



MANUEL MERIDA

MEYER
espace ZAFRA
PARIS NEW YORK

PARIS
4 RUE MALHER
75004 PARIS
+33 1 42 77 05 34

MIAMI
BY APPOINTMENT
1130 HALLANDALE BEACH BLVD, SUITE 1130 C
HALLANDALE BEACH, FLORIDA 33009
+1 (646) 884 0139

CONTACT@ESPACE-ZAFRA.COM
WWW.ESPACE-ZAFRA.COM

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ARTIST

BY ERIK MARTINY, PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROBERT LAKOW



Not far from the beautiful basilica where Saint Denis is said to have carried his severed head north from Paris, the Franco-Venezuelan artist Manuel Merida works in his labyrinthine studio confecting dizzying optical effects that are enough to make you lose your head as well.

A warm, powerfully built man with Samsonian hair greets me to view his equally grand-scale sculptures. He is busy working on a large-format installation for the Art Paris Art Fair. Although it is only half erected, you can tell it's going to be one of the highlights of the show. Towering above us is a rectangular facade lined with red and white stripes. Fixed to this slab of shored-up wallpaper are two motorized circles whose lines are intended to spin in perfect alignment, a fact that seems to hold great importance for the artist. He tells me that his work is all about "creating order out of chaos, while retaining a little chaos, too." The modules of ordered chaos are all around us in stacks, in boxes, on the walls, on shelves and workbenches—endless reams of painted or wallpapered red and white stripes. Merida has even designed a striped table and chair for the prestigious art fair. He shows me a red-and-white zebra bag and a winter hat with a pom-pom, which he dons with a companionable chuckle.

Merida has titled this gyrating installa-

tion *Usuyuki/Chantier II*. It's obvious enough why he sees it as a *chantier*, as the French word means "construction site," so I inquire about the significance of the more mysterious Japanese-looking word. Merida is a bit evasive, telling me he just liked the sound of it. When I ask if these colors hold any personal meaning for him, he replies that this is a very French question. "The French always analyze everything," he adds, laughing in his good-natured manner at this national quirk. And yet although Merida eschews theoretical notions, somehow "anti-intellectualism" doesn't seem to fit his work. His artwork radiates a kind of instinctive conceptualism that makes short shrift of verbal language. It strikes one as a cross between kinetic Op art and European Informalism: To the preconceived structure with its rotating wheels, he adds the spontaneously assembled Informalist elements selected instinctively from the classified debris that surrounds us.

Merida's experiments take him in two main directions. The second, related vein he mines channels his creative powers into the realm of colored powders. In 2012 the designer Hermès used some of these works in shop windows to great effect. Large rotating glass cases enclose pigments, powdered charcoal, debris, or artificially colored sand that is slowly and

endlessly churning. The effect is mesmerizing, a bit like watching a human-sized, intimate version of a colored glacier flaking apart into a powdery sea, reconstituting itself only to crumble asunder into new primordial shapes. This is the art of assisted gravity, and it provides the gravitas of contemplating the creation and the undoing of the universe. There is something otherworldly about the tinted sand Merida uses nowadays—it looks like topsoil culled from various far-flung planets way outside the solar system.

This page, left: Manuel Merida's studio in Paris.

Right:
Manuel Merida
Yellow circle and twist
2014
79 inches in diameter
Painted wood, glass, pigment, motor, and metal
Courtesy of the artist and Espace Jahn

Opposite page: The artist in his studio

