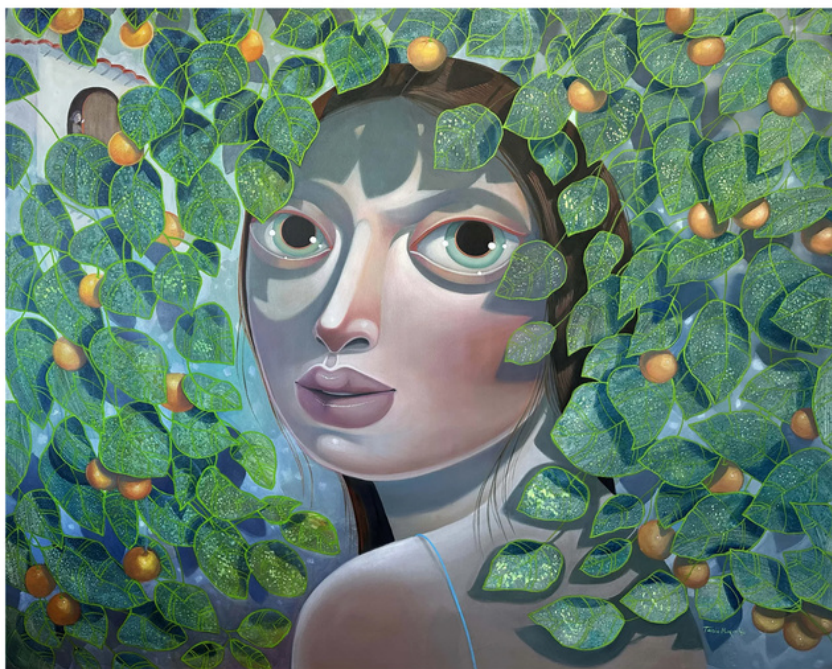


Tania Marmolejo's Wide-Eyed Portraits Are Capturing Collectors' Attention

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Tania Marmolejo, *Encuentro Entre Los Naranjos (Encounter in the Organge Grove)*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Villazan.

The New York-based artist [Tania Marmolejo](#) has recently drummed up strong demand at global auctions, with sale prices often hammering for double or triple their estimates. Marmolejo is known for her contemplative large-scale portraits of women. She draws on her Dominican-Swedish-American heritage and previous experience in animation design to evoke complexity and enigma in her stylized, wide-eyed portraits that have enchanted private buyers.

In October 2022, her work *I Always Come Back Here* (2020) sold at Sotheby's Hong Kong for HK\$693,000 (US\$88,576) to a private buyer, a then-record price for the artist at auction. Less than six months later, that price has been beaten twice. *Let the Hurricane In* (2019) sold for HK\$1.08 million (US\$137,896) — more than seven times its low price estimate — at Poly Auctions later that month; and in March, Phillips New York also sold *Dreams of Escape* (2021) for US\$88,900.

The artist [has described](#) her style as a “contemporary crossroad” of disparate subject matters, including Asian erotic paintings and emotive Expressionist techniques. Born in 1975 in Santo Domingo, Marmolejo studied graphic design and illustration in Norway; fine arts in the Dominican Republic; and fine arts and illustration at Parsons School of Design in New York.

Her artistic career began in illustration for magazines, character design, and animation, the latter of which has informed her recognizable portrait style to this day. Her works appear colorful and lighthearted, but her portraits are grounded in deeper cross-cultural references, embodied by emotive characters that seem to consider the complications of their own identity. In *A Great Escape* (2020), for example, the artist represents her Caribbean and Scandinavian heritages in a “rather kitschy way,” according to Phillips contemporary art specialist Danielle So. The work sold for HK\$635,000 (US\$80,892) to an Asian buyer, who beat a raft of Asia-based bidders at the auction house in March.

“I think part of the appeal is that you see the underlying influence of her background in character design for animation,” So told Artsy. “The nuanced facial expression of her character...simultaneously lead[s] viewers into a space of both familiarity and unknown, which can provoke contemplation and resonance for many.”



Tania Marmolejo
The Bunny Collection, 2010
Lyle O. Reitzel
US\$18,000–US\$26,000

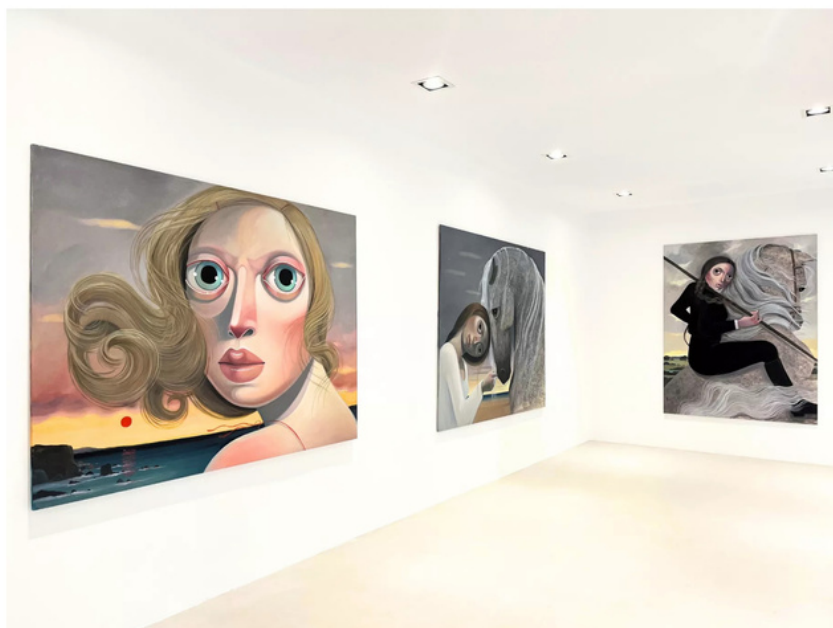
Marmolejo is prolific. She has staged five solo gallery shows in the past two years—the next is slated to open at Stockholm’s *Loyal* in June—and there is no sign of her slowing down.

The artist has seen particular interest from buyers in Asia, and interviewees agree that Marmolejo’s rise in popularity on the continent can be traced back to her 2021 solo exhibition at Eligere Gallery in Korea, entitled “Anacaona’s Revenge.” The show debuted a dozen portraits inspired by the exhibition’s namesake—a Caribbean figure that symbolizes female empowerment and resistance—and featuring Marmolejo’s signature wide-eyed subjects.

At Sotheby’s Hong Kong last July, *So Close And Yet So Far* (2020) sold for HK\$504,000 (US\$64,223), dwarfing its estimates of HK\$100,000–\$200,000. Sotheby’s Hong Kong has auctioned five of Marmolejo’s works thus far. Deputy director and contemporary art specialist Florence Ho noted that each lot has had between 5 and 10 bidders, mostly from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Qatar, South Korea, and the U.S.

“[Tania Marmolejo] has been in the art scene for a while, but in terms of her secondary-market career, she is on the verge of becoming a new star: 60% of her buyers from Sotheby’s are based in Asia, so it feels like the Asian market is where she really shines,” said Ho. Indeed, Sotheby’s Hong Kong is expecting to sell more of Marmolejo’s paintings in the coming year to the mix of new and established collectors that seek out her work.

Another recent secondary-market highlight includes *The Early Harvest* (2013), which sold at Christie’s Hong Kong in April for HK\$378,000 (US\$48,153) to an Asian private collector, beating its mid-estimate by 122%. Of the piece—a debut for the artist at Christie’s Hong Kong—Marmolejo wrote: “The eyes are the vessels for communication. I want the viewer to be ‘caught’ in a stare that won’t let go.” The auction house noted that the sale of this piece was indicative of a trend of Asian buyers embracing Western contemporary artists.



Tania Marmolejo, installation view of “Under the Influence” at Villazan, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and Villazan.

Beyond auctions, the artist’s work is also selling quickly on the primary market. At [Felix Art Fair](#) in Los Angeles in February, [Nicodim Gallery](#) featured Marmolejo’s *DIVINA INMACULADA* (2022), a shadowy and enchanting portrait set starkly against a stormy backdrop. The oil on linen piece sold for US\$50,000 to a private collection after attracting great demand.

In May, [Villazan](#) in Madrid opened a solo exhibition of a dozen of new works by Marmolejo inspired by the artist’s connection to Spain. The show sold out in the first two days of the opening with a “bombardment” of interest from Asia, according to Orietta Ibarrondo Gelardin, project manager and artist liaison at the gallery. The most popular were *Encuentro entre naranjos*, *Tarde Estrellada en Bolonia* (2023) and *Soñé Que Fui Musa de Picasso* (2023).

“We were definitely aware from the very beginning [of the show] that there was a significant amount of interest from all over the world,” said Pablo Villazan, founder of Villazan. “As of now, we can confirm that demand not only has considerably increased but that there is an extensive waiting list.” ■