

ARTFORUM

Jose Alvarez

THE KITCHEN

In 1988, Jose Alvarez toured Australia channeling the spirit of “Carlos,” a 2,000-year-old shaman who held forth on Atlantis, “corrected” the date of Jesus’s birth, reported on the movements of UFOs, and divined other sundry matters before capacity crowds at the Sydney Opera House. In the voluble tradition of fundamentalist televangelists, healers, and cultish gurus of all stripes, Alvarez charismatically staged the visionary with the help of his mentor James Randi, himself a debunker of paranormal phenomena, who also appears in the recent video *Dejeuner Sur Le Dish*, 2007, playing chess with Carlos; besides conducting séances, Alvarez peddled vials of tears and potent crystals and proliferated his message via the mass media. But even stranger than Alvarez’s initial hoax was the fact that scores of people were persuaded by it. Indeed, so convincing was his act that its influence survived its debunking. In laying bare the structure of such presentations, Alvarez counterintuitively reaffirmed the possibility of conviction.

Even though the aim of his deception was ultimately to enlighten, Carlos’s moral is that people believe against their better judgment in matters of both lesser and greater consequence. Taking this as axiomatic, Alvarez’s first New York solo exhibition, “The Visitors,” furthered his quasi-sociological research into mysticism and magic. Having quit live performance in favor of video and collage, in this show he expanded upon the promise of his earlier work through a range of media. Placed at the gallery’s vestibule, *A Separate Reality*, 2007, comments on the spectacle of the earlier communions—eventually executed in Europe, Asia, South America, and the United States, as documentary photographs of Alvarez in Italy and China installed alongside the monitor suggested as well—with Alvarez inhabiting the role of the medium and of the whistleblower in turn: Clips corroborating past Carlos embodiments alternate with others culled from CNN, the *Today* show, and *60 Minutes*, where Alvarez affirms his position as a conceptual artist.

Equally underpinned by an interest in the production of faith, other works, like *The Guessing Game*, 2004, are less schizophrenic than pathological. In this fifteen-minute video montage, clips of bogus psychic James Van Praagh’s television appearances from 1998 to 2002 are grouped according to the logic of repetition, which is to say, by the catchphrases or key concepts that he has exploited in multiple settings. Hopeful mourners are told that Van Praagh senses a problem with the deceased’s breath (duh—he’s dead), or that he suspects that the grieving relatives frequently look at photographs of the departed. As if these musings were not hokey or generic enough, their iteration in Alvarez’s deft editing renders them burlesque.

Less (or maybe differently) pedantic, Alvarez’s wall-based amalgams of paint, porcupine quills, feathers, beads, crystals, and mica forgo shape-shifting multiplicity as much as overt propaganda. Instead they channel Fred Tomaselli’s multifaceted abstractions and Yves Klein’s alchemical

monochromes. More about aesthetic than religious dogma, then, *Article of Faith*, 2007, *Between Two Worlds*, 2007, and the feverish *Keepers of the Secret Knowledge*, 2007, confound sincerity and spuriousness. Their horrible new age-y profusions of so much sacred stuff and their elsewhere gorgeous encrustations of bronze and gold slip between critique and collusion. (Not coincidentally, Alvarez quotes Bruce Nauman's mocking dictum "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths," in *The Guessing Game*.) Whether theoretical ploys or earnest paintings, though, they left one with the lingering suspicion that Alvarez had ignored his own point and that the sorcerer seemed to have been seduced by the beauty of his own illusion.

—*Suzanne Hudson*