

Andrew Edlin GALLERY

Samuel Sarmiento: Relical Horn

November 7 - December 20, 2025

"A Romanian woman once sang me a phrase of folk music and I have since found it tens of times in different works from different composers of the past four hundred years. Indubitably: things do not begin, or they don't begin when they are created. Or the world was created old."

— Macedonio Fernández, *The Museum of Eterna's Novel: The First Good Novel*, 1967

Andrew Edlin Gallery is pleased to present *Samuel Sarmiento: Relical Horn*, the Venezuelan artist's first solo exhibition in the United States. Born in 1987 and based in Aruba, Sarmiento investigates—through the intertwining of ceramic sculpture and drawing—the fictional possibilities of history, the force of oral traditions, and the pliancy of time: a time that denies a single beginning and falters before envisioning its own end. In *Relical Horn*, Sarmiento unveils a striking ensemble of kiln-fired ceramic sculptures brimming with overlapping narratives, characters, inscriptions, and both chromatic and volumetric experimentation.

The ancestral technique of ceramics—where human hands extract matter directly from the earth as though tearing away fragments of geological flesh, imprinting form with their fingers and palms, transferring a cerebral vision into mineral entity—anchors Sarmiento's practice. The clay is then colored, adorned, and fired at temperatures at which any organic matter would be scorched into extinction. He experiments with various patinas, glazes, pigments, and even gold, which, under the kiln's searing heat, yield kaleidoscopic, granular, and aqueous surfaces. Like the unreliable mechanisms of memory, certain areas of his ceramics are erased, intensified, or transfigured through firing—altered by the unforeseen oxidation that stains and textures their surfaces.

In his works, Sarmiento understands history—whether the so-called official narrative or the myths and legends perpetuated through unwritten means—as a structure built from narrative forces: the multiplicity of interpretive viewpoints, the superimposition of temporal understandings, the blurred edge where fact dissolves into fiction, the myth of historical impartiality, and the paradox of history itself—as both total and infinitesimal, encompassing the world yet anchored in a single, fragile subject.

Sarmiento unsettles our perception of history by fabricating new ruins— archaeological remnants of the present, ultracontemporary fossils that provocatively friction against a

scattershot constellation of references. Ancestral and mythological traditions from Central America collide and entwine with canonical images from art history—such as Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* (1981) and Joan Mitchell’s *Bonjour Julie* (1971)—alongside crucial philosophical texts, from Socratic maieutics to Walter Benjamin’s hermeneutics, and with key films from German cinema, such as Werner Herzog’s *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), an epic tale in which a romantic dreamer, enthralled by the Italian tenor Enrico Caruso, attempts to build a magnificent opera house in the Brazilian Amazon. Sarmiento also brings into the institutional art sphere the content and sensibility of other forms of transmission—oral tradition, music, poetry, hallucinatory imagery, and fabulation born of psychoactive vision, as in many native Latin American communities. These channels become catalysts for new myths, legends, and fantastic histories.

His works provoke reflection on whether, centuries from now, the events and gestures of our present—so ordinary to us today—will be seen with the same aura of peculiarity and distinction that we project onto the remnants of past civilizations. To work directly with clay and fire is to engage with expanded notions of mineral time and ancestral technique—temporal intervals so vast as to elude comprehension when measured against a human life span that, at best, reaches a mere century.

The Venezuelan artist is also deeply interested in how a classic, a tradition, or a canon comes into being—particularly within Eurocentric systems of thought. He questions what attributes elevate an object or event from the inertia of ordinary existence into singularity, rendering it exceptional. Hence his fascination with what he terms the “relic horn”: a distinctive element that accrues symbolic and historical density, transforming an object into a relic—layering it with temporal sediment that fractures linear history and establishes new coordinates, new points at which history itself is inscribed.

Is such singularity guaranteed by adherence to an aesthetic or narrative program? Might there exist a formula capable of eliciting a specific emotion, much as the German art historian Aby Warburg explored through his *Pathosformeln*? Could there be a model, a framework, a structure? Questioning what a classic is, South African writer J. M. Coetzee writes: “So we arrive at a certain paradox. The classic defines itself by surviving. Therefore the interrogation of the classic, no matter how hostile, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed. For as long as the classic needs to be protected from attack, it can never prove itself classic.”ⁱ

To possess a horn—this desired, fetishized object—one must first slay a creature of immense grandeur: a rhinoceros, an elephant, or even a unicorn. It is, therefore, a fragment of present yearning bound to an absent body. A boundary is thus drawn: for a time, that body or object served a practical function, and from its absence emerged layers of symbolic existence. In much the same way, when an artist dies or disappears, a trace remains—a

proof that they once walked the earth: their work. So it is with relics in the history of Christianity: fragments of bodies, garments, or objects once touched by saints, toward which the faithful direct their prayers and pilgrimages. The fetishism surrounding relics extends equally to civilizations— archaeological remains, cave paintings, ceramic vessels. Our societies yearn for material fragments of the past in order to sustain an increasingly immaterial future.

Sarmiento also underscores the importance of communication vehicles that, within the art world, document the achievements that gradually accumulate into historical record. A copy of *Artforum* is provocatively paired, in the title of one of his works, with the Rosetta Stone—that carved slab crucial to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs. These journals of a “real fiction,” while they validate the art production of a specific context, also expose the collapse of a narrow, self-referential history read by few. Sarmiento points to the small fiefdom we, art workers, inhabit— voluntarily confined, declaring a mere half-acre to be the world, blind to the vast constellation of other stories that have shaped humanity. Of course, this small piece of molded, painted earth still tells us much: beauty, civilization, and the traces of history remain bound to disciplines that are, paradoxically, both revelatory and restricted— accessible to only a few. Touching the paradoxical nerve where the microcosm expands into the macrocosm and vice versa, Sarmiento amplifies the power of oral histories that have long underpinned Caribbean cultures while reflecting the reflux of Western visual art itself.

Sarmiento, like each of us, is both a reader and a writer of history. He is an inventor of truths and a spectator of lies, a victim of memory’s accidents and of forgetfulness. He is the tiger trapped in time—the only animal to bear the stripes of its own cage upon its skin. In *Relical Horn*, Sarmiento seems to construct his own museum of living relics—objects that never cease to deliberate on truth, to chatter about the narratives of the past. They question themselves restlessly about their origins, their cycles of repetition. A fictive, eternal museum.

— Mateus Nunes, PhD

¹ J. M. Coetzee. *Stranger Shores: Literary Essays, 1986-1999* (New York: Viking, 2001), 16.