

Edison Peñafiel: ***Tides and Passages***
Chapter I | ***MARE MAGNVM***

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What the Sea Holds

Step into *MARE MAGNVM* and rolling waves close around you, rising and falling, wrapping you in undulations of charcoal, canvas, and ink. Across the sea's expanse, fourteen larger-than-life-sized boats move in a slow, unbroken circle where eighty-one figures, huddled and watchful, turn toward one another and toward a horizon none of us can see. Nobody speaks. The only sound is a low, deep, reverberating instrumental hum. It's based on a Latin American lullaby, *La mar estaba serena* (the sea was calm, calm was the sea), distorted to a frequency that's felt bodily. MARE MAGNVM was among the first of the artist's works I encountered in 2023. Even on a single small monitor, the work was riveting. I am thrilled to present an exponentially expanded version of *MARE MAGNVM* at Locust Projects, kicking off his multi-chapter *Tides and Passages*.

Edison Peñafiel is someone who knows the weight of leaving, journeying, arriving. Born in Guayaquil, Ecuador, in 1985, he left for the United States in 2002, seeking relief from political and economic instability. He has spent his career making art about, in his own words, "those on the underside of the world's major conflicts—the migrant, the laborer, the surveilled." His work often borrows the structure of repetition because repetition is how history behaves, and how life evolves: always leaving, always arriving. Peñafiel has said that *MARE MAGNVM* is a response to the seemingly endless loop of local and global news he's taken in over the years, from Florida's Cuban and Haitian refugees to masses crossing the Mediterranean, English Channel, and the Pacific, and those migrating across Mexico and the Rio Grande to the southern border of the U.S.—the same story, countless people, nameless faces.

First realized in 2021 for Galería Sabrina Amrani in Madrid with technical production support from MAD Arts in Dania Beach, *MARE MAGNVM* has changed with every space that has held it. At Locust Projects, the work wraps a sweeping panoramic screen. Drawn, painted, performed, photographed, and collaged by the artist, the images we see were scanned and painstakingly animated by MAD Arts and are presented here as a 360-degree video surround, a configuration made specifically for our space.

Locust Projects is proud to premiere this work at an unprecedented scale in Miami, a city where a makeshift boat on the horizon is not an unfamiliar sight and holds personal meaning for many of our neighbors, friends, and family. We see those references here in the drawn and collaged boats built from wood scraps, oil drums, tires, and metal siding—cast-off found objects. Bound together, they visibly carry weight, physically and psychologically. The journeyers' faces are not faces but papier-mâché masks inspired by those made in Ecuador, painted with oversized, strangely tender and sad expressions. Peñafiel has described the masks as a way of thinking about adaptation, about covering oneself to get by. They humanize and they erase at once. These people belong to no single nation or century. They are everywoman and everyman, and every body of water where people have gambled everything on a makeshift hull. And every thirty minutes, the travelers arrive back where they began. There is no landfall.

Every one of the eighty-one figures is the artist himself. He plays them all, evidenced by a beard beneath a mask, a hairy forearm below a sleeve. The disguise isn't meant to deceive. It's meant to be seen through, turning the crowd into one body, multiplied. The characters draw on real stories: his own, those of people close to him, and countless strangers. The work reads as a portrait of everyone who has left, made personal by one body standing in for them all.

The title *Mare magnum* is Latin for the Great Sea, a phrase long attached to the Mediterranean. In Spanish and Italian the phrase still lives in everyday speech, where, I was astounded to find, it means a bewildering, teeming multitude. So fitting here with the sea, and the crowd upon it. Say mare aloud. Or *mer*, French for sea, and *mère*, mother: they sound alike. Spanish sailors and poets say *la mar*, the sea in the feminine. They are not etymologically related, but, waxing poetic, I can't help but think how our ears hear one sound for the thing we cross and the one we leave. And then there is *mære*, as in the demon of nightmares, which is a palpable aspect to the work, the uncertainty, the foreboding.

As I consider the journeyers in *MARE MAGNVM*, I keep returning to artist Bethany Collins's recent talk at Locust Projects, where she shared several images from her Odyssey text paintings positioning select words and phrases from Emily Wilson's translation against myriad previous interpretations. Wilson, the first woman to translate the poem into English, argues that Homer's Odysseus is not a hero, but a "complicated man" and that his epic journey is filled with migrants, refugees, and the homeless poor, and with the question of whose suffering we think deserves pity.

Beneath all the Odyssey's monsters and storms, the poem keeps returning to a door and a stranger: *xenia*, the sacred obligation to feed and shelter whoever turns up hungry, because you cannot know who they are. The very opposite of xenophobia. Odysseus himself spends years without a ship, a crew, and sometimes a name, entirely dependent on the kindness of others. I think about this when I see the masked, nameless faces in Peñafiel's boats. Where Homer gives one man a name, a destiny, and an island to sail toward, Peñafiel gives eighty-one people none of these and raises the question, who will take them in?

From where we stand in Miami this could not be more relevant. The sea is rising, and water has pushed countless people from the places they call home toward the hope of something better. Miami is a place of constant arrivals. In the exhibition text for the Madrid presentation, *MARE MAGNVM* is described as "a reality already here" and "an omen of one that is soon to come." It well describes our current moment as borders harden and resist, and language about immigrants hardens and sharpens. The ancient code of *xenia*, welcoming the stranger at the door, is not only in question but being decided for us.

What I love most about *MARE MAGNVM* is how the installation counters the ominous nightmare with humanity and hope, beginning with a mother's lullaby, masks referencing the artist's motherland, and a sea that echoes a mother's arms rocking, carrying, and holding. Peñafiel places you and the travelers between a home left behind and one tenuously ahead. The scene of journeyers far from home, searching for a safe harbor or *a buen puerto*, is both a frightening reality for many and a metaphor for seeking something for and in ourselves and each other.

With time, you learn to read the bodies: a hand on a shoulder, a turned head, a figure leaning toward the water while another leans toward the person beside her. You begin to search the boats the way the figures search each other, and the searching becomes its own kind of company. The work turns to you, welcoming and enveloping you with a soothing hum, a gently rocking embrace.

— Lorie Mertes | Executive Director

Tides and Passages
CHAPTER II | *De Profundis Clamavi ad Astra*
(From the Depths I Cried Out to the Stars)

Edison Peñafiel's *De Profundis Clamavi ad Astra* is a newly commissioned work opening at Locust Projects in June 2027 with major support from VIA Art Fund. Where *MARE MAGNVM*'s travelers cross the surface of the sea, in *De Profundis*, its characters descend through the depths toward transformation—physically and spiritually—to the stars. Both works will be shown together in 2028 at the Orlando Museum of Art.

About the Artist

Edison Peñafiel (b. 1985, Guayaquil, Ecuador) is a Miami-based interdisciplinary artist working in immersive video installation, sound, and textile. His work has been presented at the USF Contemporary Art Museum (Tampa), The Ringling Museum of Art (Sarasota), The Orlando Museum of Art, Sabrina Amrani Gallery (Madrid), the Ford Foundation Gallery (New York), and Passerelle Centre d'Art Contemporain (Brest, France). Peñafiel is a recipient of the VIA Art Fund Artistic Production Grant, the Foundation for Contemporary Arts Creative Research Grant, and Oolite Arts' Ellies Creator Award, among others. He is represented by Sabrina Amrani Gallery, Madrid.

Support and Credits

The exhibition is realized with major support from VIA Art Fund with additional support provided by Funding Arts Network and the National Endowment for the Arts. It is produced in partnership with MAD Arts in Dania Beach, FL. The artist has also received a Creative Research Grant from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts and a grant from Mosaic Art Fund. The project is curated by Lorie Mertes, Executive Director.

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