

THE DAILY CALIFORNIAN

Opera-inspired 'Bilongo Esmerelda' exhibits visceral, dystopian imagery

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Sofía Córdova/Courtesy

Like a sail, a threadbare white fabric ruffles in midair as it towers above the viewer. Projected onto the cloth, a series of video clips play without beginning or end. In one clip, a golden egg cracks open. From it emerges a satin brown ship situated in a pixelated navy sea. The ship breaks in half and then falls back into its original form.

The clip, titled "Level 5: La Irmanda' Thel Glaci," features streaks of azure paint spread across the bodies of two men clad in nothing but sunglasses and Emporio Armani underwear. Slightly disconnected from the backdrop, they embrace each other frantically. The background music is distorted, amplifying chaos. Slowly, the men fade into a sea of periwinkle pixels.

Gorgeously edited, the video cycle "Echoes of a Tumbling Throne (Odas Al Fin De Los Tiempos)" centers Sofia Cordova's solo exhibition, "Bilongo Esmeralda (Let the Devil Take Style)." To the right of the video screen are other artifacts, including three caricatured screenshots of the video characters – two huggers, a sashaying man and a coy dancer – and a handmade light box.

Featured in the Pro Arts gallery in downtown Oakland, "Bilongo Esmeralda" is an extension of an operatic video and performance series. According to a press release, the series imagines a dystopian future in which "the world is overtaken by water and we have become migrants, adrift, seeking refuge and trying to make meaning of bizarre artifacts of our current present... Cordova, who is Puerto-Rican, began this project as an exploration of Caribbean diaspora and the immigrant experience, but opens it up to explore a broader, more universal experience of not belonging."

"Level 5: La Irmanda' Thel Glaci" echoes the desperate struggle to understand the displaced self. The viewer is disconnected from the two men, whose eyes rest behind dark shades. The pixelated background evokes feelings of fragmentation and alienation. The two men hold onto each other in desperation, fingers fumbling across chests and necks as though each man were blind. Their relationship originates from artifice and necessity rather than sincerity.

Ultimately, "Bilongo Esmeralda" avoids a pessimistic narrative. "Level 6: OxumOxosi" features a veil-clad woman who dons gloves, shades and ripped black shorts. She dances along to an upbeat Spanish song, contorting her body into brassy model and superstar poses. Her demeanor is almost impudent. Her body reproduces into rose, blue and green doppelgangers, which eventually disappear into a foggy, verdant landscape.

The woman's cheeky dance is lighthearted yet critical. It points to a performative aspect of identity where one constantly puts on a show or, in this case, a dance for the world. It cautions that while this performative quality can be empowering, it can also be limiting and otherizing for the actor.

A veil-clad black man takes the place of the woman in "Level 7: Las Saturnales." His torso is bare, his legs covered in white garters and tights. Muted, glittery clips from the Japanese anime "Sailor Moon" play in the background. Like Usagi during her Sailor Scout transformation, the man throws his head back, proceeding with regal sashaying motions. He lifts his veil upward, revealing his eyes. Here, the displacement of the self is about not simply loss but also transformation, for better or for worse.

The installation's final component is "Emr'ld Tblt." It is a handmade light box that alludes to the Emerald Tablet, a stone prized by European alchemists. In the piece, a graduated green light illuminates the box's background, a wallpaper of map-inspired etches and steep hills. Juxtaposed upon it is a fuchsia stone with cryptic inscriptions. The piece is similar to a Halloween prop but eerier, more melancholy. In bold colors, it illuminates the precariousness and possibilities of being in a new world.

The defining feature of "Bilongo Esmeralda" is its surreal yet visceral imagery. Cordova calls upon audiences with emotional urgency and sensual movements in her latest stand-alone installation. Confrontational yet perplexing, "Bilongo Esmeralda" is best suited for viewers who are un baffled by imaginative and exaggerated forms.