

MITOS Y MEMORIAS: Patrick McGrath Muñiz



Patrick McGrath Muñiz, *Entre Tierras*, oil on canvas, 45" x 65".

In 2022, as the world began emerging from its COVID-19 cocoon, a troubling brew simmered within Patrick McGrath Muñiz. Although he had relished nesting with his wife and son, he couldn't help tallying up the cultural downsides of our shared isolation: a reliance on social media, especially doom-scrolling; the rise of conspiracy theories; algorithms that governed which ideas reached us; and the fast-growing threats of artificial intelligence.

Together, they crystallized his fear that the distance between what we can control and what controls us had evaporated.

"We came out different," he said of the pandemic's lasting effects. "There's something we're missing today. We're so distracted, there's so much bombarding us. There's no time to sit back and reflect."

So Muñiz did just that, sifting through memories of his childhood in Puerto Rico, his early years struggling to find his way as an artist, and his emergence as an internationally lauded painter who blends Old Master techniques with satirical commentary on social justice, climate change, and consumer culture, among other pressing themes.

That inner search spurred an evolutionary shift in his artwork, on view to the public for the first time in his new show, *Mitos y Memorias* (Myths and Memories).

"I have this feeling of nostalgia for the past," Muñiz said.

"I'm trying to explore personal memories through the lens of mythology. It's a way of finding that these memories can be universal. I want to strike a chord with that sensibility, that need for us to connect with our past." Doing so, he insisted, provides hope. "Knowing where we come from, we can know where we're going."

Muñiz spoke with me in early February, when his 12-by-12-foot home studio near Houston was packed not only with ideas but with works in progress.

Among his goals was to retain his sense of retablo-inspired pieces that blend an intensity of iconography rooted in the past while now also addressing of-the-moment concerns. To accomplish this, he had to increase the size of his panels and canvases. Where an altarpiece might once have measured 18 by 24 inches, his new works are more than twice that.

Two of the estimated 12 pieces Muñiz's will exhibit were nearing completion when we spoke, and a numbered key helped decipher their layered meanings. *Entre Tierras* (Between Lands), the only oil on canvas in the exhibit (the rest are oils on panels), stretches to 45 by 56 inches, every bit of its area populated with details. A crowded boat on troubled waters addresses migration, displacement, and the search for belonging. The boat moves away from a tropical land toward an industrial wastescape. A baby resembling Santo Niño de Atocha is held aloft as he focuses on a Gameboy. Three mermaids in the water hold sodas and fast foods as they attempt to lure the travelers away from their true path, while an angel modeled on John Gast's famous painting *American Progress*, depicting the concept of Manifest Destiny, leads them westward.



Patrick McGrath Muñiz, *Des Conecta Dos*, oil and metal leaf on panel, 40" x 21".

For a formal statement about this work, Muñiz wrote: "At its core, *Entre Tierras* is a reflection on the complex feelings of being between two worlds—between analog and digital, past and present, nature and civilization. It ties into the overarching theme of the exhibition . . . highlighting the tension between what is lost and what is gained as we navigate a world driven by progress and economic necessity, always in motion but never truly at home."



Patrick McGrath Muñiz, *The Bloom – Alegoría de la Primavera*, oil and metal leaf on panel, 48" x 34".

While such themes—and certainly the painting’s style—echo Muñiz’s past works, the themes are now less political and far more personal.

“I used to think art should be about waking up people and being very mindful about social-political discourse—to be an agent of change,” he said. “But artists have been doing that for a long time, and you can see what’s happening. Art should be more than that.”

The “more” that Muñiz envisions for *Mitos y Memorias* is the core question of mythology, religion, and philosophy: What does it mean to be human?

“These paintings are going to be full of figures,” he said. “There’s lots of inspiration from art history, the Spanish colonial era, my own art. Each one is very complex. There’s so much to unpack in each piece. They’re going to be very baroque. It’s all going to connect to the grand picture of humanity.”

Muñiz begins each piece by sketching in pen on paper, his hand so finely trained as to put the lie to the verb *doodle*. From there, he dives into research, poring over books, wandering museums, and hunting the internet for connections that can inspire him.



Patrick McGrath Muñiz, *The Glitch – Alegoría del Invierno*, oil and metal leaf on polyptych panel, 48" x 34".

"I've started using AI as a research tool," he said, describing how he queries a variety of apps to help him identify and categorize the archetypes that will rule each sketch, such as the father or the emperor. From there, he assembles collages of images, layer on layer, until he achieves the "ah-ha" that spurs hours of applying oil paint and gold leaf to his surfaces. On any day, he might hop from one piece to another, and then another, as he waits for each one's paint to dry enough for the next stage.

The Catholic roots of Muñiz's artwork hold firm, but just as past pieces drew additional inspiration from tarot cards, he turns now to *La Isla*, an image from Lenormand cards for four of his new

works. These 18th-century divination decks from France, with connections to German playing cards, "speak of day-to-day things that are easier to interpret than tarot," he said, citing a tree or an animal. "It's like I'm trying to connect with simple things in life, and that is almost an antidote to the overwhelming and saturating information environment we live with in today. I'm pulling back and getting into really reflecting on what's important in life. Art has that capacity of reminding us of things that are important."

For *Mitos y Memorias*, Muñiz combines ideas from the deck's imagery into polyptych altarpieces. *Apotheosis* delves deeply into the personal—the monk depicted at its center is a self-portrait.



Patrick McGrath Muñiz, *Apotheosis*, oil and gold leaf on panel, 42" x 26".

The monk holds an open book displaying an Aztec double-headed serpent. Other figures represent Fortuna, the Roman goddess of luck and fate and fortune; a sage reminiscent of Saturn, the Roman god of time; and the Lady of the Apocalypse, whose robotic face and hands embody Artificial Super Intelligence. “The ominous eclipse around her,” Muñiz said, “suggests that this could be a moment of revelation or cataclysmic change.”

That precipice defines the balance he is seeking, one that he hopes will tip us into a future in which digital tools serve as helpers so that we can focus better on one another.

“I just turned 50, and I feel like I’m looking back,” he said. “The first half of my life was in Puerto Rico, and it was analog—pre-internet, no Google, no AI.” Hurricane Maria, in 2017, destroyed his studio there, and the loss of his work has haunted him.

But when Muñiz moved to Georgia, to earn his master’s degree at Savannah College of Art & Design, he at last connected with teachers who understood his yearning for a classical style. His color palette became more muted. As his career advanced,

his confidence in the stories he wanted to tell grew stronger—to the point where he can now be described as a New Master, using timeless techniques to address the present moment.

“We have deep memories of things as simple as touching a tree,” he said. “There’s value in that. We’re so driven by high ideas, stupid ideas, conspiracy theories. That’s not contributing to our well-being.

“Another reason I’m going back on things that I had forgotten is that I’m remembering things along with my son,” he said of six-year-old Francis. “He’s always asking questions. ‘Why do plants need sunshine? How do you draw a three-D building?’ The essence of art is asking questions, and there’s something beautiful about that.

“I wouldn’t want to go back to the COVID time for anything in the world. But it put things in the context of what’s important; being human.”

—Kate Nelson



Patrick McGrath Muñiz, *El Perro*, oil on panel, 11" x 7".



Patrick McGrath Muñiz, *La Luna*, oil on panel, 11" x 7".