

## On Marco Caridad's Work

"Tell me about yourself." How do you usually answer this familiar and typical question we encounter in various situations? Being an introvert, the process of self-introduction has always been a "whole-cake-effort" instead of just a piece. I have, however, come up with a standard reply script while being asked the question. "My name is Yi Chin, and I am a Taiwanese art professional working and living in Miami." I described what I am, not who I am.

Who am I? It's the ultimate question that every single one of us is trying to solve, learn, and discover every day. Of course, self-identity is constructed by self-awareness. But is labeling our identity something that happens to us through subjectivity or is this something we choose to subject ourselves to every day?

"Sans Stereotypes" features Caridad's new body of works, a series of prints, sculptures, and installations about the artist's journey in finding self-identity and against stereotypes he has encountered. Growing up in a conservative environment, it was challenging and confusing to be queer. The learning to embrace who we are is often conflicting with what we were taught in school and society. Caridad turned his passion, anger, confusion, and curiosity into his earlier works as a form of healing and expression. Influenced by abstract expressionism, Caridad's brush strokes and use of colors are bold and sentimental. "My exacerbated movement of gestural lines are symbols of passion, sensuality, and honesty; the hidden, deconfigured, and tied are projections of frustrations about social injustice." Caridad noted in his statement.

Exploring and mixing mediums is considered an essential core of Caridad's practice. Caridad continued his distinctive style in his new series and experimented with quite a few materials, such as linocut prints, acrylic assemblages, wood, cut-out canvas, and more.

The male genital, the penis, is the motif that links all artworks in "Sans Stereotypes." The Phallus, an erected penis image, is worshipped by numerous cultures and is widely portrayed in art history. The Phallus often represents a powerful subject associated with status and luck for reproduction. Caridad's works, however, present a penis in its relaxation. By showing the natural stage and vulnerability of the genital, the artist wishes the audience to see the penis itself with less extended meaning but a piece of human flesh.

Knowing our body features is the start to learning who we are. Being a gay man, Caridad found that gay sexuality is oversimplified, reduced to pleasure; and male vulnerability is generally suppressed by society. He conceptualized this notion and began to question his identity as a man and what it meant to bear the extra layers and filters of queerness.

The interpretation of the penis is buried under complex lines and strokes, implied in Caridad's works. The audience can barely see the shape of the penis, or at least the penis image we are familiar with. In *The Quality of Being Soft*, a series of the cut canvas, or as I like to call them, soft sculptures, are hung on the wall. Just as their depicted subject, the artworks are soft, gentle, and vulnerable. The artworks challenge our impression of seeing something masculine or threatening; they challenge our stereotypes in seeing the "machismo" men image, the taboo part of the body, and challenge us to see beyond the surface. While gender is involved in how people identify themselves, the soft penis here questions the systems of gender binaries, performativity, and stereotypes. What does a man need to do to prove he is a "qualified" man?

"The penis is just another versatile extremity of our body and does not represent who you are or whom you like." Symbolically, the whole series of works in "Sans Stereotypes" is the self-portraits of the artist's current self. The topic of "Who am I" is a classic subject. Still, Caridad has found himself constantly looking for further meanings to his identity. Besides being a Venezuelan-American, a husband, a member of the queer community, Caridad considers himself more than social titles but identifies as more. The artist reflects on himself, and what is left of him without all the labels?

It is a never-ending journey to learn about who we are, and our identity will continue changing as we age. Caridad's sculptures, paintings, and prints revealed themselves to become an abstract confrontation of identity and provide us multiple perspectives in seeing stereotypes in art, in artists, and in life. His works endeavor to discover self through shapes, lines, and vivid colors, inviting the audience to reconsider and redefine what it means to be "oneself."

-- Yi Chin Hsieh, curator

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