

THREE^{TO} WATCH

There is a lot of superb art being made these days; this column by Allison Malafronte shines light on a trio of gifted individuals.

NICOLE M. SANTIAGO (b. 1976) has a long-standing fascination with birthday cakes and babies, as evidenced by her nearly 30 paintings that contain these motifs. One could surmise any number of symbolic meanings from them, but specific interpretations are not what the artist is after. Rather, Santiago is offering loose explanations of semi-autobiographical familial narratives that remain subservient to the broader formal concerns of her paintings.

Santiago earned a B.F.A. in studio art from Indiana University and an M.F.A. in painting from the University of New Hampshire. She is currently an associate professor of art at Virginia's College of William and Mary, where she has taught figure drawing, color theory, and composition for the past 13 years. With her extensive education and instructional experience, Santiago has become an expert at articulating painting techniques and theories to students of all levels. Although her stylistic and philosophical approaches make it logical to compare her with the Perceptual Painters — a group of contemporary artists who challenge the assumptions of the visual world and who focus on space, volume, color, and shapes — Santiago's paintings are simultaneously individualistic, with a strong female viewpoint all her own.

While appreciating the storytelling aspects, technical skill, and expressiveness of Santiago's paintings, viewers may have other responses as well — such as curiosity and surprise. A cursory glance at *Baby-Cakes Pregnancy Portrait*, for instance, might elicit delight, but after poring over her portfolio, we realize this is not a straightforward pregnancy scene. The cake and bare belly must be symbolizing something else, but we quickly move on to appreciating Santiago's harmonious color, compositional creativity, and intelligent design.

"I'm always striving to defy the stillness of the painting, to portray a layered narrative where residues of the past and suggestions of the future swirl around the present, creating a kind of 'thick time,'" the artist explains. "To accomplish this, I use the scattered signs of daily existence to reveal indirect insights into the rhythm of everyday life. But that sense of rhythm also depends on the formal structure of the picture itself, where the underlying abstraction must work in tandem with discernable imagery to deliver an engaging image."



NICOLE M. SANTIAGO (b. 1976), *Baby-Cakes Pregnancy Portrait*, 2013, oil on canvas, 42 x 34 in., available from the artist

SANTIAGO is an exhibiting member of First Street Gallery (New York City), where she will have her third solo exhibition with this gallery in May 2020.