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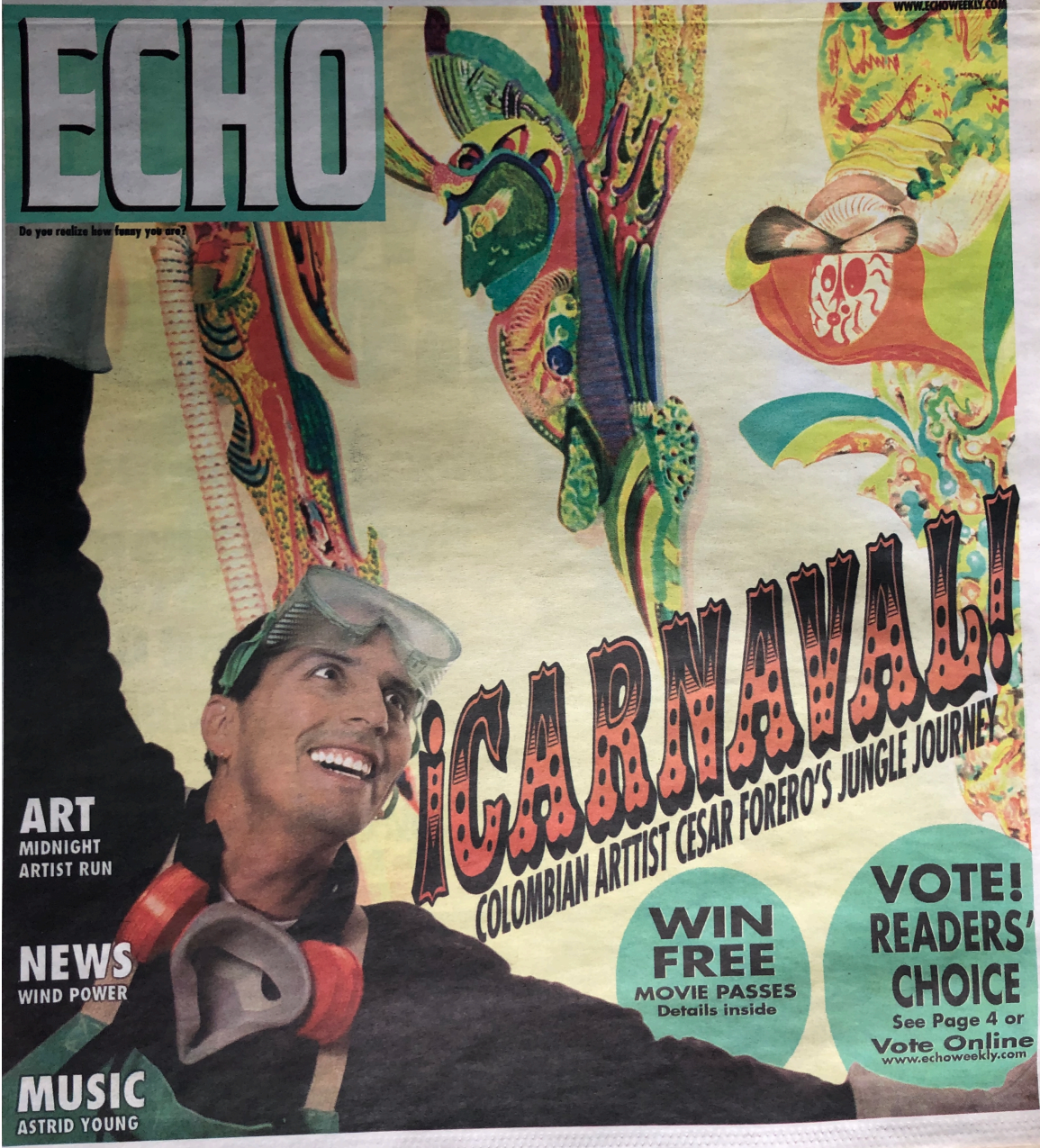
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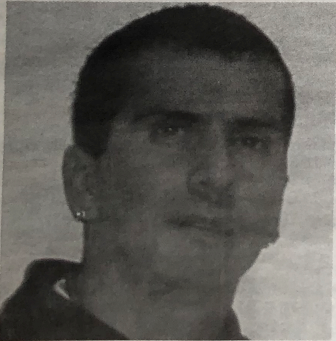
CARNIVAL

COLOMBIAN ARTIST DRAWS INSPIRATION FROM TRAVELS

by Lauren Hall

Welcome to the Jungle/Life's a Carnival for Colombian artist Cesar Forero.

Occupying the territory between installation and architecture, Colombian artist Cesar Forero has created a complete environment in the courtyard of the Clay and Glass Gallery. The title of the work, "The Four Elements," came from Forero's interest in how humans and the earth are made, and how different cultures describe where everything comes from. For centuries, earth, wind, fire and water have often represented where all matter originates. Fascinated with this, Forero began researching Japanese culture, and found: "They have philosophers who think the relation of the four elements form all materials." As a result, each part of Forero's work directly relates to this concept.



The first thing noticeable in the installation are the large organic shapes climbing the wall of the courtyard. A cacophonous display of bright blue wooden abstract shapes envelops the several stories high outdoor wall. Resembling a waterfall, the shapes reach up to the sky and seem to explode into the air. "I thought it was very interesting that the gallery has no ceiling," Forero says. "So the sky was always constantly moving and it was going to be part of the piece. I wanted to make it look like the sky was coming down through the wall. [The shapes] are not specifically human, not specifically animal, but the forms have a certain anthropomorphic quality." Scattered across the floor at the base of the waterfall are seven ceramic sculptures in twisted forms with bits of spiraled metal and glass marbles surrounding them. Referencing Japanese philosophy, Forero notes: "The four materials I used in the installation are wood, metal, glass, and clay." Fire is not represented in an obvious manner however, but firing in a kiln is, of course, essential to presenting clay in its finished state.

While conceiving the work on the floor, Forero recalled an instance when he was visiting the jungle and a friend mentioned a beautiful spot with a waterfall he should see.

"We started walking through the jungle and we got lost, and couldn't find the way home. In Columbia, at six o' clock, it gets dark, and there's lots of quicksand. So it's very dangerous and we had to find a place to spend the night." The adventure made a lasting impression. "It was very special," Forero recalls. "It was cold, humid, and it was scary, but fascinating. So the theme of the waterfall has been constant for me lately."

In much of the Forero's other work what is present on the floor is directly related to what is

happening on the wall. The connection here occurs at the base of the waterfall, where the clay sculptures, or "islands", seem to grow up out of the chaos on the floor. "Going back to this idea of the four elements," Forero explains, "when the earth was creating itself, in the water that was surrounding the planet, these islands started appearing and volcanoes came through the water. So I made this representation on the floor that looks like islands."

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In contrasting bright and earthy colours, the sculptures are organic in form, resembling turbulent bubbling mud or lava. The anthropomorphic quality in the wooden pieces on the wall is continued here. "They are human and animal, but some of them look like rocks and like stones." Just as shapes can be discerned in clouds, Forero says: "When you see the mountains you can read things, like bodies and faces. So when you see my sculptures you see rocks, but at the same time you get the form in there. Some of them look like animals, or a part of a body."

The pieces of twisted, spiralling metal found on the floor are also attached to the wall, generating the feeling of cresting waves or winding currents in the air. "On the floor," Forero says, "the marbles and twisted metal represent wind, water,



and constant movement. It's really important for me that everything's changing. No matter what's happening in the world, it keeps going. It never stops."

Forero's attributes his interest in creating complete environments to his training as an architect. In a course project he had the opportunity to work with blind children and states that it was a remarkable experience. "They told me very special things about the space that I had never perceived before." He notes that when you walk into a space, many people rarely notice everything. "At most you see the colour, but these children said the way the space smells, the way it feels. They observed the acoustics. They notice more things and are more sensitive. So when I start exploring ideas about installation, I think 'how would a blind child feel if they walked in here?'" Forero now tries to make forms with irregularities and different textures. "If they touched it, they would feel something," he smiles.

Forero invites people to spend as much time as possible with his work, noting that when people view a painting they typically stand in front of it for a short period of time and before quickly moving on. "I want people to stop more, and take more time to read the work." Forero says that many people will initially get a general perception of his work, but later, when they look closer: "They just stop, and lean in, and pick things up. They feel like they're finding things." He compares this investigation to being in the jungle, and taking time to look at interesting insects, plant life, or even rocks. "You really have to take some time to understand what's happening there."

Much of the Forero's motivation for making art comes from a concern for environmental issues in the jungles of his homeland. "When I was

doing my MA in the States I was very concerned with everything that was happening. Animals have been killed and areas have been devastated. A few years ago the United States said some of this territory in the jungle, where cocaine grows, had to be taken down. So they started fumigating these areas to get rid of the cocaine and marijuana.

"I was so concerned with what was happening in the world," he says, "that I started making work in relation to that," Forero says, adding that he wants people to be conscious of their actions and how everyone has a direct impact on the environment.

With marbles, pieces of clay and metal everywhere, Forero's installation almost demands that the visitor pay attention to their whereabouts. The viewer becomes as aware of themselves as they are of the work. If you're not careful with your movements, you could easily slip on a marble, or break a piece of clay – a terrifying thought in an art gallery. This potential for embarrassment causes a slight amount of anxiety, but also brings the kind of heightened awareness required for Forero's work.

While Forero's installations look celebratory and exciting because of the bright colours and exuberant forms, there is also an underlying sense of pathos and sadness. "In the carnival," he explains, "it's fun, and when people see it they say, 'Cool! Wow! That's funny!'" Although Forero goes on to explain that when visitors begin to listen to the lyrics in the songs performed at carnivals it changes the meaning of the celebration, as they often hear absolutely tragic stories amidst bright decorations and costumes.

The intense sense of movement in *The Four Elements* is representative of what Forero believes

is a trait ingrained in Colombian culture: the urge to keep going in the face of tragedy. "In Colombia sometimes you go out, and you don't know if your family in another part of your city is going to die," he remarks. "It's like boom! There's a bomb! You ask; 'where did it explode?' And you find out and you say; 'My partner is there! My wife is there! My child is there!' And then you call them and you ask 'are you okay?' And they answer 'yes,' and it's like nothing ever happened. We are, of course, touched by other's pain, but you've got to keep going."

"I was so concerned with what was happening in the world, that I started making work in relation to that,"

Commenting on the fact that much of the art being produced in Colombia is laden with violence, Forero says that while he respects the work of these artists, he has a slightly different view of things. "[They should] tell of this violence in another way, so it's not like making more violence to tell violence. My family has been touched by this violence – terribly. I have horrible stories about what has happened to my family. But I'm optimistic, and I think there's a better way to live."

The exceptionally vibrant and dynamic installation Forero presents offers viewers a chance to reflect on their impact on the world. He encourages us to consider the concept that humans, plants, and the earth itself are all made up of the same elements and should respect each one another accordingly.

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