



Grace Parazzoli | For The New Mexican

## mythological portraits

PAINTER FATIMA RONQUILLO

“When we have found all the mysteries and lost all the meaning, we will be alone, on an empty shore.” The conceit of *Arcadia* — the idyllic, unspoiled land — bears the burden of absolute perfection and its inevitable loss. Tom Stoppard titled his 1993 play, from which the above quote was taken, *Arcadia*, alluding to the play’s contemplation of human ordering of wild nature, and to the inevitability of ending up on an empty shore.

*Arcadia*, the exhibition opening Friday, Sept. 14, at the Meyer Gallery, features new oil paintings by Santa Fe-based artist Fatima Ronquillo. They have been likened to jewels, which is an apt descriptor, as they are meticulously painted in a style that is reminiscent of the European Old

Masters, with nearly iridescent subjects often posing before Arcadian landscapes. Symbols and allusions abound. In *Hand with Crowned Marmoset*, the titular crowned animal perches atop a hand adorned with a pearl-lined ring, whose center is a blue eye that stares at the viewer. Mythological figures like Hebe and Dionysus revel in their utopia — Hebe, the Greek goddess of youth, by offering ambrosia to an eagle with outspread wings, and baby Dionysus by riding a majestic cheetah, his head crowned with grape leaves.

Some of Ronquillo’s works recall Hispanic colonial art, among them *Crowned Nun with Bees* (not on display in *Arcadia*), whose subject modestly looks to the viewer, her body shrouded by her habit and her head

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*Hand with Crowned Marmoset*, 2018, oil on panel; opposite, *The Wanderers*, 2018, oil on linen





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adorned with a wild mass of colorful flowers. Others play with literary and musical references; Mozart's Cherubino page is a recurring figure. A number of the works in *Arcadia* portray Greek mythology, with a hint of newly invented mythology as well: In *The Cartographer*, a youth with a cockatoo perched on his hand stands before an allegorical map of the mythical Arcadia, which Ronquillo created from imagination. For both the boy and the viewer, the scene offers mystery, wonder, and the intrigue of the unexplored.

But the works' immaculate beauty at times has its darkness, its hint of the empty shore. In *The Wanderers*, a girl with a peregrine falcon rides a bison against a background that is not traditionally Arcadian. Rather, it is New Mexican. "I had thought of Arcadia as this unattainable land, a mythical one, where there's an unspoiled wilderness and happiness," Ronquillo said. "Both the bison and the peregrine falcon were at one point very endangered, but with conservation efforts, they have actually rebounded a bit. And I thought that was sort of an optimistic thing, but it's also kind of precarious. You

have to be vigilant and make sure their populations are sustained. It's not just these specific species — in general, it's a painting about hope, about how as humans, we are custodians of the land, but also we are very much at fault."

Ronquillo cites Antoine Watteau and Francisco de Goya — in whose works lightness begets shadows — among her many artistic influences. "I like things where there's a bit of either melancholy or something dark or sinister," she said, clarifying that not all of Watteau's and Goya's works have that darker undertone. "Or there's different elements going on. But I think most great paintings do have that. That's why there's interest in those for so many years, for so long, over the centuries. Because people can keep looking at them and looking at them, and they always find something different."

Ronquillo, who is originally from Pampanga, Philippines, and grew up in San Antonio, developed her distinct style through study and practice. She is self-taught. "I learned from copying paintings from art history and drawing them," she said, describing separately how she would read National Gallery technical bulletins, study the methods

behind older paintings, and assess how those techniques would inform her own. "I sample throughout. I'm very democratic at it. I don't just [sample from] the Renaissance. It could be the rococo, it could be North American folk art, it's anything — or Latin American folk art, or colonial art. It's an all-in-one. Because that's the beauty of being an artist now, is all these references are so readily available. I've always thought before that the way I'm painting is anachronistic, but actually, the more I think about it, I couldn't have painted like this before, because all of these references would not have been just so easily available for an artist." She cited online access to imagery and the ease of travel as two tools for understanding what came before. Additionally, "You're moving now with all these years of art history behind you. And the world is more global, so you can have all these multicultural references, if you like. It's very exciting to be an artist now."

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Ronquillo's technique is also the culmination of years of work. Last month she wrote a guest article for *Artists on Art* magazine outlining her intricate process. It begins with a drawing, which is transferred to a canvas that has been prepared with imprimatura; Ronquillo then begins the underpainting stage. She adds layers of increasing transparency during multiple painting sessions, a slow method that entails discovery during the act. "I'm always learning," she said of the artistic process. "Each painting presents a certain set of problems to be solved. It's basically over the years, just trial and error. If you don't like what you've painted, you can always wipe it." She added, "It's also individual style: I don't think I can paint any other way. It basically comes down to how do you find your voice. It's what feels the most natural, in a style or subject matter that continuously excites you and amuses you. It sounds very trite, but it's all about — am I in love with this image, with these references? Is it something that to me is intellectually stimulating or satisfying or just amusing? And technique can be that too, because oil painting can be very, very complex or very simple, depending on the individual artist and how they want to go about it. For me, it's a lifelong learning situation."

Stoppard wrote in *Arcadia*, "It's wanting to know that makes us matter." *Arcadia* may not last, but the undying desire to learn has its own sort of perfection to it. ◀

## details

▼ Fatima Ronquillo: *Arcadia*, through Sept. 21

▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, Sept. 14

▼ Meyer Gallery, 225 Canyon Road #14; 505-983-1434 or [meyergalleries.com](http://meyergalleries.com)