

Miguel Calderon

“For the others, like me, there is only the flash
Of negative knowledge, the night when, drunk, one
Staggers to the bathroom and stares in the glass
To meet one’s madness.”

W.H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety* (1947)

The stress is killing us, psychologically and physically. What we navigate now is a topography of fracture, the myriad schisms, disruptions, pitfalls and upheavals you get when, as societies and individuals, we all begin to crack. How this dread and distress registers in art may ultimately depend on what we see as its creative purpose- to salve and distract from our deepest fears, or to confront and query our dread; to invite it like an old friend, as Miguel Calderon does, to come sit with us as welcome company for our alienated selves. If the question is whether art is to comfort the disturbed or disturb the comfortable, the answer may be that it must do both.

Neurotics Anonymous, is both the name for Miguel Calderon’s exhibition at kurimanzutto in New York City and the titular sculpture he created for this show- a marble rendering of the panic-stricken figure from posters for meetings of Neurotics Anonymous, a 12-step recovery program modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous for people struggling with mental and emotional distress. Personal in that Miguel’s mother has at times needed support for her mental health, its distillation into the iconic, classical form of this tormented bust, brings the idiosyncrasies of private demons into the collective domain of a shared, even universal, condition. Altogether working as a portrait of anxiety writ large, the confessional details of Calderon’s neurosis offer the details of his own mental diminishment and distortions under the fixations of anxiety as metaphor and allegory for the pervasive dis-ease registered in our society, politics and culture. It’s not about empathy, it’s about recognition.

Neurosis, a rather old-fashioned prognosis that's no longer a recognized medical diagnosis, lingers in our body politic as a Freudian analysis of mental disorders caused by past anxiety that has been repressed. Anxiety indeed is the operative noun, connoting not simply excessive worry but obsessive thoughts, compulsive behavior, the insecurities of self-doubt and low self-esteem, and the full spectrum of emotional turmoil wrought by anxiety disorder, OCD, PTSD and phobia. Auden wrote *The Age of Anxiety* in 1947, setting it in a bar during the Second World War, giving voice to the uncertainties and confusions of everyone rising from the rubble and trauma of disastrous global politics and unimaginable atrocity. Perhaps now, as then, Calderon reminds us, the darkest fears of our existential dread are more easily transformed into the nagging anxieties of self. There is much that threatens us all- be it concerns over the environment, the loss of freedom, poverty, crime, the specter of war, or any number of other global crises- but what keeps most of us up at night is typically far more petty and personal stuff.

Because neurosis is a Freudian concept, Miguel Calderon wields it as an analytically sharp and wryly acerbic tool to excavate the roots of his psychological issues; to identify the past trauma underlying his discomfort and insecurity. Thankfully, he's not just painfully honest, he's damn funny, able to make his hysteria somehow hysterical, revealing himself emotionally naked but in the trickster guise of a subversive shape shifter. Exploring the tortured and deformed iconography of his subconscious in a series of ink drawings *The Uncomfortable Body*, he returns to the way he soothed his anxieties in his youth through obsessive sketching, counterposing the impulsive with the contemplative as he at once works with a raw, instinctual urgency yet holds these malign forms up to direct observation, like grotesque caricatures that reveal hidden truths. And then, in a total WTF moment when a snake somehow gets into his bedroom and bites him in the forehead while he is sleeping, he lets that horror migrate into the drawings as well.

Calderon's testament typically implicates us as witness, a cycle of voyeurism he limns with *Revisited Exvoto* where, uncovering in his father's archives the identity of a photographer known as The Vulture for his pursuit of spectacular car crashes, he reenacts of picture a photographer took of the vulture photographing a crash. He's dealing with what's eating him in such a way that we must understand just how unhealthy our own diet of desire and distraction is. In *Cocteleitors*, a thirty-plus minute single channel video that is at once experimental, documentary and slapstick satire, we visit with a cast of former journalists and cultural imposters as they use fake IDs and the great disguise of social entitlement to crash big moneyed VIP events in the pursuit of

free drinks and food. A devastating parody of the social dynamics between workers and the elites, and the invisible line of belonging that class dances around but imposters trespass. Its pairing here with *Trojan Swan* creates a mock installation of the trivial treasures- the vulgar glamour of ice sculpture swans and fancy nibbles- by which power ratifies and rewards itself.

In all the ideals Miguel Calderon conjures in his art here, there is a deep longing, palpable regret and farcical failure that measures our doubts and desires against the near impossibilities of happiness, wholeness, contentment, achievement and arrival. These are side thoughts we try to put out of our mind, simple gestures like *Social Climber*, a bejeweled climbing wall to mark the fool's progress of social aspiration, and- as in the case of *SOS*, a photographic record of the nine consecutive roadside assistance phone lines he found out of order when his car broke down in Colombia- evocations of the vast emptiness and helplessness that forever lie in the heart of our being no matter how much we cram it full of business and materiality. Ultimately, it's a picture of hope and striving drawn in the sands of futility, and if it's enough to make you cry, you still can't help laughing.

-Carlo McCormick