

# Look Into This Jaguar's Eyes

Artist Juventino Aranda sees the spiritual in mass-produced objects.

BY EMILY POTHAST



PHOTO BY TARA J GRAVES

An homage to the black velveteen paintings that hang in many Chicano households.

Long before Europeans set foot in the Americas, the jaguar occupied an exalted place in the indigenous religions of Mexico. Associated with the gateway to the underworld, the jaguar embodies, as the poet Francisco X. Alarcón wrote, the “wild untamed living spirit” of the jungle.

On the surface, Juventino Aranda's *We Shall Meet in the Place Where There Is No Darkness (Jaguar)* is an oversized homage

**JUVENTINO ARANDA:** to the black velveteen paintings that hang in many Chicano households. But to gaze into its yellow eyes is to encounter this untamed spirit as if in an obsidian mirror—transformed, but not defeated, by the homogenizing glaze of industrial capitalism.

When Aranda was growing up in Walla Walla, the child of Mexican immigrants, his mother collected mass-produced artworks like this one, never taking them out of their protective cardboard frames. The care with which she handled them reveals not just an aspirational aestheticism, but a sincere devotion to their well-being.

Aranda's jaguar is currently hanging at the Frye Art Museum as part of *Pocket Full of Posies*, the artist's first solo museum exhibition. Many of the works in the show portray consumer objects as sites of ritual and reverence, like *America (El Dia Que Llego la Llorona)*, a giant votive candle in a man-sized glass vessel. As a child, Aranda would worry that the protection offered by his mother's prayer candles would run out as they burned down. The title refers

to La Llorona (The Weeping Woman), a tormented, child-abducting ghost.

According to curator Amanda Donnan, Aranda sees a parallel between the warnings to children about La Llorona and the warnings to mothers about the police state, which instills a visceral fear that their black, brown, and immigrant children could be snatched away from them at any moment.

Many of Aranda's works use humor, and some are basically one-liners, albeit good ones. *Carry Yourself with the Confidence of a Mediocre White Man (Mar-a-Lago)* looks like an enormous cocaine mirror etched with a kitschy palm-tree motif, lampooning the disparity between the classiness Donald Trump tries to project and the sleaziness he can't help but ooze.

*Kings Are Killed, Politics Is Power (Good Night and Good Luck)* is an outsize send-up of *My Little Golden Book About God*, a nursery-school staple from the 1950s. Like Aranda's cast bronze MAGA hat that just says “GREAT”—exhibited last year at Greg Kucera Gallery—the only word of the title reproduced on the cover is “GOD,” captioning a cherubic blond child holding a tulip. The effect is absurd, and also emblematic of how the visual culture of evangelical Christianity links innocence, purity, and piety with whiteness. Behind the mask of religiosity lies the motives of colonialism, destroying indigenous cultures and replacing them with self-serving myth.

In spite of this erasure, ancient rituals persist, often under the auspices of Catholicism. Aranda's work follows the magic all the way to its source, pointing to a reality where every manufactured object may be read as a text containing layers of history and meaning. ■

## Top Picks

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### 'Indigenous Stewardship of the Salish Sea'

On August 13, after an unprecedented 17-day mourning ritual in which she carried her deceased newborn calf around on her head, the orca known as J35, or Tahlequah, finally laid her offspring to rest. The grieving mother's ordeal drew international attention to the grave conditions for wildlife that have been allowed to flourish in the Salish Sea—*Ḷ'wəłč* in the indigenous Lushootseed language. Curated by Shannon Kopelva and Jennifer Ott, this exhibition explains the role that the Pacific Northwest's coastal peoples have had in taking care of the Salish Sea for generations, and what they are doing to help protect it at this critical moment in history. (Central Library, daily, free.) **EMILY POTHAST**

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## Bellwether 2018

We keep writing about the mischievous, Stranger Genius Award-winning artist trio SuttonBeres-Culler for a simple reason: They're a lot of fun. John Sutton, Ben Beres, and Zac Culler have caused stirs by floating around on an artificial island in Lake Washington and creating a joystick-controlled painting viewer module, among other installations and happenings. The trio has curated this year's annual arts festival in Bellevue, with exhibitions, installations, and events spreading from the epicenter of the museum to areas around the city. They'll showcase Pacific Northwest sculptors in a pop-up gallery, host performances, and highlight the creativity and architectural excitement to be found east of Lake Washington. (Bellevue Arts Museum, Wed–Sun, \$15.) **JOULE ZELMAN**

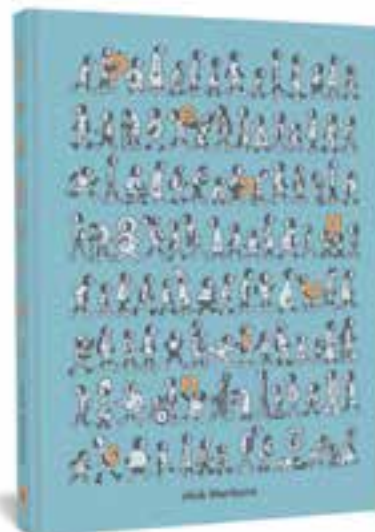
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