Los Angeles Times

When artist Greg Ito collaborates with 'Top Chef's' Richard Blais, you get ArtxFood
Written by: Sonaiya Kelley
May 30, 2018

Three courses into ArtCubed's event ArtxFood, diners are presented a plate of duck blackened in squid ink and listed cheekily on the menu as black swan.

The meal, masterminded by chef and restaurateur Richard Blais of "Top Chef" fame, is served in a gallery space filled with paintings, installations and sculptures by Los Angeles artist Greg Ito.

Titled "Hallowed Ground," Ito's series features hyper-flat fairy-tale symbols — a frog prince, a bevy of swans, round-bellied spiders — as well as optical-illusion candles and candlesticks, surreal neon objects and colorful lighting treatments.

The immersive art and culinary collaboration is part of a month-long event hosted by ArtCubed, an L.A.-based experience production company. Through June 3, Ito's works will serve as the backdrop of Blais' 56-seat supper club for two seatings a night, Tuesday through Sunday.

"'Hallowed ground' is a term used to define sacred space," Ito says. And what better sacred space than the dinner table?

Where the concept of communal dining anchors the theme of the experience, Ito's inspiration for the paintings and sculptures skews toward darker themes like lost love, fear and tragedy. More specifically, the recent loss of his fiancée's mother.

"We're dealing with the grief of that, but we also just got engaged," he says. "So it's these two polarized emotions happening at the same time."

That polarity informs the theme of limited time, which Ito emphasizes in his work, using recurring candles and hourglasses. Silhouettes of faces in the candlesticks allude to the uncertainty of relationships, inspired by his own impending marriage.

“When you’re in a relationship, you always have that thought in the back of your head: ‘How long will this last? Is this the one?’” he says. “I wanted to play with that, because I always felt like the most interesting stories are not always happy or sad — it’s the moments in between.”

In one painting, two hands gently embrace, while below, ravens crowd together on a branch, their orange eyes stark against the dark night sky. “Those can be thoughts of maybe, ‘This might not work out,’” Ito says. “It’s nice to see tension within the work.”

“Using the combination of painting, sculpture and installation,” he adds, “I’m able to tailor an experience where people can come and experience something that is truly different.”

The fairy tale-inspired images pair with Blais’ dishes, which have names like Unicorn Soup, Bird in Hand and Best Picnic Ever!!! served with a side of irony, according to the menu. The square gallery space, housed in Hollywood’s Goya Studios, is divided into three areas.

The pink room, Ito says, is inspired by L.A. sunsets “where the sky is on fire.” As day transitions into evening, the sky transforms into a cool blue, which inspired the second room. “And then the moment in between is the dinner,” Ito says. “So if you see the lighting, you have the pink and the blue, which is like the moment in between. And that’s where everyone is breaking bread and hanging out.”

Ito was inspired to become an artist by his uncle, sculpture artist Peter Shire.

“Seeing his lifestyle and his studio growing up,” Ito says, “I was like ‘This is the kind of life I want to live.’”

His interest was also piqued by a high school summer program at the California Institute of the Arts.

“I was around all these artists, and we’re away from our parents for the first time,” he recalls. “I was like, ‘This is awesome, I want to be an artist.’”

Ito spent six months on this series, beginning with the paintings, which were informed by a “lexicon of imagery and colors.” And also the food. “It’s my first time collaborating with a chef,” he says, “and it’s also my first time involving a participatory performative aspect to the artwork.”

Going forward, the artist — whose work up to now has mostly consisted of gallery shows — hopes to create more immersive, experience-based works.

“I can see myself continuing my studio practice, but I’m also interested in seeing how I can extend my practice into a larger realm of more commercial projects,” he says. “I would love to see how the artwork could grow when I’m doing environmental or experience design for companies and events.

“If this room were white with paintings on the wall like a normal gallery setting, it’s a little sterile, it’s not exciting, it’s not different. It also doesn’t make you want to stay very long.”

That’s not a problem at the ArtxFood dinners — everyone always stays for dessert.