

CURA.

288 PORTRAIT JONNY MEGRON

TEXT BY
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SELF-PORTRAIT



Through a kind of mimetic poetics, Jonny Negron finds figurative expression for the alienation, absurdity and intimacy of contemporary living. From Telfar to tinctures, poppers to pill-popping, Negron's latest body of work weaves together, with humor and mysticism, references to niche brands and hyper-syncretized rituals, building sensual scenes that reveal our nocturnal fantasies and their messy realities. In these tableaux full of bodies spitting and spilling, in lust and in longing, nightlife is a space of both escapist intoxication and ecstatic communion. Deftly cinematic and riddled with symbolism, these paintings also show the leakiness between commodity culture and outsider utopia suggesting how partying can be a cipher. Negron started work on this recent series of paintings exploring the nocturnal realm during the pandemic's lockdown, when social distancing was enforced and restaurants and bars were mostly shuttered. But for some the party never stopped. In certain cities everything stayed open. In others, underground raves raged on. Nightlife is always a space outside the regular order of things, its own order forged by liminal forces, after-hours spots and outsider in-groups. Always elusive, an ever-adaptable exercise in pleasure-seeking, its fugitive status was pushed even more to the fore.

As the world started to open, the first showing of Negron's *Night World* series took place in Shanghai in November 2020, a solo exhibition at Mao Space titled *Blue Dream*. The paintings included *Disc Woman* (2020), depicting a DJ in a bondage harness manipulating Pioneer-brand CDs with long pink talons; *Perfect-Ion* (2020), in which four bodies groove on a dance floor littered with cigarette butts, puddles of spilt drinks, and empty bottles and cans; and *Rave New World* (2020), which shows a group of bodies choreographed around carrying a passed-out person, a Lamentation of Christ reference, with "LOGO" printed on the back of one in the group's Off-White jacket, the garment itself a self-conscious nod to our brand-whore culture, but in the context of the painting also an allusion to Logos being a name for Jesus. Christianity may have been the original cult, but now it's Instagram brands which are distinguished for their cult followings.

Negron's hand often exalts objects, name-brand and otherwise, to a kind of mystifying effect. Watches, chains, and

pendants sparkle with a kind of cryptic appeal. A Reber-brand Mozart-labeled chocolate heart mysteriously shows up twice in recent works. The inordinate attention paid to this "specialty" but sold-at-Walmart chocolate brings to mind the horcruxes in *Harry Potter*, objects a wizard has embedded with a piece of their soul to achieve immortality (replace "wizard" for "artist" and this sounds a lot like real life). Whether the status of these objects is merely a send-up of 21st-century commodity culture, they're sincerely suggested to have special powers, or some combination of the two, Negron's fetishistic lens is undeniable.

The most explicit examples of religious and sexual fetishism, however, can be found in Negron's older work. The artist initially became established through comics and illustration, producing a diverse body of work that continually revisited both occult and erotic themes. For Negron a shift of sorts to painting began in 2016 with the exhibition *Formative World* at Farewell Books in Austin, Texas, the series from that show being pretty impossible to consider without thinking about fetish. Multiple works feature a communion of red-cloaked figures, stoic yet tender, handling ritualistic instruments and wounded bodies, at times nipples and fishnets showing through their priestly robes. One of the paintings titled *Ordo Virtutum*, Latin for "order of the virtues" and a reference to a medieval morality play, shows one of the cloaked figures holding a sistrum, an ancient Egyptian rattle shaken in the presence of a deity which I first mistook for a BDSM-esque torture device. A postcard from the show reproducing the gouache-on-paper work is accompanied by a William Olaf Stapledon quote, "strange that in my remoteness, I seemed to feel, as never before, the vital presence of earth as a creature alive but tranced and obscurely yearning to wake." This sincere desire for transcendence, even when there are hints of satire or irony, is threaded throughout Negron's work, and ever-present in the newer nightlife paintings too, which explore the potential for ecstasy in the club environment. Their nocturnal characters are often rendered with a saint-like serenity, and the composition of hands passing a credit card (*Valis*, 2020) formally references Michelangelo's in the Sistine Chapel. Rapture, it's suggested, is pos-

sible even in this universe over-saturated by very material realities.

Symbolism is another way that banal consumer objects project towards another plane in Negron's work. The artist has suggested that the presence of glass cocktail tumblers and other drinking receptacles throughout the nightlife paintings can be read through the lens of Tarot, with the suit of cups representing emotions. Some of the characters depicted with vessels around them are very much in their feelings. In *Innervisions* (2020), a figure with cornrows covers their face with their hands, a stack of four empty glasses on the table in front of them along with a coin, tails-side up—we wonder, did the everyday exercise in divination cause their despair or just the alcohol? Either way, the four of cups is said to appear when you're feeling unmotivated or discouraged and can also represent our tendency to take things for granted.

Phantoms are another presence in Negron's work that suggest inter-plane transmissions. *Frozen Warnings* (2020) features a figure accessorized with facial piercings and a waist trainer sitting in a dusky blue light, the ghostly and sparkling outline of another body beside them, a protective arm slung around their shoulder. *I wear your ring* (2021) depicts a close-up of a phantom hand seemingly stealing a ring from a figure's finger. *J Lo's Dress* (2018) renders a specter of Jennifer Lopez's infamous plunging Versace gown, floating eerily at night in a tropical forest that recalls the lush Puerto Rican landscape, as if the jungle-print frock is haunting its inspiration. And *Villalba* (2018), with ghosts hovering over the graves of Carlos Soto Arriví and Arnaldo Darío Rosado, two assassinated Puerto Rican freedom fighters, alluding to the haunting nature of colonization and continued occupation.

Pop culture and spirituality, the personal and the political all swirl in Negron's work, suggesting interconnection and alienation across physical and fantastical channels. In these *Night World* works, an autobiographical portrait of the artist and their peers, out late and intoxicated by substances and emotions, finds a way to bridge the chasm between consumer culture and transcendent yearning, a complex and yet still often meme-able illustration of modern life as we know it, always with nuance and without judgement.





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If I Was Your Girlfriend, 2020 (detail) (opposite page) Can You Get To That, 2020





Requiem, 2021 Disc Woman, 2020 (opposite page) All images Photo: Ed Mumford Courtesy: the artist and Château Shatto

