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Roberto Benavidez: 'Bosch Beasts'
The Importance of the Fluidity of Identity and Form
Perrotin
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Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1500) is a three-panel work permanently on view in the Prado Museum in Madrid, Spain. It is a complex and enigmatic triptych about the fate of humanity. Bosch illustrates the aftermath of pleasures and sins in Paradise and Hell. The painting is filled with an amalgamation of people and animals who co-exist in these imagined worlds. Los Angeles-based sculptor Roberto Benavidez has been crafting piñatas for more than a decade, often using images from art history as source material. In his series *Bosch Beasts*, he uses *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and other Bosch paintings as points of departure. He transforms the two-dimensional inhabitants of Bosch's worlds into three-dimensional forms, in essence bringing them to life. The indiscretions, dancing, frolicking, same sex and even inter-being couplings depicted in these works are the inspiration for Benavidez's sculptures.

Benavidez is an exacting craftsman who did extensive research into the construction of traditional piñatas before embarking on this endeavor. His labor-intensive practice involves choosing a person or creature to reproduce, sizing balloons to serve as the head and the body, then covering them with cardboard and layers of papier-mâché. The final step is to surround the sculptures with thousands of pieces of serrated-edged cardboard covered with brightly colored metallic and matte crepe paper. Piñatas are often filled with candy or surprises, and what (if anything) may be inside Benavidez's sculptures remains a mystery. These works are 'art' and not meant to be hit with sticks and broken apart by children during parties or other celebrations. Benavidez removes that sense of play and replaces it with a different kind of game — one of recognition. That Benavidez is a queer, mixed-race, Mexican-American is also of importance, as he knowingly inserts aspects of his homosexuality and racial identity into the works. He celebrates the hybrid nature and ambiguities of his creatures.

While some viewers might want to trace each piñata to its referent — and can do so as reproductions of three Bosch paintings hang on a nearby wall — the work is more about Benavidez's interpretations, than a one-to-one mapping. For *Bosch Beast No.*

14 (2025), Benavidez creates a mouse-like creature based on *The Hermit Saints* (1493). Bosch's animal has translucent wings, a wispy tail and a curious black band around its middle. Benavidez transforms the browns on the rodent's back into an iridescent blue, playing off the color of the spots on the original animal. He also adds pointed spikes at the top of the band to suggest an S/M studded collar.

As an installation in the gallery, the piñatas form a menagerie. The creatures hang suspended in front of a blank white wall as isolated forms culled from Bosch's frenetic works. Viewers might even begin to imagine the details of the landscapes that surround them. *Bosch Angel with Star Piñata* (2015) hangs in the center. It is based on the tiny angel in the upper right corner of the middle section of the altarpiece. In Bosch's painting, the angel holds a red sphere above his head, on top of it is a white bird. Benavidez changes the sphere into a seven-pointed piñata with golden tassels to represent the seven deadly sins.

Bosch Beast No. 9 (2019) is a floor-based sculpture that stands ninety-six inches tall. It reproduces the bear or cat-like creature climbing a small tree from the left panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. In Benavidez's depiction, the innocent looking creature climbs a multi-colored pole that rises from a green base while changing colors from gold at the bottom to green to gray to blue at the top.

Benavidez creates a wide array of animals, birds and chimeric forms, some devouring small piñatas, others eating other animals or insects as in *Bosch Bird No. 3* (2014), another critter from *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. There is an abundance of choices from Bosch's fertile imagination, and Benavidez has masterfully created an installation that not only references art history, but also invites contemplation of the relationship between Mexican and European cultures, as well as the importance of the fluidity of identity and form, both past and present.

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