

Hybrid Sculptures Reflect Immigrant Experience

by Portia Priegert

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Pilar Mehlis, "Antrofish," 2016, Hydrostone plaster, encaustic medium, canvas, paper patterns, acrylic gels, feathers, fishing line, oil paint and wire mesh, 19" x 6" x 8" (each) photo by Byron Dauncey.

When Pilar Mehlis was a girl in Bolivia, she went to festivals where traditional dancers wore fanciful costumes.

"You have these huge groups of people in coordinated dances with musicians and it's very festive," says Mehlis. "When you're little, like I was when these things first made an impression on me, you see a lot of human legs and then the rest of the body is something else that is very magical or colourful, very exotic."

Mehlis thinks that experience informed her latest work *Antrofish*, on view at the Herring Kiss Gallery in Calgary until May 6. For each sculpture, Mehlis sewed a fish costume out of canvas,

Antrofish, which takes the first half of its name from the Spanish word antropomórfico or anthropomorphic, also reflects on her experience of living between two cultures.

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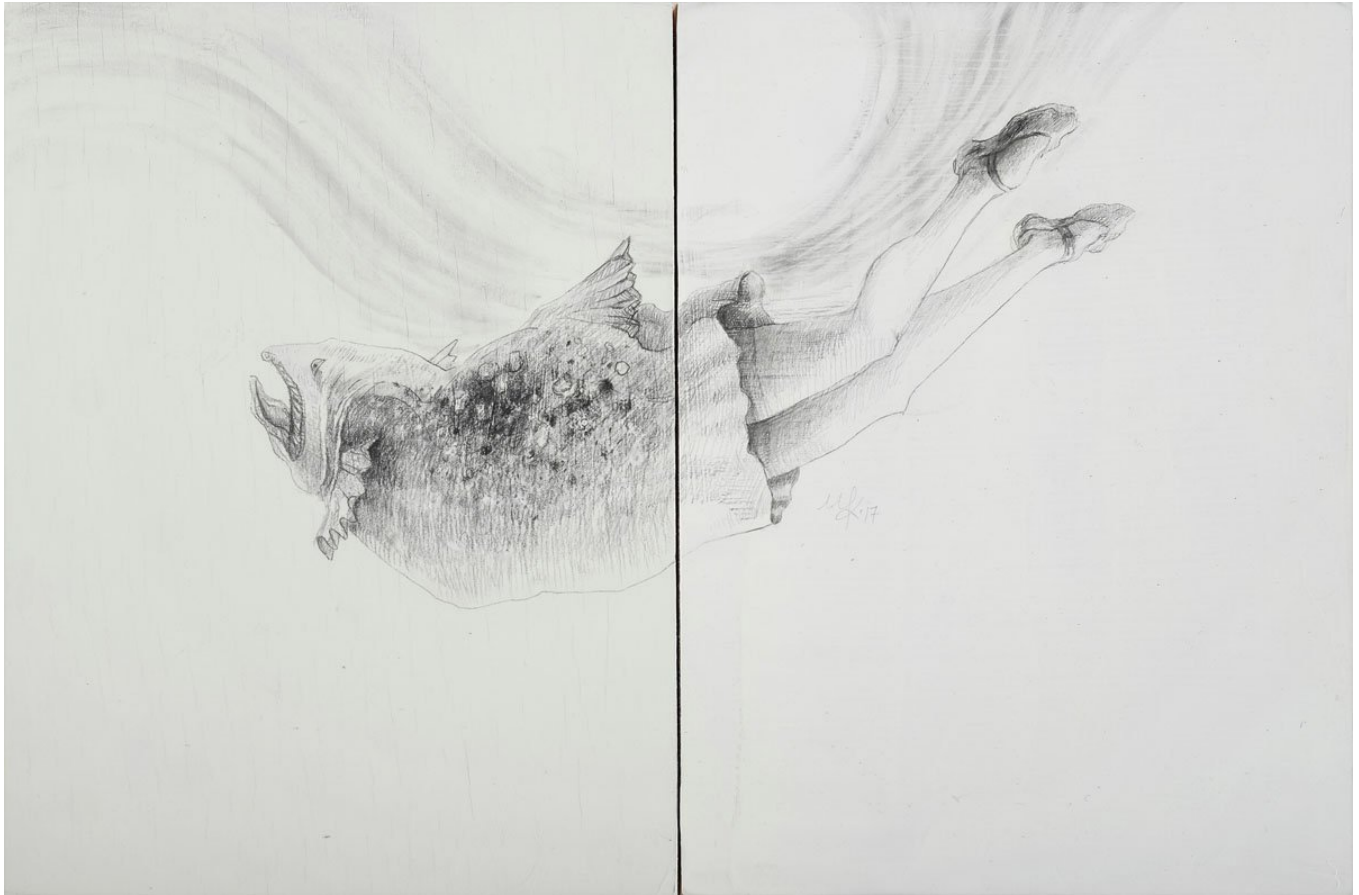
Pilar Mehlis, "Ichthyology Cha Cha," 2016, oil and collage on paper, 22" x 30" photo by Byron Dauncey

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Pilar Mehlis, "Saints Among Us," 2017, Hydrostone plaster, canvas, paper, foam and oil paint, 18" x 4.5" x7" photo by Byron Dauncey

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Pilar Mehlis, "Dancer Dyptich," 2017, graphite on panel, 6" x 8" each panel, photo by Byron Dauncey

Mehlis moved to Yukon with her family in 1983 when she was 12, and returned to Bolivia for her final year of high school and then university. She eventually returned to Canada, and studied visual arts at the University of Victoria, before moving to Vancouver, where she now makes her home.

She continues to make annual trips to La Paz to see her parents, which started her musing about migration paths, both human and animal. The fish in her work are based on Chinook salmon, an emblem of the Pacific Northwest known for their epic migrations.

Mehlis has worked on *Antrofish* for more than two years. She began with drawings – some of which she was hoping to include in the show – but eventually decided to experiment with sculpture. That's where the work found its real magic. The contrast is striking between the

classical representation of human legs trudging forward, all slick, stony and white, and the detail, warmth and individuality of each fish.

The work seems to echo myths, yet is remarkably fresh, and it's easy for the mind to drift toward magical realism. Mehlis agrees. "The idea of the supernatural happening in real life is almost like a second language in terms of literature in South America and all of Latin America," she says. "Legends and fables, they just abound, and people use them in natural, normal language."

But Mehlis emphasizes that, more than anything, *Antrofish* is a vessel for her ideas about her life as an immigrant. "I work mainly in metaphor," she says. "Nothing in my work is really all that literal. It just speaks of ideas."

Herringer Kiss Gallery

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Portia Priegert is the editor of Galleries West. A former news reporter at the Ottawa bureau of The Canadian Press, she has an MFA from UBC Okanagan and has taught at the University of Victoria.

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