood) presume that religious content is not denied; the psychedelic-like flourishes however, are fluid and free of piety.

Conversely, Woodward's graffiti-cartoony 2012 (mixed media) lays out a fear-based agenda that will no doubt make its way into far too many newscasts over the coming year. Polluted, cramped and cacophonous, it could be a still from the 2006 dystopian thriller, *Children of Men*. The piece is hung high so viewers are not slapped in the face with this train of thought, but it still

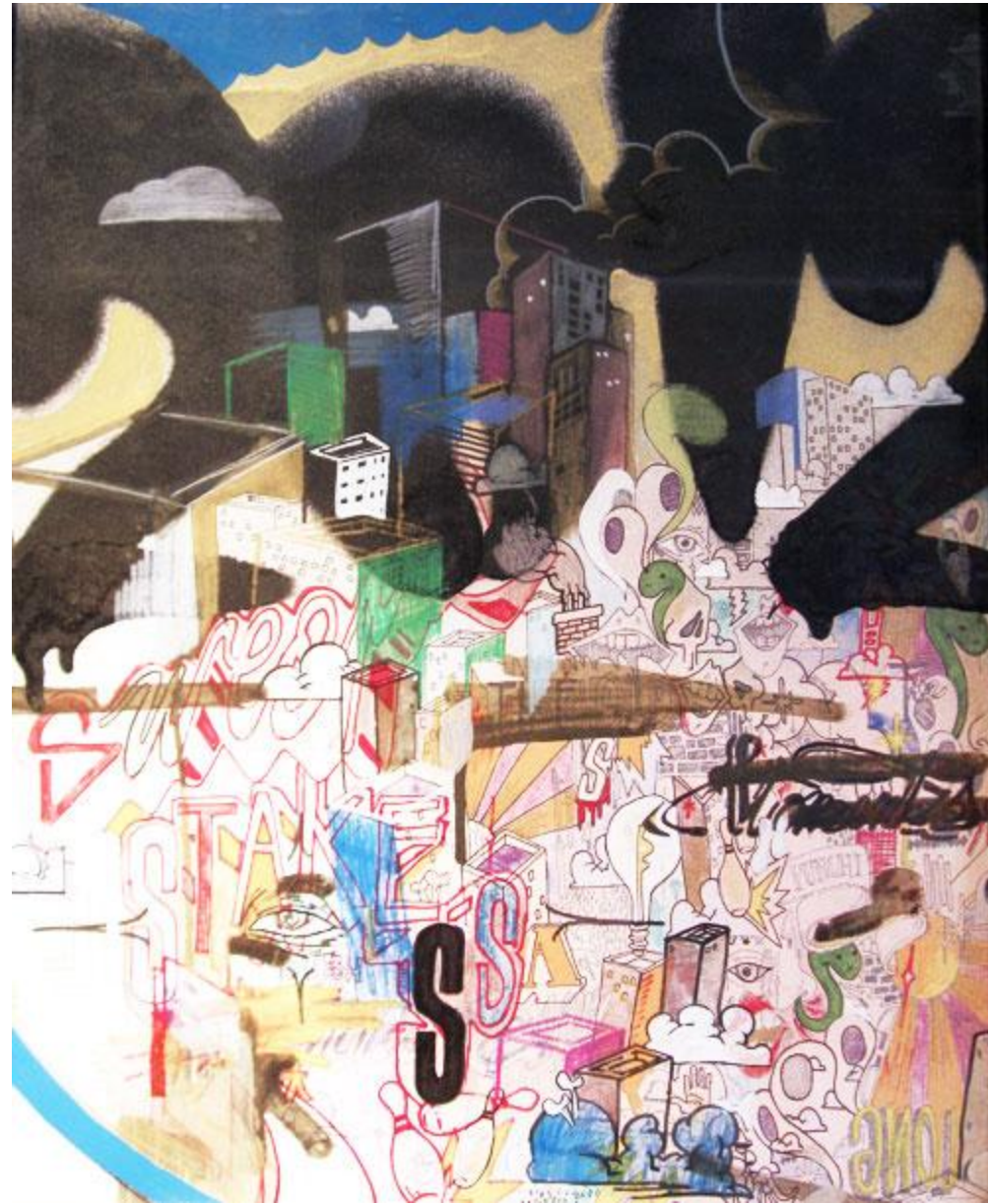
conveys portent.

The belief is shared that life doesn't just end, but places faith in the duality of life and death. Taking on many forms, *The Tree of Life* for one; is considered the origin of creation, taking root in the Earth and reaching up to the heavens.

A familiar scenario is an idea takes root in a society and its inhabitants bleed it dry until there is nothing left. Remnants of the old are carried away from the once totemic location to places all over the world, waiting on the appearance of a savior, even if it means that savior has to first destroy what remains. But I digress; such ruminations might best be left for ethnologists to ponder.



Luis Merlo, *Duality*, digital print.



Thomas Woodward, 2012, mixed media print.



Alisha Gambino, *Consciousness*, acrylic on canvas.



Thomas Luna, *Mandala and Pathway to the Sky*, mixed media.



Gene Emerson Friedman, *Altar For Quetzalcoatl And The Tree Of Life.*



William Wilmott, *Neon Nicodemus*, aerosol and oil paint on wood.