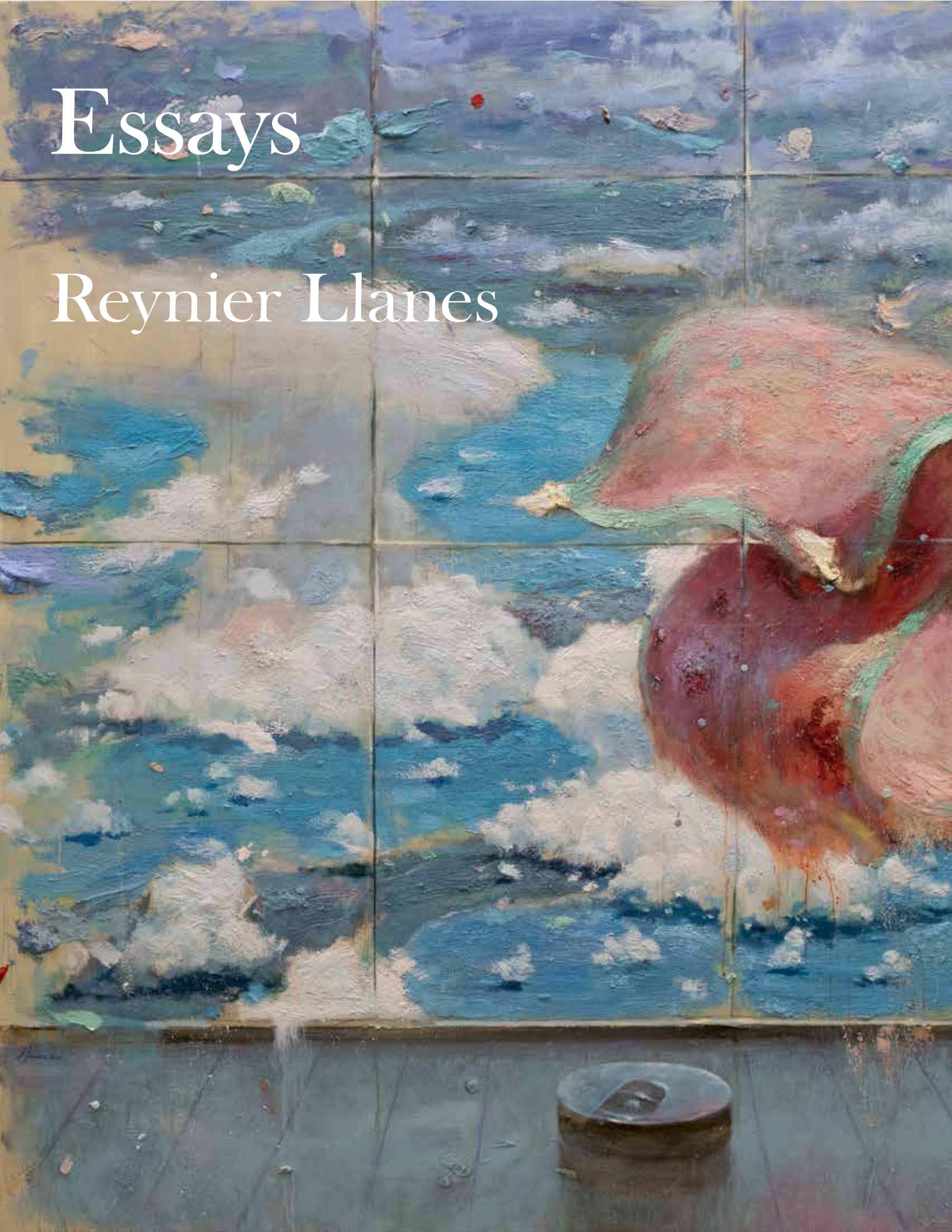


Essays

Reynier Llanes



Reynier Llanes Artist and Alchemist

If you ask Reynier Llanes what his profession is, he will probably answer, “artist”, and a visit to the exhibition, Reynier Llanes: Where There Is No Frontier, on view at the Museum of Art – DeLand, May 20 – August 28, 2022 certainly confirms that answer. However, when personally experiencing Reynier’s art, there is a distinct feeling that something more than the artist’s hand and eye is at work. The exhibition space vibrates with a palpable, almost frenetic energy. Animals take on human characteristics and qualities. Human bodies transform into shimmering, crystalline vessels. The past and present, natural and man-made, spiritual and mundane join together in a parallel universe creating new dimensions and realities. Colors, - soft and subtle or firework vibrant – drip, ooze and explode from the paintings’ surfaces. Images of hauntingly familiar characters whisper and shout from the gallery walls sparking memories with their stories. And then there is the light, a bright beacon or glowing ember, but always reassurance that the darkness will not prevail. Yes, Reynier Llanes is an artist by profession, but he is an alchemist by vocation.

Traditionally alchemy and art are kindred spirits. Alchemy can be defined as transformative practices and the mutation of base substances into precious ones through mysterious processes that depend on secret knowledge. The goal of the alchemist is to imitate and transcend nature – creating something new just as the goal of the artist is to transform ideas and materials to create new worlds and realities. Dr. David Brafman, associate curator of rare books and curator of The Art of Alchemy at the Getty Research Institute, explains, “the history of alchemy is essentially a history of seekers: that is, experimenters seeking after the secrets of nature and looking for ways to bend natural matter to the will of the human imagination, for the creation of art as well as the perfection of the body. It was alchemical seekers who discovered and invented concrete, oil paints, inks, and pharmaceutical medicines—and the urge to understand and imitate has never been so strong as it is today, in our new digital age of liquid crystals, plastics and other synthetics.”

Reynier Llanes is undeniably an alchemist and seeker who combines the ordinary elements of paint, coffee, paper and canvas transforming them into something extraordinary in a way that cannot be explained. Just as the alchemists who came before, Reynier is an inquisitive observer of the world, always seeking the “what ifs”, questioning life, humankind and his place in the continuum. Like other alchemists and artists, he communicates his ideas, insights and vision with a vocabulary of symbols, codes and metaphors. Sometimes decipherable other times obscure, but always engaging and intriguing. Reynier’s images encourage viewers to recall their own memories and find personal meanings and stories. In *The Guardian*, a solitary figure of an older man stands in front of an open bank-like vault. He has one hand on a table and the other placed upon a large crystal. The crystal encases an apple with a missing bite. An ethereal light washes over him making his silver-white hair and blue shirt shimmer like rising heat waves. Who is this man? Is this the apple of knowledge from the Garden of Eden? Is he the master alchemist transferring his knowledge under a shroud of secrecy, secured safely in the vault, because the knowledge is so powerful? Is he a metaphor for the master artist, teacher and mentor? A recurring image of Yolanda, a cow, shape-shifter, prophet, traveler, dreamer, protector, keeper of stories, mother figure, and more is the main character in *Revelation*. Yolanda emerges from a dark shadowy background, a brilliant light streaming down from above illuminates her face. Determined,



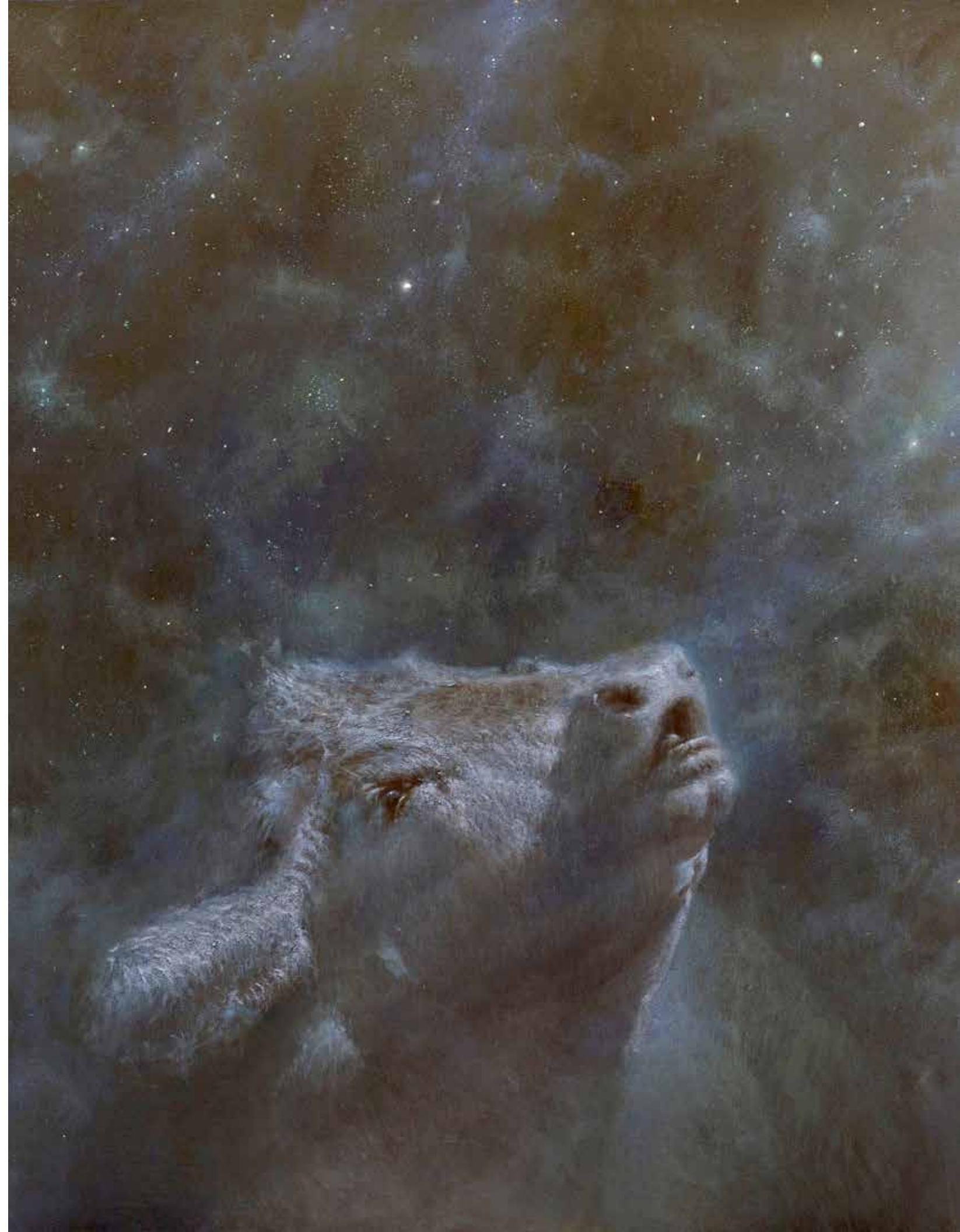
mission-driven, she wears a crown – perhaps a flower, on her head. A flash drive, another reappearing symbol, is placed in the crown's center. Yolanda confronts the viewer commanding attention. Her message seems timely and urgent, yet one ancient, repeated many times before all too often unheeded or forgotten. She is the keeper of our past, the repository of our history, and perhaps the flash drive serves as a symbol for the repository of future knowledge. Revelation is an alchemical vision, where past and present coexist simultaneously moving back and forth, in and out in a mysterious dance of before, after and what is yet to come.

Yolanda appears again in *Chant in Midnight Hill*. Her countenance transformed, she looks almost human. She lifts her face upward towards the star dotted dusky night sky, mouth slightly open in a soundless song. Yolanda's face is bathed in a soft radiant light creating a sense of awe and mystical reverence. She is the mother, protector, prophet. Is she chanting a song of praise or crying out in supplication? In this painting, Reynier Llanes poignantly conveys a world rich with visions and beliefs expressed through the alchemist's and artist's vivid and mysterious language of symbols and metaphors.

The concept of alchemy as a spiritual practice is rooted in the ancient philosophy that uses the transmutation of lead into gold as a metaphor for the process of self-actualization and spiritual rebirth always resulting in a positive outcome, an interpretation reflected in Carl Jung's definition of alchemy as a metaphor for soul work. This philosophy resonates throughout Reynier Llanes' work as evidenced in *You Are Here*. An indecipherable war-like setting, crumbling buildings loom in the background. Is the "here" Ukraine? A transparent mercurial figure holds a baby whose hand reaches toward the figure's face. There is a long slashing black fissure next to the figure and baby and thick blobs of debris like paint are splattered over the painting's surface. Despite an ominous feeling of destruction and despair, the figure and baby appear as a beacon of light. Is the figure a spirit – protector or a symbol that human kind can persevere? Is the baby an allegory for the continuation of humanity in the face of all the devastation? Is the "you" in the, *You Are Here* the viewer being reminded that there is always hope that goodness and positivity will prevail?

Cultivo una Rosa Blanca (I Nurture a White Rose) and *I Can Breathe* are two other works of art in the exhibition that emphasize Reynier's desire to transmute negative events into something positive. In *Cultivo una Rosa Blanca* a young boy is engulfed in a field of pink and white flowers. He stands facing the viewer, plain white shorts, arms and legs warm brown from the island sun. His indistinct features create the impression that he could be any young boy. A disquieting large reddish scar is placed over the center of his heart. Why is it there? What happened to the boy? Reynier's motivation for this work is his reflection on the crisis in his homeland and the Cuban people who are seeking freedom. He was also inspired by the poem "Cultivo Una Rosa Blanca" by José Martí where the poet offers friendship and peace to both his friend and his enemy, again reinforcing that positivity can prevail.

Reynier Llanes' painting, *I Can Breathe*, depicts George Floyd, dressed in gleaming angelic white, free, floating, moving forward. This interpretation is a far cry from the shocking media images of George Floyd, police officer's knee on his neck, pinned to the ground crying out "I can't breathe!"





Where is the figure headed? Is the look on his face anticipation, joy or triumph? Is he pointing the way towards a more just future? Once again, Reynier seeks to transmute despair into hopefulness and the evolution from ignorance to enlightenment, and spiritual rebirth.

One final image, *Reminiscent*, clearly speaks to Reynier's vision as alchemist. A solitary male figure, seen from the waist up, arms crossed, his mahogany face lifted upward is showered in a wash of pale blue rain. There is a feeling of calm and peacefulness on his face. Is he reminiscing about past experiences? Is he being baptized with the ritual water of purification? Is this a metaphor for the alchemical process of self-actualization and spiritual rebirth?

These are just a few examples of Reynier Llanes' alchemical, artistic vision. Every artwork in *Where There Is No Frontier* is a treasure chest filled with magic and mystery. Each character has a story that can evoke a memory or feeling. Every visitor can find some work that will resonate with them on a personal level. The true joy of this exhibition is that there is no border or boundary between the artworks and the visitor. All that is required is a curious and open mind and time to travel into Reynier Llanes' mystical, magical and uplifting world. As Paulo Coelho writes in *The Alchemist*, "This is why alchemy exists. So that everyone will search for his treasure, find it, and then want to be better than he was in his former life. That's what alchemists do. They show that, when we strive to be better than we are, everything around us becomes better, too."

Pam Coffman
Curator of Education
Museum of Art DeLand

