

BROOKLYN RAIL

Lola Montes: *Cirica*

by Barbara A. MacAdam
December 2023



Installation view, *Lola Montes: Cirica*, Vito Schnabel Gallery, 2023; Artworks © Lola Montes; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery

In her vivid clay constructions Lola Montes creates a visual memoir that draws upon a wide range of sources. Alternately eloquent and gruff, the work moves between the past and present touching upon the storytelling that ultimately informs mythologies, religions, and even the history of art.

An array of tiles composed of hand-painted flowers, titled *Zucchini Flowers*, on split ceramic segments hangs in the hallway outside the gallery's main room. The flowers are set against a stark white ground and call to mind Cy Twombly's poetic renditions. Testifying to Montes's multi-regional affinities—her lives in Milan, New York, and mostly, in Sicily, where she collaborates with local artisans to produce time-contingent pieces that reveal centuries' worth of imagery—are plaques marked with mythological-evoking figures, not least, of the goddess Circe, after whom the show is named. Circe, an enchantress, was the daughter of the sun god Helios and is known for being able to bring about the metamorphosis of humans into other life forms.

Throughout the gallery, there's a sense of many pasts conversing with present time, acknowledging the art of Montes's peers and near peers, including her father, Julian Schnabel, as well as the Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana, who, like Montes, attacks the surfaces of his materials to extract and amplify meaning and expand upon the spirit of the present. One feels the influence of Renaissance sculptor Lucca della Robbia whose terracotta classicism lent a sculptural elegance that reacted to the raw, more guttural sculpture of ancient Sicily.

LOLA MONTES

The show is named *Cirica*, after the Cirica peninsula, where fishermen assemble to collect shards of Roman and Greek ceramics. Here Montes has gathered her minimalistic renderings with her effusive pieces of the past. Among the most affecting of Montes's works is the beautifully brushed, mostly abstract *Crocodile Tears* (2023), painted in soft green along with peach flesh tones.



Lola Montes, *Artichoke Candleholder, Italy (Four Heads)*, 2023, hand-carved and painted ceramic
15 3/4 x 11 7/8 x 11 7/8 inches (40 x 30.2 x 30.2 cm); © Lola Montes; Photo by Argenis Apolinario;
Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery

In the main room, Montes has planted a spare Italianate garden with anecdotal wall tiles and, scattered throughout, concrete stools inlaid with painted ceramics which incorporate bits and pieces of narrative and memory. Could these be intended to serve as meditative places to pause and reflect on the narratives of time? Lending a surprising bit of energy and a touch of humor is her sexy installation *Artichoke Candleholders, Italy (One, Two, Three, and Four Heads)*, 2023, revealing happy phallus-like forms, growing and dancing in bright colors. The candelabra, we learn from the press release, is inspired by the idea of castratura, or castration, whereby the first artichoke of each plant must be cut off so that others may grow, "a poetic metaphor for love. One risks getting pricked trying to reach the heart."

Other pieces, like hand-painted wall works are shaped like serving dishes with evocative titles such as *Premonition*, *After Hours*, and *Rebirth. Nature's Trusty Merchant* (2023) more viscerally attests to Montes's appreciation for nature and its connection with the human body, where a female figure is one with a tree whose brushy leaves appear to spring out of her buttocks or that grows between her legs. Similarly, in her map-like composition consisting of six terracotta tiles, titled *Humanity* (2023), we see a gentle meditation on landscape and gesture.



Lola Montes, *Crocodile Tears*, 2023, hand-painted terracotta tiles mounted on steel support, 15 3/4 x 15 3/4 x 3 1/8 inches (40 x 40 x 8 cm). © Lola Montes; Photo by Argenis Apolinario; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery

From this gathering, Montes has pulled time, place, and history out of clay to build a personal studio replete with her own physical and emotional history. Time is at the heart of it all, as is underscored by her 16-piece tile work *Cutting Up Space and Time* (2023), filled with biomorphic forms emerging from the sea that seem to be continually transforming themselves as they assume shape.