

DISPARATE MINDS



Hugo Rocha, *Untitled*, 2015, marker and colored pencil on paper, 18" x 24"



Hugo Rocha, *Madres Egoistas*, 2015, marker and colored pencil on paper, 24" x 18"



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Hugo Rocha, *Untitled*, 2016, marker and colored pencil on paper, 18" x 24"

Based in suburban LA, Hugo Rocha creates uncanny works demonstrating his particular sense of drama and ongoing interest in telenovelas, re-imagining still images from favorite episodes in dynamic and engaging ways. Rocha's fascinations are translated into portraits of cartoonish characters within elaborate, eerily staged interiors and landscapes.

Sometimes singing as he works, Rocha typically produces an initial drawing in graphite that quickly becomes saturated with bold fields of color, which appear flat from a distance while distinct mark-making is visible up close; densely applied marker and a subsequent layer of colored pencil lends his drawings a surprising physicality. Fairly prolific, Rocha usually completes a drawing every three days spent working in the studio.

We were initially introduced to Rocha's work by Seth Pringle, the previous Gallery Manager at First Street Gallery. Based on his experience of observing Rocha's studio practice, Pringle offers valuable insight into his creative process and development:

Hugo was always a fascinating artist to watch over time. His style and subject matter have been quite varied over the years. One part of his practice that's been consistent is his list-making. He'll write columns of words or names in an amazingly immaculate and precise handwriting, usually the names of Mexican singers or telenovela actresses...His work really came into its own when he started making his

marker and colored pencil drawings a few years ago...he started drawing scenes from telenovelas. He would watch an episode, usually a show from the 90's, and select a still shot to draw from. The resulting images were a strange and fascinating combination of representation of the image and his own imaginative vocabulary of forms and patterns.

He started to pay less and less attention to the reference image and his drawings, accordingly, had fewer corollaries to the reference and became more about repetitive motifs. He started making drawings that were extremely flat, without any of the weird spatial perspectives of the earlier telenovelas...there would be some references to the photo, like if there was a telephone or someone was wearing a hat, but they became these almost automatic compositions created with a language that was totally Hugo's making.

The power of Rocha's work lies in these inventive departures from carefully chosen source material and an effortless ability to move between representation and abstraction. An untitled drawing (2015) features three characters seated at a table, with alternating bands of bright green and yellow articulating luminous Venetian blinds in the background. These figures boast characteristics distinctive of Rocha's singular style - helmet-like hair, bulbous noses, uniformly arched eyebrows, full red lips, and a perpetually fixed gaze directed at the viewer. One could imagine that this forward-facing stare is just an effect of the semiotic way he always draws the pupil in the center of the eye; the assumption, however, that striking aspects of a disabled artist's work are incidental to their way of seeing is important to question. The eye of the severed head that appears in *Madres Egoistas* (Rocha's interpretation of Judith beheading Holofernes, which borrows the title of a 1991 Mexican telenovela) instead uniquely sags lifelessly downward - a subtle detail which seems to indicate this decision is deliberate.

Whether Rocha's figures appear to explicitly address or be intruded upon by the viewer, an expectant tone is consistent throughout his body of work. This establishes an understated intensity for the examination of his abstraction, which proves to be wonderfully rich and thoughtful. Through his reductive approach Rocha presents flattened depictions of an image, and as he does so, invests in an instinctual process of observation and interpretation. The picture plane is populated with compelling and beautiful moments, each passage defined by shapes serving its own aesthetic and representational priorities - the way in which a pot of flowers is framed by a chair back or simplified leaves and flowers congregate to form a bush.

Hugo Rocha (born in 1976) has maintained a studio practice at First Street Gallery Art Center in Claremont and Sunland Studio in Sunland-Tujunga, California since 2007. He has exhibited previously in *Storytellers* at

LAND in Brooklyn curated by Disparate Minds co-founders Andreana Donahue and Tim Ortiz, *Summery Appeal* curated by Doug Harvey at The Good Luck Gallery in LA, and *Telenovelas* at First Street Gallery.