

# Arteviste.

## A Review of Juan Antonio Olivares: *Moléculas* at Off Vendome, New York



Installation images courtesy of Matt Moravec (Off Vendome)

Traditional art media do not ask much of one's time. Two- and three-dimensional works occupy space: on a wall, on a floor, or even suspended from a ceiling. To borrow from Robert Mangold, these works say, "Here I am. Plonk." You see it. You might walk around it. You either get it or not. Job done.

Video—time-based media—demands more of the viewer, especially when the work is flat screen and full frontal as opposed to immersive or interactive. (The current vogue.) To understand, "Moléculas," you have to be willing to cross a threshold and succumb to another imagination in a depth of ways not required by more traditional entertainment or video.

"Moléculas" warrants a brief refresher course in elementary school science. We take for granted our DNA, our celestial beingness. A classroom definition defines a molecule as the smallest possible amount of a particular substance that has all the characteristics of that substance. A molecule is a universe unto itself that contains all our genetic material. It has mass. It is whole. It may (or may not) be somehow eternal.

"Moléculas" is more molecular chemistry—the interaction of particles, the formation and break down of bonds—than molecular physics, which governs structure and properties. The story line is a dense tone poem à la Terrence Malick about personal memory, love, and loss, familial bonds and, ultimately, the unknown. An amputated toy surrogate, a *kuschelbär* (or cuddly bear), realistically narrates the most basic human story in a strained, pained voice. It is the story of a mother's love, sibling rivalry, death, and regret. The bear ambulates the room in the unbalanced gait of an amputee, after hopping from the analyst's couch to confront itself in front of a multi-paneled mirror, which provides a self-reflective confessional.

Details are minimal, but important. The antiseptic architecture and furniture are more sculpture than décor. The office itself simulates a room from Le Corbusier's *La Cité Radieuse*, stark, antiseptic. The analyst's couch replicates the architect's often-copied *chaise longue*. Most critically, the simple



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desk is strewn with artifacts, clues of an analyst's work: handwritten notes, cards, a lamp, and a computer. The latter is the technological heart and heartbeat of production, flickering, throbbing a softly repeated sound. Water—dripping, splashing, slushing—provide another source of auditory continuity. Persistent sounds of life.

This is not conventional art. Olivares, the son of Chilean and Colombian expatriates, ventures well into the territory of magical realism, which is primarily known as a literary genre. He challenges binary oppositions like life and death, acceding them merely as points in a continuous cycle. As a style, magical realism often warps the conventional notions of time, with events occurring and reoccurring with nuanced change. Mystery and ambiguity abound. But there is the profound sense that what has happened, what is happening, will happen again. This is the revelation of "Moléculas."

The visual acuity of the video is startlingly crisp, even as it transitions from black and white to color, from photo reality to animation. The work is the product of two years' self-taught effort. After graduating from Columbia University, Olivares attended the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf for two years, as yet another acolyte of Christopher Williams. This is not an insignificant matter, since Williams is more likely to suggest paths and the means to self-confidence, rather than specific ideas and techniques.



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Frida Kahlo and Mika Rottenberg may be among the best-known Latin American proponents of this artistic style, which awkwardly straddles surrealism and photorealism. Where Olivares differs from both artists is that he neither accentuates nor celebrates the bizarre or grotesque. The bear is an unexpected, “fantastic” storyteller—a humble avatar, appearing in a conventional, rather Spartan setting of a psychoanalyst’s office. The video achieves a heightened state of awareness of life’s connectedness and delicate balance. It ends with the bear’s gentle disintegration, like a dandelion puffball caught on the wind, with its own molecules scattered across time.

“In nature nothing is created, nothing is destroyed. Things only change when you die. It’s a type of change, when death changes us. We enter another type of life.” Juan Antonio Olivares, “Moléculas,” 2017



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