

Rafael Santiago

Like Paradise.

Leslie Lohman Museum Project Space



I present my first iteration of a new series, ***Like Paradise*** combined with my series ***Demigods*** -- a body of mixed media collages I began in 2017 that continues in a new way my exploration of themes of queer identity and autobiography. With this series, I concentrate on and incorporate religious symbolism, drawing from the strong experience of developing a homosexual preference and gender ambiguities in a religious climate during my childhood and adolescent years. The title suggests a sort of utopian landscape, a paradisiacal garden much like the peaceful paradise on earth promised to devoted members of Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) in the aftermath of Armageddon. In the JW religion, there is a separate Scripture, and practitioners bear witness to that as an accepted and inarguable truth.

This God implicitly excludes homosexual persons from the promises, consigning them/us to an eternity of non-existence. We are excluded for being attracted to one another, and especially for having sex with one another, 'wasting' our seeds. Within my vision of my own imagined paradise (through use of appropriated imagery from vintage 80's porn of my childhood to 17th century Dutch still life paintings), I reject that formulation and provide a new, ideal place where the male body is depicted flourishing 'against nature', and where genderless gods protect everyone's queer existence. I create a vision of the world perfected much as it appears in Christian, Jewish, Shaker, JW, and many other religious cosmogonies. This series looks at a state of perfected delight through largely botanical models, sexually charged, yet at the same time neutral and beautiful.