

MATTHEW BROWN

Sula Bermúdez-Silverman

Ichthyocentaur

633 N La Brea Ave

February 11–March 18, 2023

Sula Bermúdez-Silverman's work brings an incisive approach to the contents of everyday life, uncovering hidden histories and drawing discrete connections to reveal unseen structures of influence. Working in sculpture and installation, she creates an atmosphere of defamiliarization where materials, forms, and ideas slip into one another. A poultice of specific objects and beings, *Ichthyocentaur* distills history to illuminate our misbeliefs and reveal the arcane forces that have shaped "The New World."

Throughout the exhibition, Bermúdez-Silverman culls contested narratives from her extensive research, particularly historical accounts of the European colonization of the Americas. Like an archeologist uncovering long-buried relics, she sifts through the annals of history to identify specific fallacies, blunders, and myths.

It is told that when the Spanish conquistadors first arrived in the Americas upon horseback, the indigenous people believed the two beings, man and horse, were one—*centaurs*, mythical descendents of the ancient Greek *ichthyocentaur*, another hybrid being that was believed to be part sea animal, part human, and part horse. The Eurocentric tale of this first encounter assigns the Spanish a god-like stature, with the Native Americans gazing up in awe at powerful beings—European men and their horses—beyond their recognition.

The accepted scientific narrative amongst American academics supports this narrative: forty million years ago, wild horses roamed North America, yet disappeared from the region during the last Ice Age, and were only later reintroduced by European conquistadors. This reintroduction of the horse, they say, was a determining force in the success of the European colonial project: "Next to God, we owed our victory to the horses," proclaimed Hernan Cortes, who led the conquest of what is now Mexico.

Yet many scholars of the Global South dispute these axioms, asserting that horses never went extinct and that indigenous tribes used horses continuously and for millennia. Fantasy and myth are entangled with facts and history. Nevertheless, the Spanish did, in fact, resemble the *ichthyocentaur* when emerging from the Atlantic: men bound to horse by saddle, hailing from the sea.

In *Paso Largo* (2023), mythology becomes sublimated into a sea shell-shaped vessel containing a perfume handcrafted by the artist. Composed of notes from tobacco, seaweed, vanilla, and other cash crops indigenous to the Americas whose extraction fueled the colonial era, it offers a concise distillation of the lore embedded in *Ichthyocentaur*. *Paso Largo*, *Paso Corto*, *á la brida* and *á la jineta* (all 2023) each use translucent toddler-sized glass saddles to explore the alchemic ingredient in creating the mythic Spanish conquistadors.

The saddle is the result of an iterative process of re-making, a mixed breed of cultures of influence ranging from the Mexican vaqueros, Assyrians, Moors, Spanish, and American cowboys. Its iconic horn and other aspects were invented to better acclimate to ranch life and shepherding livestock, adaptations born of necessity and only after several rounds of trial and error. *Aycayia* (2023) offers an oversized counterpoint in carved wood. By presenting multiple

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iterations of the saddle in varying sizes, colors, and materials, Bermúdez-Silverman asks us to pause to consider it as a phenomenon, with its seductive and historically-charged aesthetic qualities. Through objects, *Ichthyocentaur* offers a relearning of our subjective and sentimental “history.” A second glance at what has yet to transfix our attention due to ubiquity.

The soil-coated ceramic sculpture *Castings* (2023) depicts worm excrement in monumental scale. Accepted scientific record also tells of the earthworm’s extinction and homecoming in the Americas: earthworm passengers arrived in the soil of the ballast on tobacco ships and were deposited into their new homes to begin devouring leaf litter and altering nature. When studying worms and their tenacious ability to change entire ecosystems, Charles Darwin stated, “[i]t may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organized creatures.”

The tunnels they create aerate the soil while their natural gut chemistry transforms earth and plant matter into fertile pellets. Earthworm excrement changed the “New World” ecosystem, giving some new flora and fauna life and others an “early extinction.” Much like the colonial settlers who brought them to the Americas, earthworms, the small unnoticed creatures beneath our feet, move the earth below us to create what we see today. Across the gallery, *De Monstris* (2023) continues this exploration. A small architectural window composed of red corn kernels cast in resin frames a dioramic praying mantis, inviting us to consider the ways natural and built elements can interact with agents and institutions to transform our social and physical landscape.

Throughout the exhibition, Bermúdez-Silverman gestures towards the object of her inquiry without ever manifesting the object itself. Just as the worm castings direct our attention to the earthworms, and the saddles index horses and conquistadors who rode them, *124 Bluestone* (2020), a miniature house atop a stage of salt blocks, refers to the human element. An archetypal example of “American” architecture, the dollhouse represents an amalgam of European styles adapted to suit a “New World” environment. Its open roof invites the viewer to peer inside, yet reveals an inch or so of cool water inside an otherwise empty structure with no signs of human inhabitants. The house’s vacancy paradoxically conjures the human presence: its potency lies in leaving space for us to project ourselves into it.

Throughout the exhibition, “The New World” is presented on the one hand as a real place, comprised of real materials, objects, and beings with their own inextricably-linked histories, and, on the other hand, as an ideological construct in a constant state of re-making. Bermúdez-Silverman carefully circumnavigates this fertile terrain, always leaving space for us to contemplate where we may fit within it. Saddle, window, excrement, dollhouse, or otherwise, Bermúdez-Silverman’s uncanny depictions of commonplace objects estrange us from the familiar so that we might examine it with a fresh gaze and glean a new understanding.

Sula Bermúdez-Silverman (b. 1993, New York) lives and works in Los Angeles. She received a BA in Studio Art from Bard College, an MFA in Sculpture from Yale School of Art and spent a year at Central Saint Martin’s School of Art & Design.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Here Be Dragons*, Friends Indeed, San Francisco, CA (2022); *Sighs and Leers and Crocodile Tears*, Murmurs, Los Angeles, CA (2021); *Neither Fish, Flesh, nor Fowl*, California African American Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2020); *Sutures*, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX (2018); *Reconstruction*, Project Row Houses, Houston, TX (2015).

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Recent group exhibitions include *Recent Sculpture*, Matthew Brown, Los Angeles, CA (2022); *Pas le temps de tout détruire sans doute*, Sans Titre (2016), Paris, France (2022); *Imago Ignota*, Fortnight Institute, New York, NY (2020); *Room with a View*, Sow & Tailor, Los Angeles, CA (2022); *Contramundos*, Lodos, Mexico City, Mexico (2021); *Enfolding Bloom*, Galerie Dengyun, Shanghai, China (2021); *Here We Are In Croyden*, Josh Lilley, London, UK (2021); *Shining in the Low Tide*, Unclebrother, Hancock, NY (2021); *Baker's Dozen*, Torrance Art Museum, Torrance, CA (2020) among others.

Bermúdez-Silverman will present a solo exhibition at Josh Lilley in London this November.