

PRESS RELEASE

Freddie Mercado
'Freddie'
Vleeshal

July 16 – September 10, 2023

Curator: Roos Gortzak

Before you catch sight of Freddie Mercado, you hear him. The tinkling of jewelry gets louder and louder as the artist approaches. It's a sound familiar to those moving in the art scene of Puerto Rico's capital San Juan. But no matter how many times you've seen the artist in the flesh, the experience of his bodily presence –literally and figuratively grand– will always cause a sensation of bewilderment. Because where his fellow artists open exhibitions, Freddie Mercado carries himself around as one.

The artistic practice of Mercado (b. 1967, Puerto Rico) revolves around a maximalist performance of gender fluidity and translocal belonging. With a pastiche of drag elements –often playing with the hyperfeminine and the hypersexualized– and cultural markers –combining regional, national and Caribbean styles and customs– Mercado questions the foundations of identity formation. His costumes and wearable artifacts bear witness to an idiosyncratic sense of humor, incisive absurdism, and meticulous crafts(wo)manship. To describe his unique aesthetic with the term 'horror vacui' would be an understatement.

Freddie Mercado takes on the age-old practice of self-portraiture and reconfigures it into a spectacle. Instead of presenting his viewer one version of the self, or two in a binary opposition, the artist shows us that the self is always on the move, never fixed – just like his physical costumes and artifacts themselves, which are ever-evolving and never 'done'. In Mercado's work, the subject is fragmented, and even fractured: the word 'fractura' has appeared in the title of numerous works since 2017, including that of a performance developed by Mercado for Vleeshal's nomadic program in November that year. It was only two months after hurricane Maria devastated the island of Puerto Rico, destroying the artist's studio on its course, and shortly after Mercado's mobility was greatly impeded by a broken hip – events that cause for the word 'fractura' to invoke crevices not only in the self on a physical and metaphysical level, but also in the place that Mercado calls home. It is through this national context, an existence at the nexus between natural disasters, economic hardship, and the history of colonialism, that we can perhaps begin to understand the meaning of an art so deliberately abundant, celebratory, and festive. Where being yourself is not evident, putting on a spectacle becomes an act of resistance. But for Mercado, it's an act of necessity as well – the only way to heal what has been broken.

This solo exhibition at Vleeshal, aptly titled *Freddie*, presents a series of paintings together with the remnants of Freddie's unique performance during the opening. We invite you to come and get to know him, and perhaps even find –somewhere between alienation and recognition– another version of yourself, too.

Vleeshal
Center for Contemporary Art
Markt 1, Middelburg
www.vleeshal.nl
Wed - Fri 13:00 - 17:00
Sat - Sun 11:00 - 17:00

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