

Edward del Rosario's Complicated Charm

Ryan Steadman

People have always wanted to get inside the inscrutable minds of animals through art. We use animal hybrids in our stories, from the Egyptian god Anubis (the god of the afterlife who was half dog-half man) to *The Little Mermaid*, not just to imagine animal existence, but also to further understand the many facets of our own humanity.

This hybridity is where painter Edward del Rosario finds his artistic inspiration. Raised by immigrants from the Philippines with a combined Spanish, Dutch, Chinese and Filipino ancestry, del Rosario was exposed to a melange of cultural traditions from an early age. He grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, a city with a tradition of promoting the arts that—fittingly enough—is also a transitional place by nature; a self-proclaimed "Gateway to the West" that's neither east nor the alternative.

It is there that Del Rosario first practiced and learned about art at an all-boys Jesuit school where he was inspired by the ornament and pageantry of church rituals. Later on, he would introduce this imagery in ways that subverted the official narrative of the Catholic church by blending those images with ones from alternative narratives, most notably with Del Rosario's own Asian heritage. The art of southeast Asia, from pictures of beautifully rendered beasts (both real and imaginary) to the brilliantly-hued traditional dress, would soon become another important foundation in del Rosario's character portraits.

After earning his Master's degree in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design, del Rosario moved to New York City where he would slowly develop his unique style of tightly-rendered and imaginative paintings and drawings. With a delicate touch and a knack for vivid storytelling, del Rosario helped redefine a genre of magical painting in the early aughts, just as contemporary art critics had begun to take the medium of painting seriously again. His theatrical style, which was distinguished by detailed actors on immaculate monochrome backgrounds, took the idea of hybridity further than any of his contemporaries by creating subjects with a dizzying range of cultural and animalian references, often blending archetypes that are seemingly at odds with one another.

In a recent painting titled, *Dominion I*, for instance, mostly nude adolescents wearing animal skulls prepare to throw a dead bird into a cauldron—either as an offering or as dinner. Yet del Rosario achieves an odd harmony in the painting, thanks to a series of subtle visual relationships, like the way the flames that lick the underside of the antiquated iron pot look identical to the graphic flames on one of the boy's surf shorts. Meanwhile, a group of school children are wearing animal costumes while

receiving lessons from animals wearing people costumes (more specifically, traditional English riding outfits). In fact, the entire scene—which is made up of 77 creatures in total—consists of figures that are either part animal, dressed as animals, or are, in one way or another, using animal parts.

Del Rosario also implies an undercurrent of transition within his fables, with many of the figures changing state in a multitude of ways. They can be seen travelling by boat from a distant land outside the frame, marching in a defiant group across the picture plane, or simply in the midst of changing their attire. The artist has even stated that he tends to create adolescent figures because that's when people "first start adapting to cultural mores". Yet it is with remarkable care and study that del Rosario envelopes these complicated characters, seamlessly fusing elaborate details such as traditional filipino tattoos, Halloween costumes, 15th century armor, private school uniforms, and a veritable zoo of fur, feathers and scales into one amalgamated person.

The sum of these efforts is an obsessive inclusiveness that oddly feels more utopian than dystopian. In del Rosario's universe, the extraordinary is ordinary, reminding us that we're all complicated and in the middle of one journey or another. It's a simple message made all the more powerful via this artist's painstakingly embellished fictions.

Independent writer, curator, and artist Ryan Steadman has written about art for [artforum.com](#), Cultured Magazine, Modern Painters Magazine, and The New York Observer and [observer.com](#), among other publications.

He's also organized a series of acclaimed gallery exhibitions, including his 2014 exhibition Ain'tings at the Robert Blumenthal Gallery, Save It For Later at the Sotheby's S/2 gallery and a Bob Nickas-tribute show at the Nathalie Karg Gallery titled RE(a)D.

He's shown his paintings regularly since 2001, most recently with solo exhibitions at Karma and Pablo's Birthday in New York City.