

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Why I like Mel Ramos

Tressa Berman · Wednesday, March 22nd, 2017

When Oakland-based curator, Eric Murphy, first asked me if I could help him and a group of artists and collectors site a show for Pop Art legend Mel Ramos, I have to admit, I wasn't sure I could. My hesitancy stemmed from my feminist sensibilities and my admittedly shallow knowledge of Ramos's work, short of conjuring a girl in a martini glass, wrapped around a catsup bottle, or sliding out of a banana peel. What was the appeal?

And then I met Mel Ramos.

On a sunny afternoon in the Oakland hills, I went to the home and studio of Ramos to meet with his team of artists and supporters: Mel (flanked by his daughter and studio manager, Rochelle Leninger), his protégé, Gabriel Navar, and neo-pop artist, John Waguespack. It was in this casual, if not ritual setting, that my awakening took place. Looking through the stacks of paintings, prints and 3-D light boxes of women in various stages of frontal display, their hyper stylized forms seemed to take on a power that the "female-as-object" belied. The satirical takes on advertising and mass media, graphic works such as the ones first shown by Ramos, Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein and others in the 1963 exhibitions at the Guggenheim and LACMA (*Six Painters and the Object* and *Six More*, respectively), created a context for the now iconic brand of "pop art" these artists launched. This pinpoint moment in art history opened the lens on Pop Art and helped to define it as a genre. Fifty-four years ago, the juxtaposition of female nudes with crass advertising was not only counter to abstraction, it was a breakthrough. The air-brushed quality of the women alongside appropriated commercialism also extended motifs of the Cool School—California cool, the flash. Seeing these images now and again in 2017 only underscores their stylized intent, and further illuminates the way these nudes appear. Repositioning the female-as-subject, Ramos's women look directly at you. In fact, Ramos's 'subjects' reappropriate the male gaze and turn it back onto the viewer/consumer as if to alert the buyer beware. Viewed in this light, Ramos's early work can almost (retrospectively) be read as subversive—a prelude to *Ms. Magazine's* "No Comment," or an inverted conversation with Judy Chicago's 1964 car hoods. The shock value of Ramos's nudes lies in this very consideration.

And then I met Leta. In more than 60 years of marriage, Leta Ramos was the subject and inspiration for Mel's female nudes. The beta test lay in the hundreds of photographs splayed on his studio table, the batch of them dating back to the 1950s to the present of Leta in various forms of pose and repose: on the beach in a bikini, in a housedress with children, wearing a hat in the garden—being a model, a muse, a mother, and most of all, being very real. There is nothing hyper-real, pretentious or stylized about Leta. Now in her 80s, her femininity has emerged as kindness

and a lightness of being that is readily captivating. It became easier to understand how Mel Ramos, this once abstract painter, influenced by surrealism and a student of living legend Wayne Thiebaud (also featured in LACMA's *Six More*), turned his attention to the figurative, and in superhuman proportions. His heroes after all, were super women.



Circling back to his now vintage roots, Ramos's superheros (Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman and Catwoman) re-affirm his mastery of the figurative and iconographic. His 2015 commissioned comic book series for Louis K. Meisel Gallery in New York seems to jump off the canvas as conscious acts of nostalgia, while wielding indestructible power. It is the enduring power of time that Ramos captures by his legacy and through his ongoing body of work.

The *Power of Pop* exhibition, closing March 25<sup>th</sup> at Gregorio Esclanate Gallery (see details), links a next generation of artists to Ramos and his foundational output. Mexican American artist Gabriel Navar works with comic figures who reverse the gaze on selfies and simulate classics (think *Starry Night* goes cellular) that serve as backdrop to technological morphs and hacking culture. John Waguespack's celebrity portraits convey the underlying palette of Pop through unlikely combinations of figurative, abstraction and photo realism. His *Deconstructing Hollywood* series is in direct lineage to the ways that Pop Art inflects upon itself to breed new forms, while paying homage to modern day superheroes (recall Prince, channel Bowie). The through line of this inter-generational show reminds us who our own heroes are, as Bowie reminded us "just for one day," or in the case of Mel Ramos, for a lifetime and more.

*The Power of Pop* at Gregorio Escalante Gallery  
978 Chung King Road, Los Angeles, CA 90012

Closing Reception for March 25: For more information and to RSVP contact-[info@gregorioescalante.com](mailto:info@gregorioescalante.com)

Featured Artist: Mel Ramos, John Waguespack and Gabriel Navar

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