

About The Cover

Rock, Paper, Scissors; Chicken, Human, Swine

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We watch two children playing the game “Rock, Paper, Scissors.” This game begins as one of random chance, but it rapidly evolves into a mesmerizing interaction of strategy, wit, and memory. The hand is transformed into a weapon, an attack, a defense. Now cutting, now wrapping, now blunting. Fingers become blades; fists become rock; palms become paper.

In this issue’s cover art, one part of a triptych by the renowned Mexican artist Abel Vázquez, a most curious fish brings new meaning to that childhood game. This pájaro is a mythical beast, a transformed animal, a bizarre chimera. A bird with human qualities. A bird with a bowler hat. A bird with the tail of a fish.

This striking watercolor is a contemporary take on the alebrije figurines first created by the celebrated Mexican artist Pedro Linares in 1936. It was in this year, so the story goes, that Pedro Linares became ill and, while lying feverish in bed, he dreamt of a surreal forest where animals transformed into chimeric forms, each shouting the word “alebrijes!” When Linares awoke, he picked up the nearest material—paper—and molded figures of these chimeric forms, painting them in garish colors remembered through the distortion of severe illness. Linares’ bestiary is now created by his sons and grandsons and a host of “cartoneros” across Mexico. Beautiful winged fish with legs; dragons grasping at decorated skeletons; bejeweled, deformed toad-headed agamids.

Like the mythical Chimera of the 9th century B.C. manuscripts by Homer (*Iliad*, VI and XVI) and Hesiod (*The Theogony*, ll. 306–332), these beasts are a thing of fascination, curiosity, and fear for humans. While many, like our cover’s image, are harmless, others represent a

magnified ability to destroy and kill. A threat to our very existence. A subliminal stab to our psyche.

And so, we return to Mexico, to a more dramatic version of “Rock, Paper, Scissors” played out very recently. This time, it’s a game of genetic reassortment—random acts of chemical bonding. But, as in the children’s game, much more than chance guides the outcome. Given the right conditions—high densities of livestock, international trade and travel, and a diversity of migrating birds—we find ourselves in a similar mesmerizing battle, one that pitches our wits against the evolution of our own chimeric H1N1 creation.

What can we learn from Greek mythology that might have bearing on the defeat on this modern, man-made chimera? In mythical times, the Greek gods sent a hero, Bellerophon, to destroy the Chimera. He did this by tipping his spear with lead, melting this in the beast’s fiery breath, and skewering the animal and sealing its guts (*Iliad*, XVI). A gory tale, perhaps, but also a measure of our own fate?

With H1N1 influenza now global, and a simmering caseload in Australia ready to burst forth on the Northern Hemisphere’s winter flu season, we are in unknown territory as we scramble for a vaccine. We analyze our chimera’s weapons, its fiery breath, and we design our spears accordingly. But our shifting foe is not the known entity that the ancient Chimera was. Driven by our own actions, it is able to respond to our every move and transform again—evolving resistance, changing virulence. And so, returning to our Mexican artist Abel Vázquez, we watch as he puts down his brush, and silently we wait.

This artist is still painting.

This triptych is not complete.

THE ARTIST

Abel Vázquez was born in 1959 in Huajuapán de León, a city crouched in the mountainous Baja Mixteca region of Oaxaca, Mexico. He studied at *La Esmeralda* National School of Painting, Sculpture and Engraving, of the National School of Beautiful Arts in Mexico City. His prolific work includes abstract sculptures, earthy acrylics, and brilliant watercolors. In addition to exhibits throughout Mexico City and the rest of the country, Vázquez's work has appeared in galleries in Los Angeles, Chicago, New Orleans, Phoenix, and across the globe.

“Pájaro—Alebrije” is one installment in a series of three paintings. *Pájaro* means bird in Spanish, and *alebrije*

alludes to a type of Mexican folk art first popularized by Pedro Linares in the 1930 s. While the original art form was made of *papier-mâché*, small wooden versions of these brilliantly painted mythical creatures can be found throughout the markets and galleries of Mexico.

Cover Art

“Pájaro—Alebrije” by Abel Vázquez, watercolor, 18 cm × 26 cm

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