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Mondegreen by Pete Hoffecker Mejía || Ryder Richards

5-6 minutes



photo credit: [Bruce Cole](#)

[Tri Star Arts](#), Knoxville, TN

By Ryder Richards

September 2021

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To view [Pete Hoffecker Mejía's](#) fresh, modernist sculptures in a [100-year-old refurbished marble building](#) is to find a similar struggle playing out on multiple fronts: one is to recognize, even cherish, the historical form (or shell) while simultaneously attempting to manifest relevancy and vitality from within. Neither are reanimating the corpse of modernism or historicity, rather they are using the given form as a scaffolding to nurture something new. But the question remains: how does one reinvigorate a dated, entrenched, even rigid ideology into a vehicle for germination?

Hoffecker Mejía's response is a distinctly expanded personal vocabulary. The modernist form is present, all nostalgic and familiar, yet there are flourishes grafted on, expanded,

with skin taken off, or tagged shapes stamping the surface. It has been made personal, individual, in a way that “soulless” high modernism misses.



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The works are near bodily in dimension, most of them grounded and leaning casually against the walls, as if keeping one foot on the ground is preferable to the effort of climbing the walls to occupy the “pompous” role of a painting. These works are evolutions rather than executions of formula. They wink at Frank Stella with parallel diagonals or a line of chevrons that act more as a referential patch than an ethos. They pay homage to Louise Nevelson’s mono-color framed assemblages, but do not attempt to negate materiality or difference through coats of unifying paint: they do not declare relational form over material character.

Foliage sprouts from the cracks in Hoffecker Mejía’s modernism, a patina of repurposed history surfaces enriches texture while textiles soften geometries. Prosthetic limbs evolve and emerge, adorned with pink lenses, the better to filter the banality of their surroundings.



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These modifications confront the fundamental flaw of modernism: the modernist enlightenment —an extension of humanism— upon fulfilling its goal leaves no room for the individual; it becomes inhuman.* The noble goals of humanism, rationality and goodness (without veneration of theology), quickly become a culture of heterogeneity establishing its own reductive, exclusive theology with its own venerated significations. In modernism, this logic was taken into transcendent dissipation by artists like Larry Bell, James Turrell, and Robert Irwin. The fulfillment of modernist humanism seems to be to remove the human altogether: not only “*less is more*” but “*nothing is sublime.*”

At this extreme humanism is always in crisis, always in need of reconstruction and distraction: in need of a remix, a reboot, a sequel. Luckily (or not) its universality is formed through reductive simplicity, so —like a meme— it travels fast and light, easily captured,

replicated, co-opted and subverted. It is in these remixes, dilutions, or collaborative appropriations, where humanism can be transgressed to serve individualism.

When modernism was imported to countries like Colombia (Hoffecker Mejía's place of birth) it was considered considered "cosmopolitan," displacing and supplanting local culture. Colonized countries, coercively convinced for generations of the legitimacy (and superiority) of western ideals, began to churn out versions of a modernist aesthetic, yet there remained something distinctly non-western in them.



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Oswald de Andrade's *Cannibalist Manifesto*^{*}, written in Brazil in 1928, addressed this distinction of originality/derivation, stating they would instead “appropriate” the colonizer’s inscription, providing “the counter-weight of native originality to neutralize academic conformity.” They would consume the modernist aesthetic, absorb “the sacred enemy,” regurgitating it as a totem to act against the “supposed cultured ... peoples.”

Mondegreen, the title of the exhibit, refers to a song lyric that is misheard, and hence misinterpreted. Applied to the show, Mondegreen’s totem is perhaps **61”x 28”x 26”**, the largest work in the show. Standing boldly free of the wall, appearing as a modernist cube, it’s raw wood without paint or decorative tag, breathes through a porous surface: is only by form modernist. It is instead a functional agent, actively misinterpreted in modernist guise, while the air filters installed within it stolidly process the suppositions of all the “supposedly cultured peoples.”





photo credit: [Bruce Cole](#)

SOURCES

E-Flux: Reza Negarestani, [“The labor of the inhuman, part one”](#) (February 2014)

Oswald de Andrade, “CANNIBALIST MANIFESTO” 1928, translated by LESLIE BARY

A **mondegreen** /ˈmɒndɪɡriːn/ is a mishearing or misinterpretation of a phrase in a way that gives it a new meaning

[Candoro Marble Building](#)