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## *Umar Rashid's narrative paintings collapse past, present and future into a darkly comic vision of colonialism*

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In Umar Rashid's "Culinarialism," an exhibition of six paintings and several drawings on view in Cultural DC's mobile art gallery, petticoat-clad colonizers drink from red Solo cups. Age-old Yoruba deities blast laser beams from their eyes. Enslaved people tend to a fanciful feast featuring Manny and Olga's pizza in a gilded, 18th century manor. These irreverent images tell the story of an ill-fated dinner party in fictional Belhaven, Va., where the past, present and future — the earthly and the fantastical — all swirl together into a kaleidoscopic vision. The violence of centuries past appears frighteningly close. Perhaps because it always has been.



Umar Rashid (Frohawk Two Feathers) "Culinarialism" install shot. VIVIAN MARIE DOERING PHOTOGRAPHY

Exploitative practices of the past often took place in the open. Nowadays, Rashid suggests, those same structures still exist, but with euphemistic names or behind closed doors. His unapologetically blunt paintings render modern oppression in blatant, visceral forms. Accented with references to 21st-century brand names and consumerism, they have a way of implicating us all.

The story his pictures tell follows the preparations for a dinner party hosted by someone called the Lord of Belhaven, Robert Sidney (who looks like Ronald McDonald), and a revolt by his servants. "Culinarialism" looks at the human cost of the food we consume through a cartoonish but grim tale of servitude that seems to stretch across history — right to the contemporary viewer's dinner plate.

The narrative unfolds in a set order: In the opening scene, servants carry boxes of coffee and Coke Ultra to the Lord's palace. Later, they tote "Olde Bay" (a nod to the Maryland

seasoning) across a dock housing a ship meant for human cargo. At the dinner, which is presided over by a “St. MacDonald,” a man — painted to look like an Egyptian hieroglyphic figure — waits on a woman who is about to dive into the fast food feast. It’s as if he’s reaching out through the millennia to see if she’d like fries with that. When the servants revolt in later paintings, party guests catapult through space, decapitated by flying pizza slices, clinging to cheap plastic cups — as if they might save them.

While Rashid renders his scenes in a playful 2D comic-strip style, the works still have a lofty feel, owing to an eclectic mix of influences: Peter Paul Rubens, Persian Mughal miniatures, cave paintings. You can’t see these historical references in the works so much as you can feel them in the painting compositions. The triangular formation of rearing horses lends a sense of gravitas to the rebellion scene; the arrangement of cluttered, detailed figures gives the opening image the feel of religious iconography.

Part of a sweeping body of work that Rashid has been building since 2003, the exhibition is just one story, from one republic, in the artist’s invented world of the “Frenghish” empire (a mix of English and French colonial powers). The Los Angeles-based Rashid, who also goes by the name Frohawk Two Feathers, and who is the inaugural artist in Cultural DC’s Capital Artist Residency program, describes himself as a storyteller. He can go on at length about small plot points and long character arcs in this work. (For his first exploration of Belhaven, in a 2017 show in Memphis, he wrote a 16 page history of the imaginary republic.) Visiting his exhibition is like stepping into a novel being written in real-time, or stumbling upon artifacts from an alternate realm.

For all Rashid’s narrative specificity, “Culinarialism” also has a one-size-fits-all feel. In his lengthy titles, the institution of slavery is only mentioned in passing. The servers and aristocrats alike have white, black, and gray skin tones: Rashid describes them as “everymen” and “every women.” And with his idea of the Frenghish, Rashid strips the colonizers of their differences, recasting them as generic conquistadors. It’s as if he put the oppressive systems of the last 600 years in a blender, and this is the weird, wild juice it spit out.

At its core, Rashid’s provocative, tongue-and-cheek show illuminates the way the appearance of inequity changes over time, and from place to place, all while the structure endures. This has been particularly apparent in the last year and a half — when the pandemic has forced the dark reality of the American caste system into light.

The paintings seem to have just one explicit reference to covid-19: a masked figure who presses a knife against one of Lord Sidney’s guests, foreshadowing the rebellion about to break out. Like the pandemic itself, the figure is a provocateur, about to reveal the fury underlying the genteel dinner, tearing at the social fabric that props up the system. Throughout the background of the painting, pairs of eyes, contained within little black boxes, hover. They read like a growing collective conscience — watching, waiting, spreading.

