

American Arts

QUARTERLY

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Rome's Pagan Ceilings

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Rembrandt for the Twenty-First Century

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Awe and Novelty

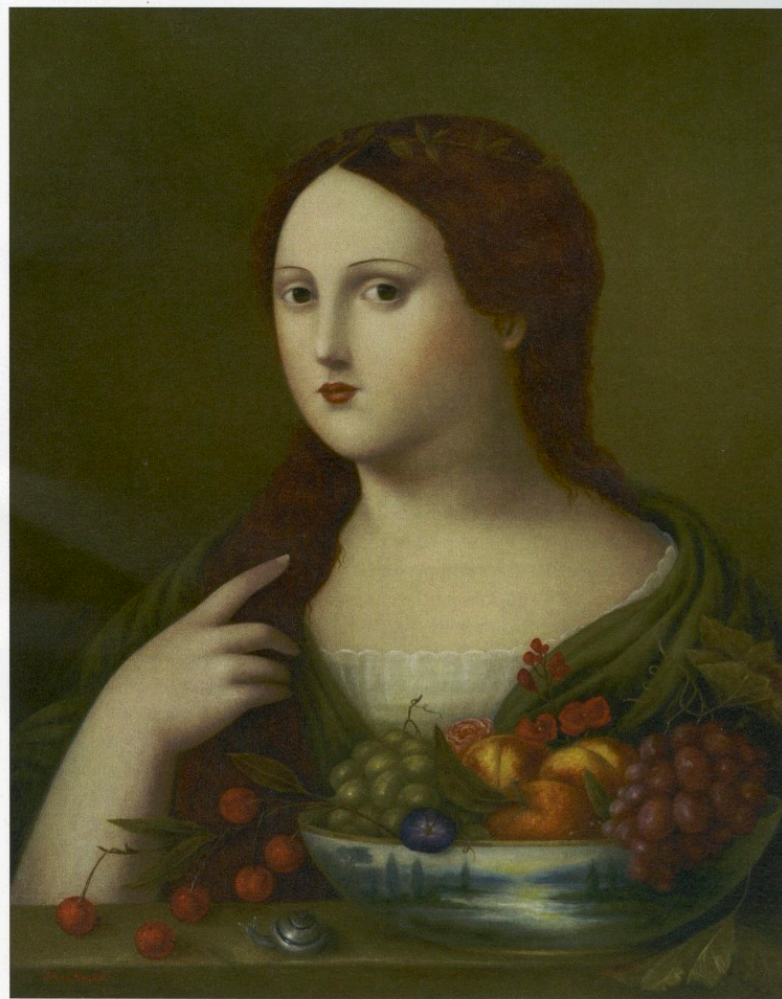
Fatima Ronquillo

Fatima Ronquillo's small, colorful idealized portraits, on view May 20–June 24, 2011, at Meyer East Gallery in Santa Fe, build on a very personal approach to tradition. Born in the Philippines, she emigrated as a child to San Antonio, Texas, and now maintains a studio in Santa Fe. Ronquillo is a self-taught artist, who filters classic European portrait conventions through her own imagination. The resulting works have an apparent naiveté that lightly veils the formal eloquence of her compositions. Like the best Latin American artists of the colonial era, she translates elements of the European grand style into her own more modest yet pictorially vibrant idiom. Ronquillo titles her exhibition “Recuerdos,” using the Spanish word for keepsakes, emblems and mementos. The artist sees her portraits as “memory clues,” a response to the human “need for stillness and nostalgia.” The more familiar Spanish word for portraits is *retratos*, and Ronquillo may be signaling that her subjects are not so much individuals, whose faces have been shaped by their psychological history, as types of innocence or beauty. The features of her dramatis personae are highly stylized: her characters are all pale-skinned, with tiny mouths, delicate brows and soulful eyes. These are not religious paintings, yet they have a marked devotional aspect. The Spanish and Portuguese carried with them religious images, devotional “portraits” of Christ, the Virgin and the saints, that had enormous influence on indigenous artists, in their secular as well as their sacred work. Ronquillo adds details to her portraits that add a symbolic charge, like the attributes of saints. The same principle may apply in the society portrait, where the sitter wears the marks of office or is surrounded by meaningful objects—the soldier’s sword, the scholar’s books. Still, the biographical narrative is kept at a distance.

For Ronquillo, whose subjects are fantasy characters from the art historical past, the world she conjures is even more remote from immediate experience, yet it is convincing on its own terms. Her compositional formula is simple: a bust-length figure—dressed in a style vaguely reminiscent of the society-portrait past, any time from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century—is posed in the foreground. Sometimes, the figure is posed just behind a stone ledge, a convention familiar in images of Renaissance madonnas and princesses. Often, a smoothly idyllic landscape forms the backdrop.

The smallest of the paintings, *Valentine* (all works 2011), is 8-by-6 inches and would fit comfortably in your hand. The format builds on both the miniature portrait painting and the photographic carte-de-visite. A boy in a high-collared jacket holds a folded billet doux, decorated with a red heart. Whether he is the sender, the recipient or an Eros dressed as a Mozartian page remains a puzzle, but the image is charming. The implications of the document in *A Long List of Offenses* are more troublesome, yet the child who holds the accusatory paper seems stoic. The crisp white of the list is pleasing against his bright red military-style jacket with blue piping and collar. Ronquillo’s images of

children avoid sentimentality, both because she presents them in quasi-adult costumes and because she captures an aura of solemnity that reminds us how seriously children regard the daily slights of life. Goya’s portraits of slightly stiff yet poignant miniature adults come to mind. While there is a doll-like quality to Ronquillo’s subjects, their demeanor is restrained, melancholy.



Fatima Ronquillo, *Lady with Still Life*, 2011
COURTESY MEYER EAST GALLERY, SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO



Fatima Ronquillo, *Valentine*, 2011
 COURTESY MEYER EAST GALLERY
 SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

Their faces seem haunted by emotions past, rather than blank. A good example is *Recuerdo* (10-by-8 inches), in which a young woman holds a spray of lily of the valley in her slender fingers. A red-headed bird lies on the ledge in front of her, and an aura of regret prevails. The artist's rich color palette—especially in the golden yellow

of the girl's dress and the embossed deep-blue-on-blue backdrop—works in robust tension with the wistfulness of the girl's mood.

A group of more elaborate compositions feature glamorous women in surroundings replete with old master trappings. Ronquillo simultaneously calls attention to and transforms the historical conventions of the society beauty. The landscape backdrop in old master portraits is always, to some extent, a fiction, however illusionistically convincing it may be. The sitter and the countryside or town in the background do not occupy the same continuous space. Ronquillo's dreamy landscapes acknowledge that artificiality. In *Lady with Still Life* (20-by-16 inches), the convention becomes a conceit, as the landscape is shifted from the background to the decoration on a bowl perched on the foreground ledge. The bowl is filled with fruit, including cherries that spill over the edge, attracting the attention of a snail. The artist's bold colors are less blended and more localized than those used by the old masters. A lack of shadows underlines the flatness of the shapes. Here, the Titian-red hair of the woman plays off against the greens of her shawl and the background wall. *The Letter* (10-by-8 inches) could be a tribute to Vermeer. The lady wears a pearl earring and a loose red turban, and her dress is lemony gold, although more daringly low-cut than a woman would wear in a Vermeer scene. Old master opulence and private symbolism come together in *Lady with Finch, Nest and Tulips* (20-by-

16 inches). The woman seated before the hazy landscape wears a bright gold dress and deep blue shawl. On the parapet before her is a showy still life of red-and-white-streaked tulips and a nest with three eggs. The nest is tilted up almost flush to the picture plane. A broken egg with an intense yellow yolk lies beside the nest. It's Ronquillo's version of the vanitas genre, a tribute to both beauty and transience. Such a still life would have had a clear meaning for a seventeenth-century Dutch artist and his audience. For Ronquillo, estrangement from transparent communal understanding is not necessarily a bad thing. "Whether the viewer gets the same story or the symbolism behind a painting is not important," she says. "I believe that the two separate acts of creating and looking at art elicit emotional, visceral responses. There is something magical, mysterious and intimate about that." These jewel-like paintings intuitively fuse different aesthetic traditions, folk art and old master, with natural grace and an uncanny quality that may be a species of magic. Meyer East Gallery, 225 Canyon Road, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501. Telephone (505) 983-1657. On the web at www.meyereastgallery.com

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