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Art review: Carolyn Castaño at Walter Maciel Gallery

March 22, 2012 | 5:20 pm



(<https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/.a/6a00d8341c630a53ef0163030d9191970d-popup>) Carolyn Castaño's latest exhibition at Walter Maciel Gallery serves as an ambivalent memorial to female victims of the Latin American drug trade. Four large paintings, each named for a real woman, depict idealized nudes reclining in lush, glitter-strewn tropical landscapes. The women are equal parts art history and pin-up poster, but there's something sinister about the large, Rousseau-like vegetation that surrounds them. Studded with skulls and other images of death, ominous swathes of pure black press in, giving the figures' white skin an otherworldly glow.

Smaller paintings feature the severed heads of male drug lords — a seemingly vindictive symbolic act. While Castaño restores the women to life, she tosses the men's heads in the long grass. Still, they too are encrusted with glitter and sparkly flowers. Perhaps they died much as they lived: astride an undercurrent of violence papered over with rhinestones.

The paintings are darkly beautiful, but the highlight of the show is a video featuring Castaño as a newscaster rattling off a litany of sound bites on the history and status of women in Latin America. Alternating seamlessly between English and Spanish — often in mid-sentence — the work pokes fun at the quick-cut, non sequitur nature of TV news while rattling the viewer's linguistic and cognitive circuits. It undoes what we think we know about Latin American women, clearing a space, hopefully, for something more real and complex.

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-- Sharon Mizota

Walter Maciel Gallery, 2642 S. La Cienega Blvd., (310) 839-1840, through April 7. Closed Sundays and Mondays. www.waltermacielgallery.com

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Photo: Carolyn Castaño, "Narco Venus (Angie)," 2011. Credit: Walter Maciel Gallery. Credit: Josh White.

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