

**Related Events:**

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**Opening Reception**

Sunday, October 26, 3-5pm

Hyde Park**ARTCENTER**  
CLEVE CARNEY GALLERY

October 26, 2008 – January 11, 2009

OMAR VERA:  
**Cold Eels and  
Distant Thoughts**



Omar Vera, *Untitled*, 2008, Still image from animated video, 2 minutes

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Hyde Park **ARTCENTER**

5020 South Cornell Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60615 773.324.5520 [www.hydeparkart.org](http://www.hydeparkart.org)

The Hyde Park Art Center is a not-for-profit organization that presents innovative exhibitions, primarily work by Chicago-area artists, and educational programs in the visual arts for children and adults of diverse backgrounds. The Center is funded in part by the Alphawood Foundation; The Chicago Community Trust; a City Arts III grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and the Illinois Arts Council; The Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; The Leo S. Guthman Fund; The Irving Harris Foundation; The Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; The Joyce Foundation; JPMorgan Chase Foundation; The Mayer & Morris Kaplan Family Foundation; The MacArthur Foundation; The MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; The Orbit Fund; Polk Bros. Foundation; The Clinton Family Fund; The Sara Lee Foundation; South East Chicago Commission; The Wallace Foundation; and the generosity of its members and friends.

*The culture we share is undeniably the product of converging and often contradictory histories. As a second generation Pakistani-American, I find my personal history to be somewhat fluid and non-linear, as throughout my life I have identified with a variety of diverse subcultures, ethnicities and religions. Themes of race and origin often figure prominently in my artwork as I question the legacies and iconographies that inform both my personal identity, and a larger cultural identity. Particularly of interest to me are moments of conflict, often quiet, but always illustrative of the tension between the powerful and the powerless, and between the past and the present.*

-- Omar Vera

In *Cold Eels and Distant Thoughts* Vera conflates historical philosophies, American Arts and Crafts, and the decorative arts with popular culture in both contemporary and ancient mediums. Along with the artist's well-crafted ceramic sculptures, the exhibition introduces new medium into Vera's vocabulary: animation and laser cut acrylic sculpture. All of the works included in the exhibition aim to shift our notion of ethnic and geographic boundaries over time.

The title of the exhibition references an early 1900's interview with Jack Johnson, the first African-American heavyweight boxing champion. The interviewer questioned Johnson as to why white women were attracted to black men. Jack Johnson replied, "Because we eat cold eels and think distant thoughts," which was his both ironic and poetic way of pointing out the ignorance and absurdity of the question. Vera hopes to encapsulate the sentiment of Johnson's famous remark in this new body of work.

The works on view invite interpretation between the multiple subjects being addressed. The life-size portrait bust of Jack Johnson includes a pedestal base made in the decorative style of Louis Sullivan emphasizing



Omar Vera, *Regulators Urn*, 2008, high-fired stoneware and paint, 56x 19 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches

ing the contemporary symbiotic culture of Johnson and Sullivan's generation. Decorative patterning is also reflected in *Ballad of Louis Sockalexis*, located close to the bust of Johnson. *Ballad* is a wall stencil with a piece of trim below embodying both tradition and progress through the figure of Sockalexis, a Native American Major League Baseball player in the late 19th century whose death inspired the 'Cleveland Blues' to change their name to the 'Cleveland Indians.'

Again mixing past and present, *Regulators Urn* references the commemorative form - the urn - popular in Ancient Greece and Rome. Conflating time into one object, Vera uses the walls of the vessel to depict a two scene bas relief narrative of Nate Dogg and Warren G's 1994 hit 'Regulators.' Each side of the base depicts an allegorical representation of one the themes of the song; love, death, money, and music.

Vera's video *Untitled* explores the difficulties of defining nations and borders over the past five centuries while addressing the limitations of modern map-making. The questions posed come from a chapter in Jared Diamond's 1997 book, *Guns, Germs and Steel*, which is the primary inspiration for this project. The animated map of Africa marks the transitioning of Africa from tribal states to colonies to independent nations and back. The third sculpture, titled *Fried Chicken* is a small laser-cut acrylic rendering of the shape of the Palestinian state that addresses the questions raised by *Untitled*.

#### About the Artist:

Primarily known for artwork that focuses on the rise and fall of contemporary popular icons like Shaquille O'Neal and Mike Tyson, **Omar Vera** is fascinated by ways in which masculinity has been portrayed through out time, looking as far back as Ancient Greece. Through citing prominent historical sources such as the Italian Baroque Sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, architect Louis Sullivan, ancient Greek historian Herodotus, and contemporary scholars like Jared Diamond, alongside popular culture references, his work appeals to a range of audiences. He has exhibited at the Lawndale Art Center, Houston, TX, the Lillstreet Art Center, and at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, in the Gallery 2 and the AIC Base Space, Chicago among other venues. Vera received a B.F.A. from the University of Washington, Seattle, and an M.F.A. from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Vera taught the Ceramics Sculpture class at the Art Center from 2006-2007. He currently lives in Richmond, Virginia.