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Txema Novelo

YAUTEPEC, MEXICO CITY, MEXICO



Txema Novelo *Nico and Nietzsche*, 2011, Archival photographs

A quick Google search for 'contemporary sacred art' yields little: either Christian art websites or very funny, sometimes awful and rarely interesting New Age esoterica. If Western art started off intrinsically linked to the sacred, is there still a connection today? Is God truly dead in contemporary art? And is the question even worth asking?

If so, how to contextualize Txema Novelo's exhibition at the alternative space Yautepec, since its pretext and context were a reflection on magic, religion, the Bible and hermeneutics as art and ritual? As indicated by the exhibition title - 'Hey Man/Amen', a reference to a song by 1980s drone-rock band Spacemen 3 - the line between the sacred and the everyday was blurred. That the title should arrive from rock 'n' roll is befitting: think Rock My Religion. The title of Dan Graham's 1982 video is an ambivalent statement: is rock the religion at hand, or is religion being rocked? The works in this show seemed to argue both, to the tune of Friedrich Nietzsche, whom Novelo quotes extensively, beginning with the passage from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-5): 'I would only believe in a God that knows how to dance.'

Dance opened the first section of the show, with pieces including the installation *Magick Dance* (2011) - a record player repeatedly playing David Bowie's 'Magic Dance' (1986) - which sat next to a vinyl decal on the ground depicting a kabbalistic 'Tree of Life' sigil retraced by dance steps. *Exodus* (2011) served as a bridge between more directly rock 'n' roll-based works, and more mystical ones. Painted on the wall: 'Walk Like an Egyptian' and 'Losing My Religion', the titles of pop songs by The Bangles and R.E.M. respectively. Below them sat a record player with Bob Marley's 1977 album *Exodus*. The biblical, musical and mystical references were clear. But the 'hot trip to heaven', as the post-punk band Love and Rockets might put it, was only beginning.

Pendulum (2011) comprised a crystal hanging from a turntable on

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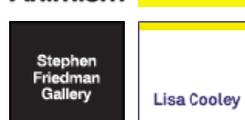
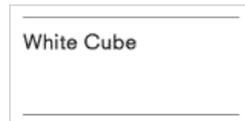
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the ceiling, oscillating over Siouxsie and the Banshees 7-inch single 'Israel' (1980) with its label depicting the Star of David. A second, more layered piece entitled *Haile Selassie* (2011) consisted of three interconnected vinyl hexagons and triangles echoing those in the Star of David on the record, but interlinked and illuminated by candles in cyan, yellow and magenta. These primary colours are used to build the rainbow, which Novelo linked back to Noah's pact with God after the Flood, and his three sons Ham, Yapheth and Shem (fathers of the southern, eastern and northern peoples). Moreover, Haile Selassie, emperor and Rastafari messiah alike, means Power of the Trinity.

The highlight of the show was a five-part Super-8 film, *Still Movie* (2010–11), portraying Novelo as an apprentice, bringing the elixir of life to his master, a painter played by Walter Schmidt (an underground cult musician from the Mexican New Wave movement). The piece quotes extensively from pop music, while also citing Renaissance paintings of Paradise, narrating the apprentice's path to freedom through hallucinatory experiences in the garden of delights. Here, Novelo seems like the love child of Kenneth Anger and Alejandro Jodorowsky, with Marie Losier as his godmother.

Novelo identifies rock 'n' roll as the active carrier between fandom and religious fanaticism. This was evident in the epilogue to the show: a diptych titled *Nico and Nietzsche* (2011), in which the artist photographed himself placing offerings and records on both of their tombs; Sonic Youths' Kill Yr Idols (1983) on that of Nietzsche, the idol killer himself; while on Nico's was The Velvet Underground's bootleg Praise Ye the Lord (1988).

Beyond the conceptual and into the philosophical, Novelo's show revealed him to be an erudite alchemist whose work opens itself to many contexts and disciplines – to the materialization of a thought process and leaps of faith.

Gabriela Jauregui






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