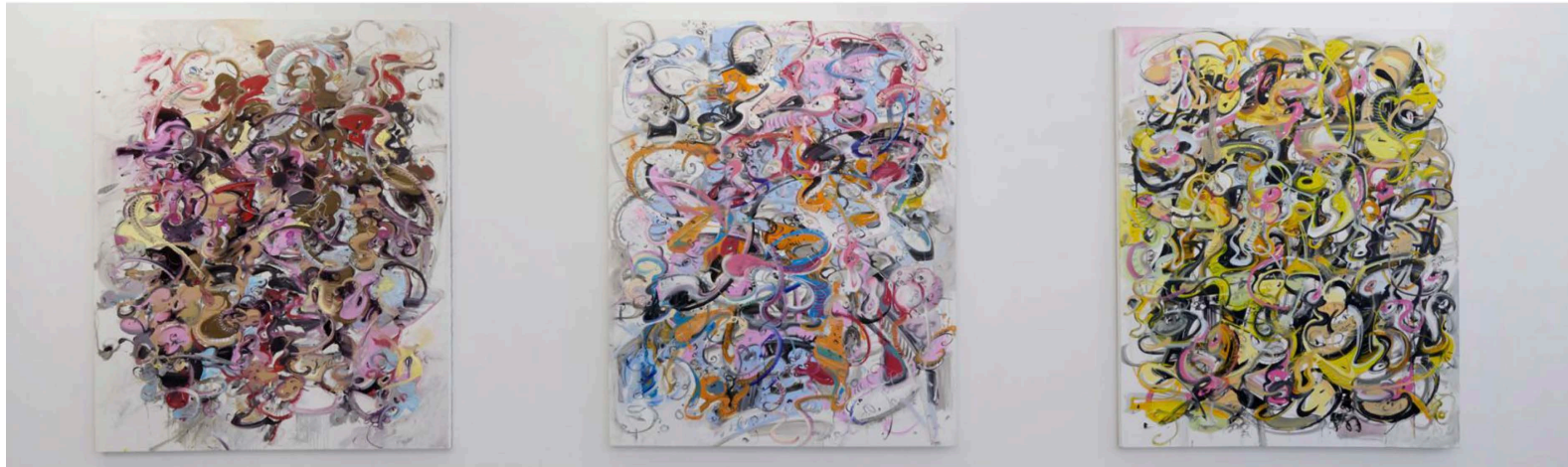


FRIEZE

Tomás Esson's Erotic Politics

At David Lewis, New York, a presentation of the artist's recent paintings and drawings reveals his continued obsession with sexual imagery and socialist Cuba

T BY TERENCE TROUILLOT IN REVIEWS | 23 APR 21



The Cuban artist Tomás Esson hasn't shown in New York in over a decade; his last solo outing in this city was in 2011 at the now-defunct Ramis Barquet – a gallery that specialized in contemporary Latin-American art. This spring, however, at David Lewis, Esson returns to Manhattan with the solo exhibition 'KRAKEN' – an extensive overview of his more recent painting and drawing. The show also coincides with the artist's 30-year career retrospective, 'The GOAT', at the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami. Both exhibitions were organized by Gean Moreno – ICA Miami's curator of programmes – who neatly positions 'KRAKEN' as a bookend to 'The GOAT', presenting works that culminate in the artist's most iconic and explosive visual play of whirling shapes, colours and venereal imagery.



Tomás Esson, LA GROTTA, 2020, oil on linen, 2.5 × 2 m. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

Before settling in the US in 1990, the artist – who studied at the Instituto Superior de Arte in Havana – was known for his bizarre, sexualized depictions of chimeric animals (or ‘monsters’ as he calls them) and grotesque caricatures of Cuban revolutionaries, which offered a pointed critique of his home country’s repressive regime. One of his earliest exhibitions, ‘A Tarro Partido II’ (With Broken Horn II) at Havana’s Galería 23 y 12 in 1988, was shut down by local authorities for the artist’s crude depictions of Che Guevara. By the time he arrived in Miami, Esson had started to further develop his ‘Retratos’ (Portraits, 1988–ongoing) – a series of large-scale paintings of his monsters. These almost-titillating figurations – akin to the phantasmagoria of Francis Bacon, Hans Bellmer and Robert Colescott – were followed by the artist’s ‘Wet Drawings’ or ‘Wet Paintings’ (1995–ongoing) – *in situ* murals that pared back his visual vocabulary into five distinct modules: the mouth, the penis, the vagina, the breasts and the anus. (What the artist declares on his website to be ‘the five fundamental elements of life’.)

Spread across David Lewis's two locations in Chinatown and the West Village, 'KRAKEN' presents some of Esson's familiar tropes, while also showcasing more contemporary examples of his abstraction. Alongside a new 'Wet Drawing' on one the walls of the Chinatown space, the show offers a selection of paintings from Esson's 'Miami Flow' series (2015–ongoing) – tight whisps of spiralling gestures of oil paint on canvas – as well as new portraits of Fidel Castro. The pairing feels a bit forced, particularly since there are so few examples of the former Cuban prime minister, and the contrast between the two series is quite distracting. Still, the Castro portraits do reveal a certain iconography that is reused and refashioned in Esson's 'Miami Flow'.



Tomás Esson, *Guantanamo*, 2015, oil on linen, 2.7 × 1.8 m. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York

In *Guantanamera* (2015), a red-nose, pink-faced Castro is pictured anxiously surrounded by a coterie of mics: amalgamations of vulvic and phallic shapes spewing viscous liquids on the Cuban leader's face. These spindly, hybridized forms of male and female genitalia recur throughout this newer body of work, although they only really read as tornado-like swirls in the orgiastic mess of painterly marks. Gone, however, are the snips of humour and satire so prevalent in Esson's 'Retratos' and portraits of Cuban leaders. Yet, the abstractions do retain a palpable base of eroticism. In *LA GROTTA* (2020), shit-coloured browns and flesh-coloured pinks billow onto the canvas, creating a massive scatological cloud of forms, as ghosts of the five fundamental elements of life begin to surface. While so much of Esson's work is about poking fun at the power of sexuality, his abstractions take on more serious tone – an energetic flattening out of machismo culture, heteronormativity and gender binaries.

Tomás Esson's 'KRAKEN' at David Lewis, New York, is on view through 24 April. 'GOAT' at ICA Miami, continues through 25 April.

Main image: Tomás Esson, 'KRAKEN', 2021, exhibition view, David Lewis, New York. Courtesy: the artist and David Lewis, New York