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Silent faces whisper of profound loss, sorrow
By Debra Wolf

An elegant display of ceramics hits a high note in Atlanta-based Mario Petrirena's latest show. While playful political collages are also on view, Petrirena's sculptures take center stage.

Like many contemporary Cuban-American artists, Petrirena sifts through issues of divided identity, loss and remembrance, mining his inner landscape for materials. As an artist, what you have to offer is yourself, says Petrirena.

When you reach what is uniquely yourself, then you achieve the universal. Transforming the personal into the universal is impeccably accomplished in this exhibition of untitled, small-scale works in which his mother's patron saint, Barbara, figures consistently.

A recurring detail in his sculptures since the 1980s, Santa Barbara's face was molded by Petrirena while a student. He uses her likeness as an artistic building block as well as a link to family, spirituality, and the perpetual chain of human experience. Adding to the sacramental quality of these works, nearly every piece acts as reliquary-diminutive tray, various containers, boats lined with tiny heads. Among the most beautiful sculptures are two bowls, displayed side by side, simultaneously fragile and solid, each resembles half of an egg, cracked open and emptied. The first has a charred exterior, while the interior streams with glossy shards sliding down toward a pool of red. Plaintive, imbedded faces are barely discernible beneath dark glaze. A fine scattering of hatch marks appears like account of the dead.

The second bowl's exterior has a coppery hue streaked with smoky wisps of gray. Unglazed, the inside is matte and ashen; faces are fixed beneath a flat field of hushed color.

A different sort of receptacle, Petrirena's white, roofless house stands empty. Stark and solemn, it suggests a mausoleum. Outer walls are patterned with Petrirena's silent, signature faces.

Three concrete and clay markers are the quietest works in the show. A geometric trio grouped on two low plinths, simple forms yield high impact — circle within square, bowl within cube, wedge within sphere. Concrete is colored to resemble rock, combining with bas-relief faces in lighter tones. Mesmerizing, these objects make a meditative shrine.

Loss — to natural disaster, political upheaval or Sept. 11 — pervades these works. Ironically, Santa Barbara, integral to Petrirena's sculpture for two decades, is the patron saint of stonecutters and towers, protector from storms and sudden death.

Petrirena reminds us that tragedy is part of human history, filled with lost faces, broken parts and silences. There is solace in his exquisite vessels, in their poetic capacity to hold unfathomable sorrow and, somehow to contain it.

