



April 20, 2024

HENRY BERMUDEZ: Odysseus in the Americas

*Henry Bermudez, American born Venezuela 1951*

*Odysseus does not appear in the art of Henry Bermudez that I know of. Nor have I heard or read that the artist has made any reference to Odysseus.*



*as below*

*Nevertheless, at an exhibition of the work of Henry Bermudez at the Woodmere Museum of Art in Philadelphia (through May 19, 2024), it was Odysseus' story which was reflected in the works of Henry Bermudez.*

*Odysseus is an archetype of the European Western mythological tradition: among the first of the ideas that (wo)men have the agency and autonomy – the gods (chance and luck) permitting – to realize a fulfilled life in a world both gorgeous and dangerous.*

*Odysseus is a hero warrior of the Greeks throughout the din and fog of the Trojan War.*

*A warrior who then grows into his full humanity, tested by the gods and by many life-threatening vicissitudes on his return, 10-year journey to Ithaca, his kingdom home.*

*Those ten years travelling through his Greek world were a time in which he was tested and tested himself; and almost lost the plot.*

He reached his island kingdom finally by his tenacity, by his belief in his fate, and by luck (the protection of the gods). Nor were his struggles over yet. They never are in a realistically recounted life, especially a mythical one.

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Here are Homer's first words about Odysseus.

They could have been written about Henry Bermudez.

*Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns  
driven time and again off course, once he had plundered  
the hallowed heights of Troy.*

*from Robert Fagles' 1996 translation of the first lines of The Odyssey by Homer*

Henry Bermudez's 'hallowed heights' were his homeland, Venezuela. He did not 'plunder' Venezuela in the negative sense of that word.

But, alert to the rich ecology and syncretic history of the peoples of Venezuela – *indigenous, African and European* – he formed his artistic vision and built the structures of his style.



*as below*

1951: Henry Bermudez was born in the small town of Maracaibo, Venezuela.

1972 was his first professional show in Caracas.

1986: by the time that he was chosen as the representative of his country at the 42nd Venice Biennale, he had become successful and well known enough to expand his experience by living and working in Mexico, New York and Italy.

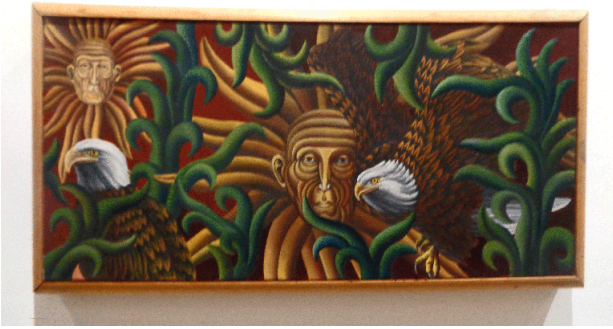
In 1996, he was invited to exhibit in Germany also.

He was 35 when he represented Venezuela at the 42nd Venice Biennale in 1986.

Here is the artist in the top left corner, looking down at the American bald eagle which becomes his companion in the center of the painting, the sun behind his head.

An image painted a few months before the artist left his homeland for the US.





*From the series The Eagle and the Sun, oil on canvas.*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

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*Should it be objected that the comparison of Henry Bermudez to Odysseus is an example of Euro-centricity, I would point to the sources of the artist's images in a world full of immigrants:*

*a globalized world where symbols and language and images and ideas and commodities of all kinds are trafficked across the earth in hours.*

*He himself has conjoined the sacred and political symbols of different civilizations in order not to judge their efficacy or place them in a hierarchy of value; or to condemn some and laud others.*

*He has conjoined them in order to bring our overlapping, often jousting, often conflicting symbolic, world views into focus.*



*Eve, 2016, acrylic paint, glitter on canvas.*

*Henry Bermudez, American born Venezuela 1951. Courtesy of the artist at the 2018 Juried Show, Woodmere Museum of Art, Philadelphia*

*Bermudez, an immigrant to the US, knows what immigrants know:  
we never lose the power of the symbols of our native worlds.*

*On the contrary, they become bedrocks onto which we embroider our new lives.*

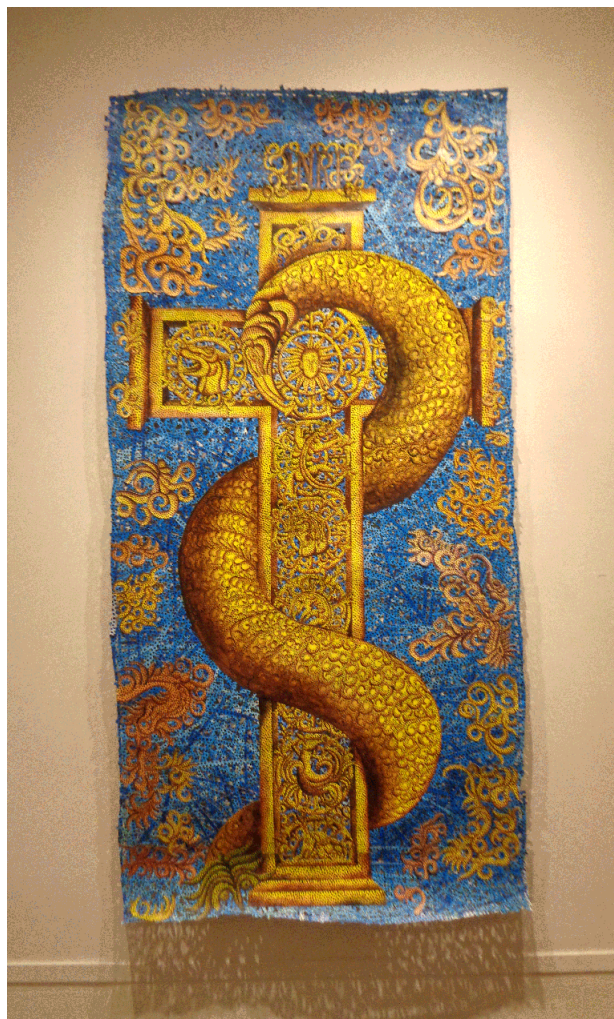
*Often, in the process of acculturation, we accrete new symbols. We intertwine the symbols of our native civilizations with those of our new lands.*

*In the most protracted effort of our lives, we meld our symbols and pray that we do not – like Odysseus from time to time on his journey home – lose the plot.*

*Here is the feathered Aztec serpent deity, Quetzalcoatl, the symbol of death and resurrection, which is often in the artist's work. The serpent is entwined with the Christian cross.*

*Both are gorgeously decorated; standing against the sky in an aura of gold.*

*The serpent is using the cross as a support to rest. It has embraced the cross. It highlights its major icons. These two symbols are in equilibrium, neither threatening the other.*







*Resting Snake, 2007, acrylic on cut paper*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

*Bermudez has conjoined the symbols of his triple heritage to show their enabling potential amidst the harsh realities of the 'real' world.*

*And all in a physical environment of great beauty and danger also.*









*Coyote, 2021-22, acrylic and fabric on paper*  
 Henry Bermudez, American born Venezuela 1951. The Woodmere Museum of Art

*And in doing this, the artist has built and displays the path he has taken through the huge expansion of our present-day 'Greek isles'.*

*He is in worlds new to him:*



He is discerning, learning, adapting, accepting, incorporating, re-imagining, remembering, representing, living.

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*Landscape is the animating context of the artist's work.*

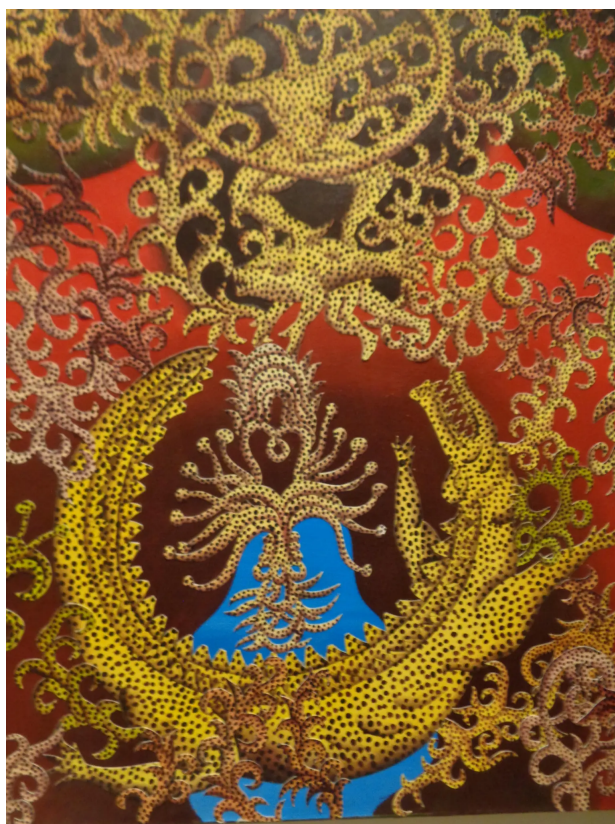
*He imagines European contact with the flora and fauna of South America; as in this image.*

*Alexander von Humboldt, Prussian explorer, traveled through South America between 1799 and 1804. He visited the Orinoco River.*



*What Mr. Van Humboldt Saw when He Visited the Orinoco, 2008, acrylic on cut paper reassembled on canvas.*

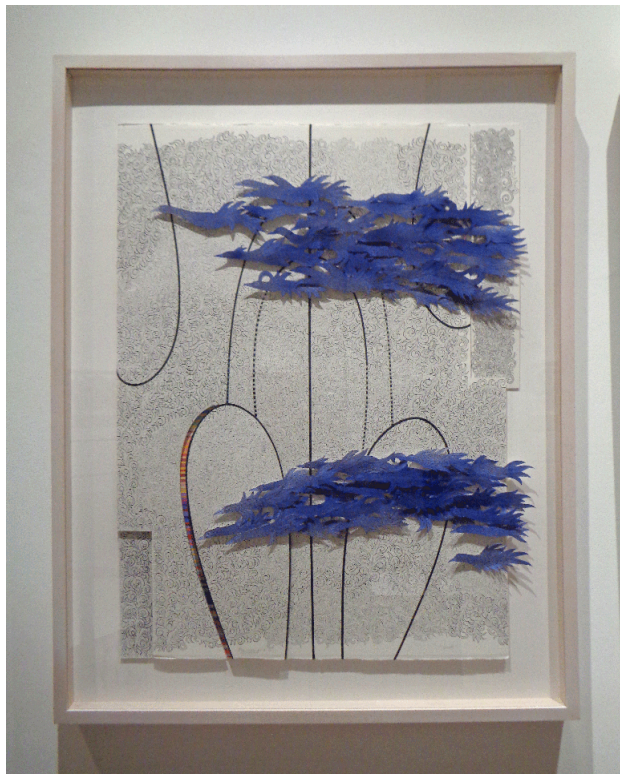
*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951. Loan by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*



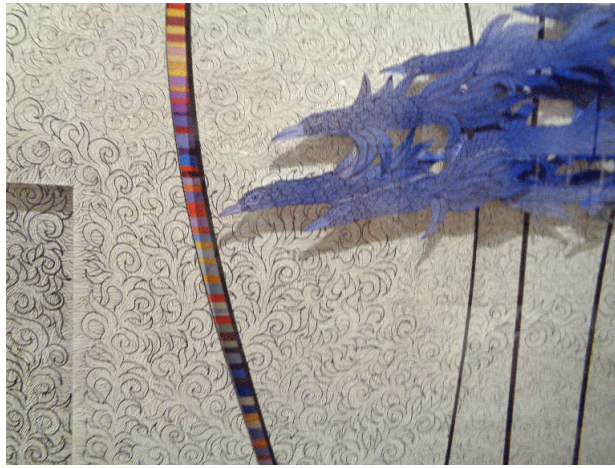
*as above*



*as above*







*Birds, acrylic and ink on paper*

Henry Bermudez, American born Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024

*In these rich landscapes, Bermudez has set the images which represent his mythical interpretations of his triple culture: indigenous, African, European.*

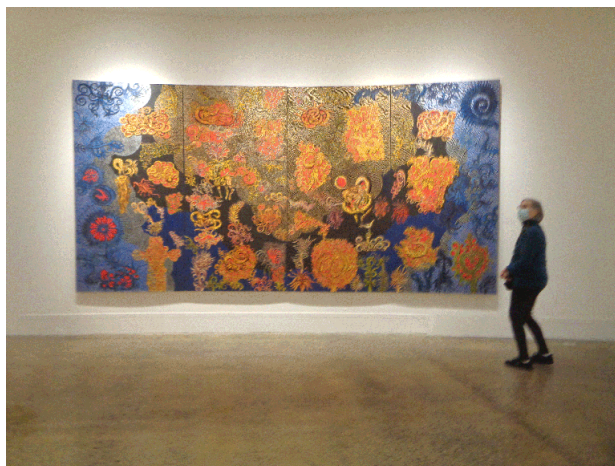
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*2003: Bermudez fled to Miami four years after Hugo Chavez became president of Venezuela. The country began its drift into economic chaos and mass political repression.*

*Bermudez left everything behind. Unable to speak English, he supported himself with menial jobs.*

*2003: Bermudez came to Philadelphia at the invitation of a friend. To begin his creative life again.*

*Here is a painting called [The Heaven](#). He painted it not long after he settled in Philadelphia.*



*The Heaven, 2007, acrylic, silver and gold leaf on cut paper, reassembled on canvas.*

Henry Bermudez, American born Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024



*It represents a milestone of the artist's settling in Philadelphia: a plea to God for help in a confusing and lonely time.*



*Layers of cut paper, floating figures in a dreaming and intricate ground.*







*as above*

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*The artist became an American citizen in 2013.*



*The Pledge of Allegiance, 2018, acrylic on canvas*

*Henry Bermudez, American born Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

*Among the adaptations that the artist needed to make as an immigrant to the United States was to reconcile the contradictory roles that the country and its cultures play in the lives of its citizens and in the world:*

*a lively economy; and the protections of Constitutional government on the one hand. On the other, a superpower, armed to the teeth, intervening in foreign dominions – repeatedly in South America – (almost) at will.*

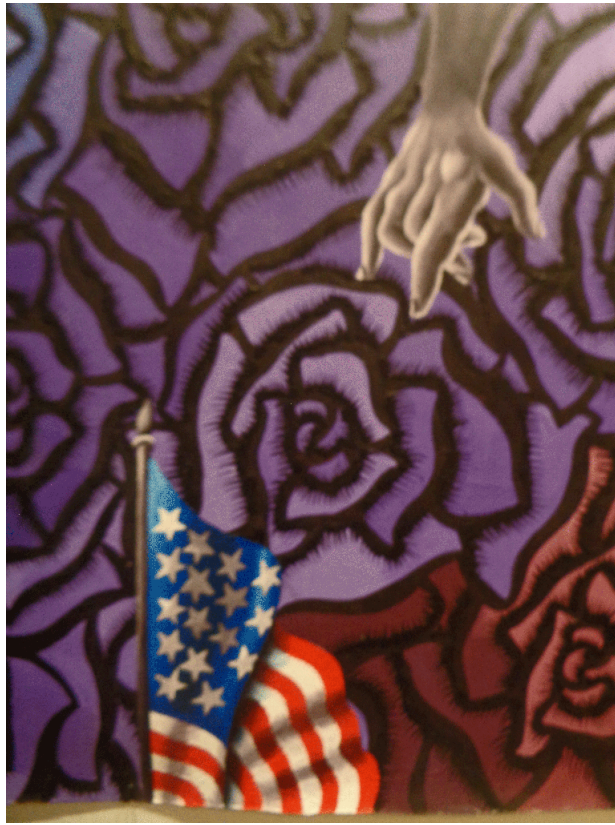


*This evaluation and emotional and intellectual reckoning continue one's whole immigrant life.*

*Here a wall separates a mass of people from the flag planted on the territory of the United States.*

*The Aztec feathered serpent and the Incan jaguar are protective symbols. The sun bearing the artist's head and the emerging rainbow offer hope.*





*The Wall, 2018, acrylic on canvas*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

*Here a reaction to a Donald Trump much reviled presidential policy to prosecute criminally every immigrant who crossed the US/Mexico border illegally. This resulted in the separation of children from their parents.*

*The American flag refuses to be opened. A child and an adult stretch towards each other. The Aztec Quetzalcoatl and the artist himself are holding themselves as symbols of hope.*







*Zero Tolerance, 2018, acrylic and glitter on canvas*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

*In January 2019, President Donald Trump suggested that the US could deploy its military in Venezuela in the event of a contested presidential election there.*

*Distraught at the possibility of civil war in Venezuela, Bermudez visited this celebrated tableau of Salvador Dali at the Philadelphia Art Museum.*

*Dali is expressing his horror at the probability of civil war following the advance of Fascism in Spain.*



*Soft Construction with Boiled Beans, (Premonition of Civil War), 1936, oil on canvas*

*Salvador Dali, 1904-1989, Spanish. Philadelphia Art Museum*

*Bermudez reflects his own apprehension.*







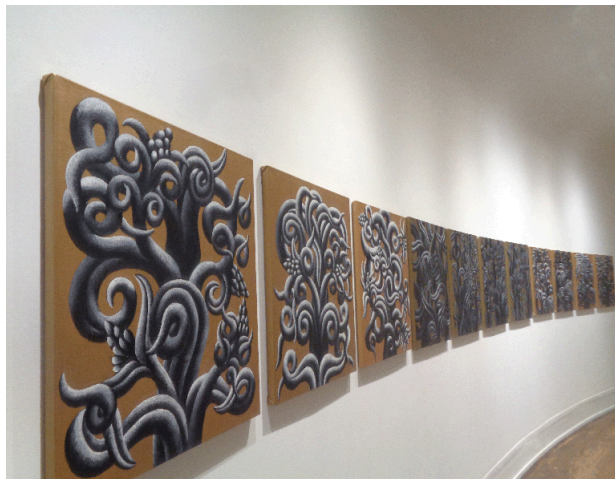




*Premonition of a Civil War (Venezuela), 2019, acrylic on canvas*  
*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

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*Landscape is the rich context of the artist's work.*







*Black Landscape, 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

*A series of 12 paintings, some darker and some lighter, which can be configured to represent entering, walking through and leaving a forest.*

*In most of his work, the flora and fauna are undulating with life energy.*



2011, digital print with reflective foil layer and die cut

Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Philadelphia Art Museum from the museum's website

*It is the human and proto-human figures who are still. Not still and afraid. Still and alert; participants in a gorgeous and dangerous world.*

*This is a reversal of the Judaeo-Christian belief in the sovereignty over and supreme agency of humans in Nature.*

*Its representation is at the core of his work. A core of truth become obvious to us all in these times of ecological emergency.*

*In these landscapes, Bermudez has set the images which represent his mythical interpretations of his triple culture: indigenous, African, European.*







*Cloud of Water, 2017, acrylic and glitter on canvas*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024. Bottom photo from the museum's website*

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*Between 1965 and 1970, Bermudez taught Afro-Caribbean youth in a small village in Venezuela.*

*These are descendants of Africans who escaped enslavement and created the communities in which their descendants continue to live in the jungles of northern Venezuela.*







*Untitled, 2021, cardboard and oil on cardboard.*

*Henry Bermudez, American born Venezuela 1951; and Michele Marcuse, no DOB. Loaned by the artists to the Woodmere Museum of Art in 2024*

*In 1985, when in Rome, Bermudez came upon Piero della Francesca's portrait of 1473-75- of the Duchess of Urbino.*



*The Duke and Duchess of Urbino, 1473-75, oil on wood*  
 Piero della Francesca, 1416/17-1492, Italian. Uffizi Gallery, Florence

Bermudez incorporated the duchess' image in his paintings. She represents the history of the European arrival in and dominance over South America.



*Sankofa and the Duchess, date unknown, acrylic on paper*  
 Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024

*Sankofa* is an Akan (Ghana) concept of the inevitable effect of the past on the future.

Here the energies of the natural world begin to absorb the duchess.





*The Visitor, 2011, acrylic paint, cut paper.*  
Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Photo from the artist's website

*Among the creative communities Bermudez has come to know in Philadelphia is that of African-Americans.*



*Tattooed Nature, 2013-2021, digital image and acrylic on cut paper*  
Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024

*A representation of the African-American model, muse and collaborator, Felicia Pitts*

*Here Aztec jaguars have become whisperers in the ears of a North American woman.*



*Miss America, 2019, acrylic and glitter on canvas*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. The Woodmere Museum of Art, Philadelphia*

*Here, in recent work, the artist expresses the meaning of [Sankofa](#): the past has an effect on the future and we should always recall this in our planning and action.*



*The feathered serpent flies through the forest, scoping it out.*

*The forest itself is branded with the marks of humans: some of the decorative elements of the Chimu civilization of Peru (later subordinated to and incorporated into the Inca).*





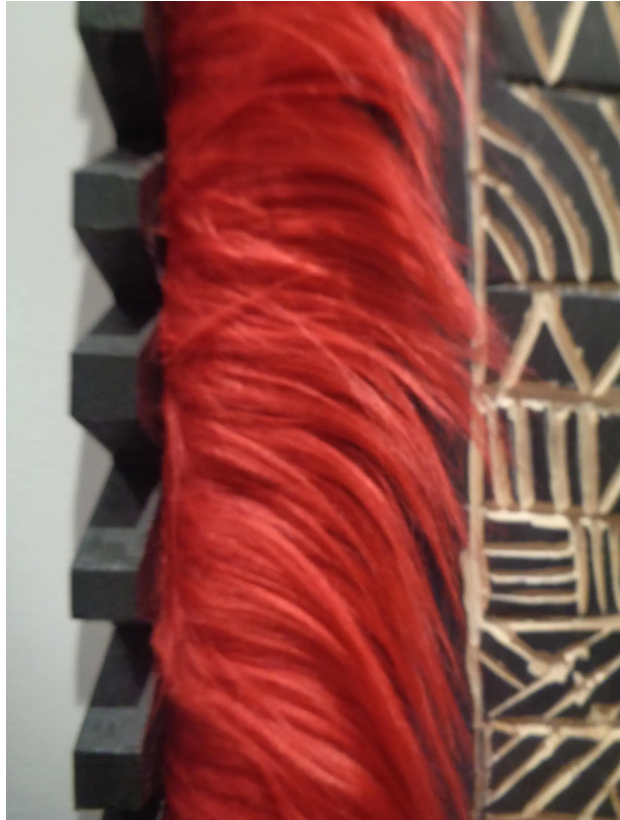
*Untitled, 2024, acrylic on plywood*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

*Here the Aztec jaguar dances energetically towards the future through the forest decorated by men and home also of animals.*







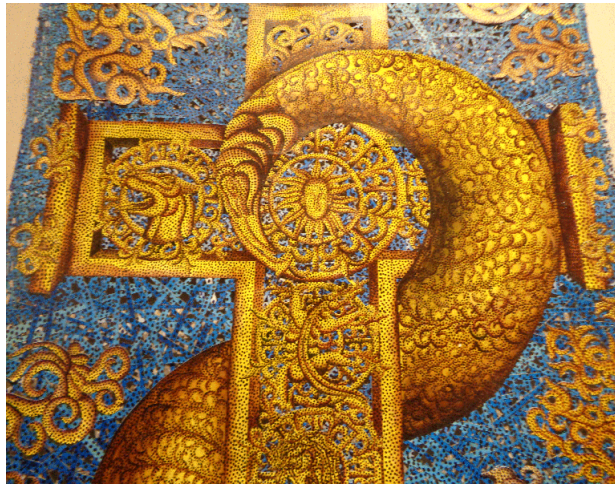
*The Stripper, 2023, acrylic and synthetic fur on wood*  
*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

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*During his time in Philadelphia, the artist's techniques have evolved. His art started with drawing and painting on paper and canvas.*

*He has moved to mixed media as in the creations immediately above.*

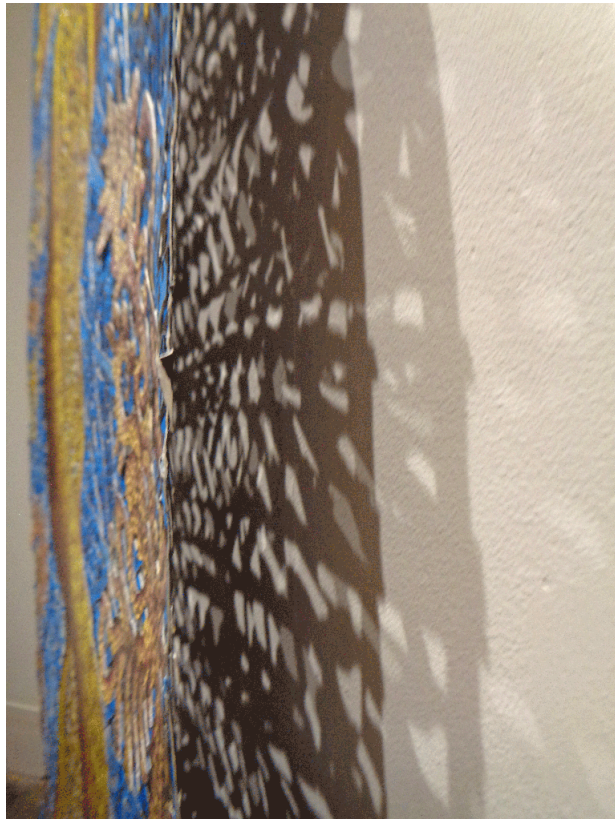
*Also, most notably, he has liberated himself from canvas and uses a cutwork technique which offers colours dappled with light.*



*detail of Resting Snake, 2007, acrylic on cut paper*

*Henry Bermudez, American born 1951 Venezuela. Loaned by the artist to the Woodmere Museum in 2024*

*When I looked behind the work, there I saw another representation of the artist's gorgeous and dangerous forests: light filtering through shadows, full of unstable life energy.*



*rear view of reflection of Resting Snake, 2007, acrylic on cut paper*

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*The artist's journey and the practical philosophy and artistic practice he has evolved from and for it are inspired and inspiring.*



*It is all my homage to Henry Bermudez for his representation of and encouragement in the odyssey undertaken by millions of us in our ancient and new, gorgeous and dangerous world.*

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 **Luisa zambrotta**  
April 20, 2024 at 1:13 pm



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