

ALFONSO VOLO



THRIFTING FOR BEAUTY





## Suspicious on Volo

Were I to write a conventional essay, it might elicit the false notion that I know what I'm talking about. Would it were so.

It's only been about eight years that I've been looking at the work of Alfonso Volo. So much mania, so little time. It's peculiar to know an artist's work for so long and feel inadequate to the purpose of explaining it. And I'm supposed to be able to do so, to provide you, kind viewer, with some points of entry. But the points of entry are so many and each one promises a rabbit hole to unknown destinations. I know very few artistic practices like Al Volo's, in both the relentless production of work and the wildly diverse, yet utterly connected, array of things that comprise a universe of dreams and desires and fears—his and ours.

On top of the paintings, drawings, watercolors, and sculptures, the fact that he has been making rudimentary computer animations since the early 1990s and no one has ever exhibited them, leaves the curator in me gaping in astonishment. When I shared this tidbit with another Buffalo curator who has known Al's work longer than myself, he had the only appropriate response: "Nothing surprises me with Al Volo."

What follows is not what I know. It's merely some of what I suspect.

### Thriftology

This was one of the alternate titles for the exhibition. All the alternate titles riffed on thrifting, a low-fi, bedraggled journey in which one traverses great distances, endures great hardship, combats like-minded adversaries, and roots through mountains of rubbish to glean a single worthy gem which, in the end, was worth it after all. Worth it after all.

### Titleology

It's not that the titles require explanation, but they need to be heard. They are important. They exist like tone poems wafting between and among the various works. You should consider them and let them seep

slowly and surely into your head and heart:

*Mercurial Hare • Peeking Over The Horizon • What You Desire, You Shall Have • After Experimentation, Leisure • Me And My Shadow • "How'd It Happen Ghosty Head?" • Who Am I? • Ugly Duckling • Oh, Lucky Day! • My Little Vestigial Light • Crown Of Creation • Plaques In Absentia • My Voice Or Yours? • Attenuated Access • Why Am I The Saddest Sack? • I, Duck Man • Hare Horizon • Extended Quack • Good For Something*

### **This I What I Never Told You, Yes We Are Animals Too**

Alfonso Volo has a deep regard for animals. Not a cooing, mindless adoration, but a blunt acknowledgement that man is part of the same kingdom as all other animals. In his work, there are numerous gestures that remark upon man's experimental hand on animals. Found animal tzchackes are often subtly marked with surgery scars or tiny points of blood where electrodes were attached. Scarring the frivolous demeanor of small china sculptures with such delicacy, with no whiff of preaching, intensifies the empathy.

### **Once Upon A Time**

But animals are more than literal to Volo, they are deeply symbolic and metaphorical. They are the device through which to recognize our own frailties and failings. Consider the fable. In a fable, animals are often the main protagonists, given human qualities in order to emphasize behavior and psychology and, in the end, to punctuate a tidy moral lesson. Volo's works often seem fable-esque not only in their prominent use of animal figures, but in their concoction as vignettes, illustrations from a deranged children's book. Episodic commentaries on vanity, beauty, anxiety, or unfiltered joy.

### **It's Not You, It's Not Me, It's Us**

There is a peculiar thread of self-portraiture running through Volo's work. It is an extension of his affinity with animals, but it's also a self-deprecating commentary on the artist himself—both as artist and as the same fumbling, fallible human as the rest of us. Whether he has





painted himself as a version of The Duck Man, animated his own “self portrait as virus,” or transformed self-portraiture into his “plaques in absentia,” Volo recognizes the multiple layers implicit in these roles. He frames self-identity within the context of desire, pathos, and unrestrained ebullience. He continually deflates vanities while recognizing his, and our, own.

**“Aware that nothing in his environment has changed, he directs his attention increasingly not to the figure (duck or rabbit) but to the lines of the paper he is looking at. Ultimately he may even learn to see those lines without seeing either of the figures, and he may then say (what he could not legitimately have said earlier) that it is these lines that he really sees but that he sees them alternately as a duck and as a rabbit.”**

Thus spake Thomas Kuhn, quoted in Wikimedia Commons from his seminal book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It’s a salient point because the famous optical illusion of duck/rabbit is used with impunity by Al Volo. It’s a perpetual formal device that crops up repeatedly in many works (as do the ovoid cartoon eye shapes), whether it’s apparent to the viewer or not. Its obviousness is less to the point than its usage. A recurring motif, it serves to reiterate Volo’s conceptual ties to animals, to the malleability of identity, and to the general notion of seeing—is it the duck, the rabbit, both, or neither that the eye is drawn toward? Are we looking too closely at the obvious forms in Volo’s work and missing the fine print, blowing by the subtlety?

There are numerous ways to parse the duck/rabbit paradigm. Beyond the perceptual ambiguity, there may be a cheeky query about whether one is sly or just quacking. And more than that, the persistent use of this dual icon reiterates an in-between state and an identity in perpetual flux.

### **Nick Nack Paddy Whack**

Volo’s use of thrift shop knick knacks creates some obvious effects—





humor, drama, psychological impact. It also manufactures some imaginative deception, perhaps suggesting that Volo is some kind of folk artist, but this belies the reality of the works. No folk artist would apply such minimalist touches to found objects or have the nerve to occasionally alter nothing about a found form. The effectiveness of the gesture lies in knowing what works—a young boy and girl, bedecked as mouse and duck respectively, facing off again a large rabbit is deeply unnerving for reasons so deep-seated it feel almost subconscious. It's a piece that aptly illustrates that, quaint appearance aside, there is nothing quaint going on.

### **Life Is A Cabaret, Old Chum**

More than a year ago, Volo showed me an absurd looking china clown in a foppish outfit and asked me what I thought. I asked what piece was it from and could I buy it. He replied, well, it's not finished yet, I need to find the other half. Eventually he did—a suited mouse with a SUCCESS suitcase—and named it What's The Measure Of Your Success? No artistic gesture but the placing of two appropriate objects together and you have a work that speaks to the vanity and foolishness of the desire for success, the potentially absurd lengths (or costumes) needed to achieve it, and an acute self-awareness of the preening pathos of it all.

### **Lastly, Remember This**

When you are thrifting—that is, scouring the world for hidden treasure, rare booty, beauty, or love—you never find if you never look.

*John Massier*  
*Visual Arts Curator*



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ILLUSTRATIONS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE: "What's The Measure of Your Success?", Help Me Out Of This, Flounder Hare (det.), Hare Brained (still), Ghosty Hare, With Top Hat And Brain, The Duck Man.

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