

An abstract painting featuring thick, expressive brushstrokes. The color palette is diverse, including shades of green, yellow, blue, pink, and white. The composition is dense and textured, with various colors overlapping and blending together. The overall effect is one of vibrant energy and complex visual rhythm.

Essays

Reynier Llanes

TIMELESS ORIGINS

Things worth saving

The closest thing we have to eternity on earth is a forest. In the 1990s, Canadian scientist Suzanne Simard proved what African religions had been telling us for centuries, that forests are a network of interconnected organisms who share information and collaborate to grow, heal wounds and survive.

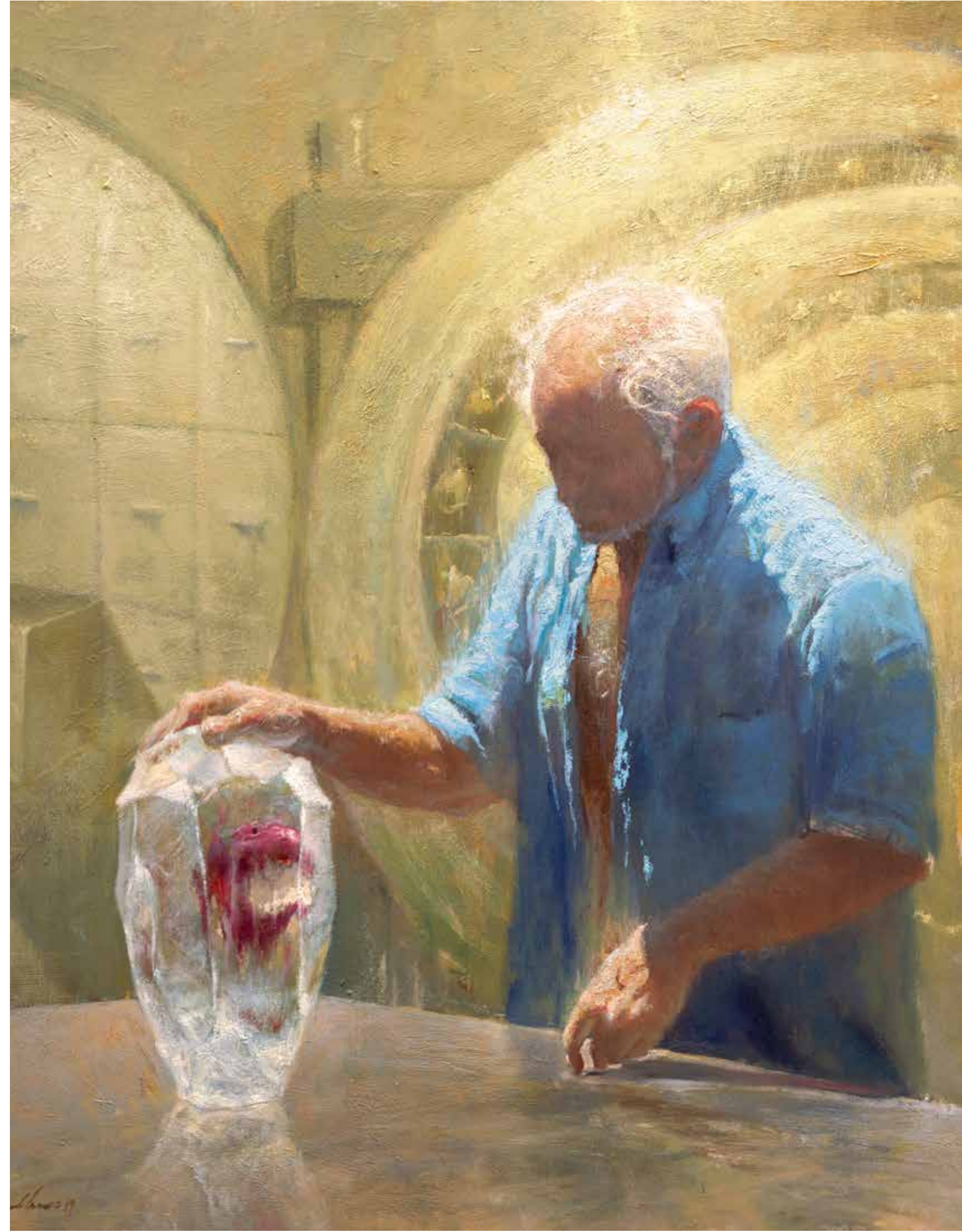
In Yoruba philosophy nature is venerated and life is inexhaustible. In *el monte* -the forest-, good and bad spirits coexist. Contrary to the Judeo-Christian tradition, African religions see the spiritual realm as palpable in everyday objects. Because everything comes from nature, then everything is full of spirits. Even the most sophisticated technological objects contain pieces of a forest that have been adapted to our commercial world.

Death in the Yoruba tradition does not mean destruction. After passing, we continue to exist and exert an influence in the world, we have a duty to perform, to protect our descendants, or to haunt our enemies. Amos Tutuola, a Nigerian Yoruba writer, said “My dead cousin taught me how to be dead during our evening lessons, he showed me how the death should behave, and after six months I was a perfect dead person”.

Reynier Llanes captured this eternal essence in his paintings of the *Patakis*. These are timeless tales which in Yoruba mythology have already taken place and will continue to take place over and over again. *Babalawos* are the priests, who hold the secrets of *Ifa*, teachings that contain the knowledge of the past, present and future. *Ifa* encompasses a system of divination that relies on statistics and chance. *Babalawos* use a chain-like object made of palm tree seeds called an *ekuele*, they throw it on a board and depending on the configuration in which they land, a different *Pataki* -mythological story- is invoked. This story is then interpreted by the Babalawo to help the person whom he is consulting. The over 200 stories conform the world of possibilities that a person may face.

By painting his interpretation of the *Pataki*s, Reynier says he was working to preserve part of his cultural heritage. But why is it important to preserve them in more than Wikipedia articles?

Samuel Butler, author of *Erewhom*, the first novel to deal with the inevitability of our subjection to machines and technology, wrote “there are few of us who are not protected from the keenest





pain by our inability to see what it is that we have done, what we are suffering, and what we truly are.” I believe Reynier’s paintings are meant to make us see what we must preserve. It is estimated that the average North American is exposed to 100 times more information than in the 1980s. How will our origins survive in this ocean of data? As we navigate the war for the conquest of our minds by new technologies, we must salvage the things that have been real and palpable and carry them with us wherever we go. In case we ever need to return, the act of remembering can be the route back to shore. As forests become virtual, nature becomes a memory or a place we visit once a year, and our minds are uploaded, people must imagine what once really was. We must save the difference between real and virtual mythologies.

There are already virtual priests, Babalawos who consult the internet to prophesize the future, and psychologists or human resource professionals who are nothing but computer algorithms. These humans who rely on computers for their spiritual endeavors, and the software that may replace them, seem eons away from their origins, the diviners, and mystical folks, who represented hope, order, and spiritual power in their communities.

Generative artificial intelligence are large language models, algorithms that rely on statistics and chance. The way they work is rather simple: a word is placed in front of another by a computer code based on the most likely scenario deduced from a vast source of websites, books, news, and blogs. An unlimited universe of virtual knowledge, interconnected like a forest. The new computer codes may one day be able to model everything, even our own lives. Mo Gawdat, formerly the Chief Business Officer for Google’s Moonshot organization, warned the world that through artificial intelligence “we’re creating God”. Is modern technology a system of divination bound to take over all others?

Those in charge of remembering

What we are gaining with these technological leaps is mostly up to the creators of the new technologies, the legislators, the activists, and the users to define. To discern what we are losing is the job of the artist. Reynier Llanes tries to create characters who embody questions like: what should we keep? Which connections should we salvage? These are not just indispensable topics that will define our shared destiny, they are also pointing towards the core of human existence. The figures in Llanes’ paintings are archeologists of memory who inhabit a space of both joy and anxiety for the future. They have a common purpose, to preserve the core.



The Keepers are characters destined to save ancient professions. Everything needs guarding. These lovers, friends, or siblings are guardians of creatures like bees, or of gestures like embracing or dancing. They remind us that pure joy is only found in the simplest activities.

If the Keepers are guardians of our traditions, the Poet is the character who navigates across time to connect them. She has the knowledge to journey across past, present, and future, she sees the map of our memory with clarity. She points us in the direction we are going and shows us how to look back. The Poet foreshadows a future where bodies are obsolete, and a past where nature and water still animate us. He makes the journey seem circular, with past and future connected eternally, with hopeless optimism. “We cannot avoid progress”, she tells me, “but we may be able it to turn it around”.

The Tourists are there to help us aspire to gaiety in a grim future. They remind us of the possibilities of maintaining a sense of normalcy in a digital landscape. These characters can be as dark as their portraits are colorful. They ski where the snow has melted, they swim where the water has been polluted. The Tourists are the ultimate expression of hope through seeking experiences that rely on physical activities that one day may no longer be

possible. They are human souls caught in a digital web. A virtual mythology starts with them in a world where religions have failed. They make death seem unreachable, and eternity an obsolete term from the physical days.

The Patakies, The Keepers, The Tourists, and The Poet, share a longing to guard our humanity. Will they shape the future, or will they become victims of the hubristic march of civilization?

Lemis Tarajano