

BIG RED & SHINY

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VELA PHELAN'S X ME LAB @ NEGLAA

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Many artists make work with the hope that they will one day see it in a gallery or museum, but Vela Phelan once told me that his assemblages are made not for these spaces, but for homes. Experiencing these pieces on the walls of Phelan's own home, I always felt that they were portals that lead into metaphysical terrain. This experience is no different in his exhibition, *X me lab*, currently on view at [The New England Gallery of Latin American Art](#). Walking into NEGLAA the night of *X me LAB*'s opening, I was immediately struck by several things:

The trance-inducing aroma that always follows the artist: a concoction that contains anise star and other unrecognizable yet pleasant earthly scents.

The sounds: conversations in Spanish and English mingled with the soundings of the Philadelphia "Chipcore" DJ Robo Rob. A bell occasionally rang, interrupting the conversations and music.

The body language of the audience: we had to squat, squint, and kneel to experience these pieces. We had to contort during conversation to avoid bumping into or spilling wine on the work that had been prepared with



Vela Phelan, *X ME LAB* (detail), mixed media, 2010



Vela Phelan, *X ME LAB* (detail), mixed media, 2010



precision. We had to hold our breath during our investigations of each piece so as not to disturb the fragile bits or cobwebs that they had accumulated as Phelan created them.

The works are arranged throughout the space as if they are leading you on a non-linear pilgrimage. Each piece is a shrine composed of found or gifted objects. The journey begins with a fanged skulled guardian. It's horns and other appendages are made from tree roots. The shell of a stingray enhanced with jewels serves as the creature's armor. There is a box that showcases a series of geisha wigs that sit atop acorns and other seeds. There is a winged Jesus suspended in the moment of crucifixion. A horse, which only reveals itself to those who look close enough, holds up Jesus' body. We are invited to kneel in front of a shrine, say a prayer, and strike a bell. It's unclear whom we are praying to - perhaps it's the projection of white noise on the wall, or Mickey Mouse, or maybe the telephone. There is a series of Mexican wrestlers hanging on a wall that are mounted on vinyl records. A Mr. Burns action figure and a smiley face leave behind their familiar existence to take on god-like qualities through meticulous placement of bizarre objects. These objects have lived previous lives serving functions that are now obsolete. Phelan reconfigures these objects with a sensitivity and attention that gives them an opportunity at an unimagined afterlife.



Vela Phelan, *X ME LAB* (detail), mixed media, 2010

Hypnotized by each wrestler, god, personification and glorification of a memory, I become aware that I am/we are dealing with something larger, something of epic proportions. It is a seemingly impossible task to write about Phelan's work because it transcends language, inducing new possibilities for universal communication. There are references to cultures I am not a part of and gods I've never heard of. They are mixed with the American Pop culture that I, like so many of my peers were raised on. Mickey Mouse is no different than Zeus, Jesus, or Bert and Ernie.

X me LAB isn't a comfortable art exhibition. It is a happening, an experience in which all senses are carefully considered and called upon. It is an opportunity for an existential dialogue that Phelan invites us to nest with.

New England Gallery of Latin American Art

For more on Vela Phelan's work, go to [Temple of Messages](#).

"X me LAB" is on view through March 3, 2010 at NEGLAA.

All images are courtesy of the artist and NEGLAA.

Sandrine Schaefer is a Boston-based artist who works with concepts of duration and the ephemeral. She is a co-founder of *The Present Tense*, a performance art initiative and a co-curator of MEME Gallery. She is currently exploring a collaboration with fellow MEME curator, Bradley Benedetti in their exhibition *Bombastik Phantastik* on view at Meme Feb. 19-Feb 22. For more information on her work visit www.SandrineSchaefer.com. She is an occasional to Big, Red & Shiny.