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Entertainment / Visual Arts

Rafael Ochoa, an artist in love with the past, embracing the future

His artworks evoke the paintings of the 18th century, but they were all rendered by computer.



Autumn Quinces: part of Rafael Ochoa's Overwrought series opening at Angell Gallery.

By: Chris Hampton Special to the Star, Published on Sun Aug 24 2014

Glancing quickly at [Rafael Ochoa's paintings](#), you could reasonably mistake them for a lesser-known contemporary of Vermeer or some other Dutch master from the 1700s. But look even a little closer, and there's something unmistakably contemporary happening — they're composed 100 per cent digitally.

While depictions of [rosy florists decorating a basket of quinces](#), a [plate of assorted squashes](#) or a [woman embracing the fruits of harvest](#) might seem like the staid fare more typical of the Dutch Golden Age or of 19th-century French academies, the 31-year-old artist's hyper-realistic images are awash in a language distinct to the Computer Age — the geometry of his shapes a little too exact, a sense of lighting that falls and reflects with a mathematical precision, the glassy appearance of his figures' skin.

He's chasing an aesthetic — "a certain feeling," Ochoa calls it — of reality rendered ideally; a look you can trace from Baroque painting through to the fashion photography of our present-day glossies, he says.

With one hand flipping through the middle pages of art history and the other clicking around the same software that helped breathe life into recent blockbuster films and videogames, like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *Watch Dogs*, the Toronto-based artist is treading ground that's mostly unexplored in the realm of fine art. Though digital graphics jump at us from billboards, comic books, and basically everything with a screen, so few hang in our galleries, which is why it seems especially significant that, opening this weekend at [Angell Gallery](#), the digital painter will be treated to his first solo exhibition, *Overwrought*.

Ochoa's aesthetic sensibility was piqued early on, when as a preschooler he'd sit transfixed by album covers from his parents' record collection — The Bee Gees, Leo Sayer's *Endless Flight*, Michael Jackson's *Thriller*.

"I would stare at these heavily airbrushed vinyl sleeves from the '70s and '80s and get lost in them," Ochoa says. "I didn't know that it was an aestheticized image, that they'd airbrushed them to make them more beautiful . . . I thought they were from another reality." His interest in this particular look wasn't just an obsession that lay dormant waiting for the right art tools; he collected it voraciously. He remembers buying a copy of the fashion magazine *Surface* from a book sale at his elementary school just because he liked the airbrushing.

Studying photography at OCAD, Ochoa looked closely at commercial and fashion photographers such as [Juergen Teller](#), to emulate that "certain feeling" he'd become absorbed by so long ago. When photographing models became too unwieldy, because he couldn't control the variables of a live shoot as tightly as his practice demanded, he decided to forgo the flesh and bone subjects and proceed digitally, teaching himself 3D modeling programs.

Ochoa begins an image by stitching together references from across the Internet — maybe the face of a dancer from a still shot, an arm borrowed from a family photograph, or a flower ripped from a Baroque oil painting. He blurs and sketches over the mock-up so that an entirely new image emerges. Then, he sculpts and paints a 3D model in a program called ZBrush, before photographing the virtual object in a rendering engine like Cinema 4D. After this, he exports the image to Photoshop for detailing and touchups.

"I'm using these programs in a really basic, simple way," Ochoa says, "nothing like the video game artists," but that modesty belies the virtuosity implicit in a step like "and then I just sculpt and paint the 3D model." The five works appearing at Angell Gallery took a combined 500 working hours to complete.

And it's his embrace of craftsmanship and technique that set him aside in today's art scene. The name of the show, *Overwrought*, is a backstroke against the current of contemporary art, Ochoa says, which he finds overly fond of conceptual tricks and largely inconsiderate of the formal qualities that make art evocative at all.

"There are these quick, easy ways into genius," he says, "shortcuts to qualify something as contemporary art." "Put a unicorn on it," or "just paint a ladder pink," he adds.

Ochoa knows his images are grandiloquent, exceedingly romantic, and obsessed with traditional depictions of beauty — a paradox given his bleeding edge digital practice. He's embracing that. That's the point of pieces like *Romantique*, a dew-dripping floral composition, and especially, *Woman with Radicchio*, a young woman marveling at the sensuous treasures of harvest, seemingly, in awe of the perfect.

"That's supposed to be me," he says.