

# Clare E. Rojas

By Susan Snodgrass [🔗](#) October 22, 2009 2:34pm



San Francisco-based artist, filmmaker and musician Clare E. Rojas spins allegorical tales in intimate paintings, large-scale murals and installations. Deriving motifs from quilts, Russian nesting dolls and Native American art, these works combine geometric patterns, personal iconography and folkloric tableaux. They often depict powerful women in tune with the forces of nature, set alongside a small cast of lowly male figures out of sync with earthly rhythms.

In Rojas's recent Chicago show, this vision unfolded in almost 40 works, including discrete paintings as well as others placed within installations—complete with painted backdrops and decorative molding—suggestive of domestic interiors and private worlds. In the gouache-on-paper *Untitled (Girl with Phoenix)*, 2009, a woman stands in profile with a phoenix in her hand, while both the sun and moon rise above her. A flowerlike orb replaces her head, and various star and leaf shapes grace the work's stark, shallow space.

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Themes of transcendence, conveyed by similar narrative and visual techniques, play out in other works where women wield swords or become goddesses and angels—notably in a suite of 26 small paintings (also gouache on paper) suspended from a horizontal row of wooden pegs. Here human figures, rabbits and birds, blossoms and leaves work in tandem with geometric patterns, all rendered in crisp lines and flat areas of intense color, for an effect that is richly graphic, recalling Japanese woodblock prints and the contemporary miniatures of Shazia Sikander.

Larger works (gouache and acrylic on panel or board) reinforce the archetypal, communal nature of Rojas's women and the role of men as stoic outsiders. In *Untitled (Ladies Bleeding to the Sky)*, 2009, three women with their hands joined and their heads thrown back offer up to heaven the blood that spouts from their gaping mouths. In *Untitled (Man Sitting)* and *Untitled (Man Fighting/Man Sitting)*, both 2008, men either sit alone in empty interiors or occupy shared space in total detachment. These mural-size works are also influenced by Bay Area street art, particularly that of Barry McGee, with whom Rojas is often compared and has shown.

Gendered narratives give way to more sculptural explorations in an untitled installation employing decorative elements found in the 2-D works. Bold geometric and floral emblems, made from colored strips of wood attached to the wall, form the backdrop to a bookcase housing painted portraits and a cascade of books seeming to explode from one shelf. The whole scene, rife with the homespun esthetic that infuses all of Rojas's work, highlights her subtle wit and keen flair for the fantastic.

Photo: Luis Gispert: *Rene*, 2008, three-channel digital video, 16-minute loop; at MOCA, North Miami.