

Review: Jose-Maria Cundin's *The Supreme Leader and Other Ponderables*

The artist takes on demagoguery at Callan Contemporary

By D. Eric Bookhardt



The Supreme Leader and Other Ponderables

• Through Oct. 30

• *The Supreme Leader and Other Ponderables*: New paintings by Jose-Maria Cundin

• Callan Contemporary, 518 Julia St., (504) 525-0518; www.callancontemporary.com

What's with all those weirdly wavy Spanish paintings? Rounded forms can be alluring, but only Spanish artists have made them as immortal as Picasso's curvy, convoluted concoctions or Joan Miro's mysterious blobby squiggles — and only Fernando Botero could get away with a tubby, chubby Christ in crucifixion scenes. Jose-Maria Cundin, born in Spain in 1938, was an accomplished artist when he landed in New Orleans in 1964. Here his surreal satirical paintings of impish Latin characters quickly found a following. Despite occasional sojourns in Spain, Paris and Miami, he remains a local presence at his sprawling studio compound across Lake Pontchartrain in Folsom. Along the way, his impish characters morphed into vividly colorful clusters of blobs and fragments that radiate oddly human sensibilities.

In this new show, those nubby forms have begun reverting back into human figures, at least partially. Maybe it was a nihilist impulse that made him turn blobby in the first place, but the recent rise of nihilistic, infantile narcissism in American politics has made even artists look relatively responsible by default, and here Cundin tackles political tackiness in *The Supreme Leader* (pictured), in which a larger than life demagogue in gold finery strikes a grandiose pose. His regal abode includes a fat cat grasping a Barbie doll and a mousetrap baited with cash, but his head is a pulsating miasma of incoherent globs. Maybe America's recent banana republic tendencies inspired Cundin's reprise of old Latin stereotypes, including deranged dictators and wayward priests. Non-Denomination Preacher Showing the Way depicts a sanctimonious blob figure confronting a cowed congregant, but Exercises on Levitation (Extreme Yoga) takes a lighter approach to social commentary. The Dark Room of the Bourbons depicts ghastly green fragments swarming like demons from the dank dungeons of history — but the most poignant example is *The Unqualified Candidate*, a view of an empty chair accompanied by a lumpy humanoid zombie, a manic morass of incoherent impulses grasping at an aura of authority that eternally eludes him.