

Juan Ortiz-Apuy
Fountain Mist







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Owens Art Gallery

Foreword

As the curator of this exhibition, it feels slightly strange to be writing the foreword. But then again, it is also new for me to write anything as the Director/Curator of the Owens Art Gallery. The seeds for this show were planted several years ago, when I first encountered Juan Ortiz-Apuy's work at Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran in Montreal. As a PhD student writing a dissertation on the relationship between the grotesque and capitalism, I was immediately drawn to his work and the way it seemed to both celebrate and critique the commodity form.

It's been a pleasure to work with Juan on this exhibition, and I would like to thank him for his insight, generosity, and professionalism. I would also like to thank Gemey Kelly for paving the way to this exhibition with her support and mentorship, and for making the Owens Art Gallery what it is today.

The Owens is extremely grateful for the essential funding and resources Mount Allison University provides. Exhibitions like this one are also made possible thanks to the ongoing support of the Canada Council for the Arts, as well as funding from the Province of New Brunswick, the Town of Sackville, and a loyal group of generous donors also known as the Friends of the Owens. We are also sincerely grateful to our talented and experienced full-time staff—made up of Roxie Ibbitson, Lucy MacDonald, Rachel Thornton, and Jane Tisdale—as well as our student employees and interns, our volunteers, and our supporters in the community of Sackville and the broader Atlantic region.

Emily Falvey
Director/Curator



Turning Tables

Juan Ortiz-Apuy's installation *Fountain Mist* is at once a bright, seductive vacation fantasy, filled with allusions to exotic locales, tropical cocktails, and ocean breezes, and a vaguely off-putting consumer grotesque. Essentially a large-scale, mixed-media collage, the installation uses found images and objects to explore ideas of animism, commodity fetishism, and sympathetic magic. Borrowing from the visual language of advertising and product display, Ortiz-Apuy thus orchestrates a fascinating *mise en scène* in which clichés of freshness, naturalness, and purity join empty, yet oddly animate looking bottles and dispensers, 3D models, stock photographs, and reconfigured components from IKEA's BESTÅ modular storage system series.

Like much of Ortiz-Apuy's oeuvre, *Fountain Mist* explores a variety of questions related to consumer culture, but specifically the capacity of the things we consume to appear as living entities with their own agency, feelings, and personality. While the language and techniques of advertising and brand management are geared to bring commodities alive—cars that relish off-road adventures, cleaners that work on their own, smart technologies that know us better than we do—this 'liveliness' is also the inevitable outcome of a society based upon alienated labour and the mass production of goods. *Fountain Mist* highlights the complexities of this relationship, as well as the ways it is obscured and mystified through fetishisation.

While the word fetish typically conjures stereotypical and often racist notions of sexual deviants or 'primitive' religious practices, its etymology is, in fact, deeply rooted in the historical development of capitalism. While *Fountain Mist* invokes all three definitions of the fetish—psychological, religious, and economic—its originality lies in the way it ties them all back to the phantasmagoria of the commodity form. Before Freud defined fetishism as a sexual disorder, or Marx coined the term "commodity fetishism," or Charles de Brosses associated fetishes with the "idolatrous" religious practices of non-Western peoples, sixteenth-century Portuguese merchant capitalists used the pidgin word *fetissio*—which derives from the Portuguese word *feitiço*, meaning 'magical practice' or 'witchcraft'—to describe certain cultural practices of the West-African Indigenous peoples with whom they traded.¹ A thoroughly European concept—one that continues, in various contexts, to serve the interests of colonialism and heteronormative Western patriarchy—the fetish thus came into being in an unusual intercultural space situated at the intersection of

¹ For a thorough account of this history, see William Pietz's series of articles "The Problem of the Fetish," in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 9 (Spring 1985), no. 13 (Spring 1987), and no. 16 (Autumn 1988).







three different ways of relating to material objects: merchant capitalist (Portuguese, then Dutch), feudalist (Christian), and Indigenous West-African (from the coastal region reaching from present-day Ghana to Nigeria). While contemporary anthropologists and other social scientists tend to steer clear of the concept of the fetish, which they consider irredeemably racist, other scholars continue to appreciate it as a useful paradigm, particularly vis-à-vis a critique of capitalism. This is due in part to the economic origins of the word, but also to the fact that Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism also functions as a cutting satire in which a colonialist concept is turned radically against the main agent of colonialism—capital.² It is in this spirit that Ortiz-Apuy engages with the idea of the fetish, and his work is informed by the work of scholars such as Michael T. Taussig, whose influential book *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* remains an important touchstone for the artist

According to Ortiz-Apuy, *Fountain Mist* is part of an ongoing engagement with the idea of commodity fetishism in which he "attempts to collide" this concept with the two other main definitions of the term: the first being a form of sexual behavior in which objects serve as catalysts for sexual arousal, and the second being the misattribution of magical powers to inanimate objects. At the intersection of all three of these definitions is, perhaps, Marx's famous parable of the dancing table. In a well-known passage of the first volume of his major work *Capital*, Marx uses a wooden table to illustrate what happens when a simple object becomes a commodity. In an allegorical flourish worthy of Swift, Marx describes this change in the object's status as equivalent to its transformation into an alarming creature that "stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will."³ This deranged piece of furniture, which clearly references spiritualism and the Victorian craze for séances and 'table-turning', also contains a vaguely phallic innuendo that is perhaps more evident in the original German, which describes the table flipping over and spouting wondrous caprices from a "wooden head." With this surreal image, Marx encapsulates the drama of the commodity form, in which consumer products appear to be autonomous, living creatures, while the life-force that goes into producing them is obscured and forgotten.

The reconfigured IKEA storage units that appear in *Fountain Mist* seem to reprise the darkly humorous motif of this table, with their strange and carnivalesque silhouettes surrounded by talisman-like objects or votive figures that are, in fact, simply the shells of consumer products, both

² See Peter Stallybrass, "Marx's Coat," in Patricia Spayer, ed., *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 184.

³ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume I, trans. Ernest Mandel (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 163.

depthless and potentially discarded. Together, these objects appear to revel in their material existence, while nonetheless remaining spectral and estranged. This paradox is echoed in the images that grace the walls around them, which conjure fantasies of a party lifestyle built upon mountains of non-biodegradable waste. The fact that none of the objects depicted exist outside of a computer rendering further complicates our understanding of this disturbing mixture of reality and illusion. Radically indifferent to their own authenticity, these images represent what Jean Baudrillard once feverishly hailed as the "absolute commodity." At the same time, they are nothing more exulted or radical than the absolute banality of the commodity form, which is literally everywhere.

Giorgio Agamben once described Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* as "the universe transfigured by the commodity."⁴ *Fountain Mist* presents its own version of this transformation and the havoc it wrecks on our relationship with the real: a fantastical garden party in which marvelous abundance reveals itself to be an empty void alive with spirits.

Emily Falvey
Director/Curator

⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: World and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 44.

Image List

1

***Garden Party*, 2018**

Inkjet prints, digital collage using stock photography, from the installation *Fountain Mist*

2

***Spring Fauna*, 2018**

Inkjet prints, digital collage using stock photography, from the installation *Fountain Mist*

3

***Touch of Sun*, 2018**

Inkjet prints, digital collage using stock photography, from the installation *Fountain Mist*

4

***Twist of Lime*, 2018**

Inkjet prints, digital collage using stock photography, from the installation *Fountain Mist*

5

***White Russian*, 2018**

Inkjet prints, digital collage using stock photography, from the installation *Fountain Mist*

6

***Wishful Thinking*, 2018**

Inkjet prints, digital collage using stock photography, from the installation *Fountain Mist*

Biography

Juan Ortiz-Apuy was born in Costa Rica in 1980 and has lived and worked in Montreal since 2003. He has a BFA from Concordia University (2008), a Post-Graduate Diploma from the Glasgow School of Art (2009), and an MFA from NSCAD University (2011).

Ortiz-Apuy's work has been exhibited in galleries and museums across Canada and internationally, including at IKEA Museum (Älmhult, Sweden), Museum London (London, ON), Les Abattoirs, Musée – FRAC Occitanie Toulouse (France), TRUCK Contemporary Art (Calgary), Gallery 44 (Toronto), Gallery TPW (Toronto), Galerie Antoine Ertaskiran (Montreal), MacLaren Art Centre (Barrie, ON), A Space Gallery (Toronto), and Manif d'art 7: The Québec City Biennial (Quebec). His work has been reviewed in various publications, including *Canadian Art*, *Le Devoir* (Montreal), *Montreal Gazette*, *Telegram* (St. John's), *Toronto Star*, and *MOMUS*.

Ortiz-Apuy recently completed artist residences at Vermont Studio Center (USA), Frans Masereel Centre (Belgium), and IKEA Museum (Sweden). Upcoming exhibitions include solo exhibitions at OPTICA, Centre d'art contemporain (Montreal), and Centre d'artistes Vaste et Vagues (Carleton, QC).

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Occasional Papers are a publishing initiative of the Owens Art Gallery designed to foster a more immediate engagement with the ideas and issues arising from our exhibitions. They also serve as a record of our programming and the individuals, collectives, and organizations that make it possible.

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Owens Art Gallery
Mount Allison University
61 York Street
Sackville, NB
E4L 1E1
www.mta.ca/owens

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