



SAN ANTONIO CURRENT | 3/18/2009

Print

Visual Arts

LACMA revolución takes the Alameda

Phantom Sightings and Caras Vemos

by Sarah Fisch



courtesy

Margarita Cabrera's "Vocho (yellow)," on view at the Museo Alameda

Two group exhibitions opened at the Alameda this past Friday, and the opening-night party, in addition to being a joyous, free, and open-to-the-public hoot and a half, elicited a plea from all comers: Man, San Antonio needs more of this. Our city hungers for more art-centered celebrations (witness Saturday night's Luminaria, whose happy and curious crowds prove the point); our burgeoning — but insular — community of artmakers and students needs more exposure to cutting-edge travelling contemporary exhibitions; and our local art discourse should engage the larger world with the rigorous, questioning energy demonstrated in the Alameda's extravaganza.

Phantom Sightings, in particular, attacks sculpture, photography, and performance, and flirts with the arbitrary notions of the mass-produced and the handmade, the confessional and the public, history and the future. Its installations, video performances, and collages resemble one

another, if in no other way, in their breathtaking audacity. *Phantom Sightings* hollers a playful but meaningful *grito*: San Antonio could make and discuss art which does more than extol the folkloric, or withdraw into the decorative or merely theoretical. The Chicano Movement still moves, hereabouts, and in the Alameda's galleries it hauls ass, from Los Angeles to the Frontera Wall, and clear into outer space.

Downstairs in the Smithsonian Gallery, *Caras Vemos, Corazones no Sabemos* provides a sturdy pedestal of context and cause. Curated by Amelia Malagamba-Ansótegui, professor of Latino art history at Arizona State University, the exhibition features many works from the extensive collection of Gilberto Cárdenas of Notre Dame University. The social subtext isn't subtle, nor should it be; the show's subtitle is "The Human Landscape of Mexican Migration." It's a mythic landscape familiar to our city, and in this encyclopedic collection oppression, outrage, and social injustice are contextualized and respected. The show's title is taken from a Spanish *dicho* roughly translated as, "We see faces, but hearts are unknown." In her introductory essay, Malagamba-Ansótegui asserts that, "While at times we see their faces, the migrant heart is unacknowledged in the daily routines and public discourses of this country, and the contributions migrants make to our society are easily taken for granted."

The exhibition is organized thematically into several sub-categories, entitled "Journey," "Encountering Barriers," "Human Geographies," "Negotiating Identity," and "Constructing the Imaginary," each with an accompanying, wall-mounted essay. It's not a bad way to go, systematically, and lends itself to an academic overview, but I confess to not paying much attention to this framing device or verbal explanations. The art itself contains compelling narratives, or rather refractions of a central meta-narrative. Illustrating this meta-narrative — in which the unseen live, work, and suffer — are numerous works dating from the 1960s to the present. Some works incorporate traditional Catholic iconography, as in several moving *ex-votos* from various artists pleading to la Virgen for protection against dying or being captured en route to el Norte, or while serving in the Gulf War.

Connie Arismendi's 2004 installation "Victoria" shows an image of la Virgen de Guadalupe hovering in stormy skies while below, an acrylic reflecting pool bordered by smooth stones is etched with ornately rendered names, a sort of spiritual/natural world "Kilroy Was Here."

Elsewhere the exhibiton demonstrates a plea for human rights. In Sue Coe's lithograph "La Frontera," she depicts a Goya-like shackled human figure presided over menacingly by a faceless oppressor in a cowboy hat, while in "Bajo el Mismo Sol," Artemio Rodriguez's 2003 linocut, wanderers in the desert imagine loved ones under a heartless, Uncle Sam-faced sun. Cristina Shallcross has printed glass votives with photographic images documenting the brutal militarization of the border, and the abuses to which its migrant human beings are subjected.

An unexpected show standout is "Superheroes," Dulce Pinzón's photograph series of Mexican immigrants in New York City, each costumed in comic-book-hero garb on the job, each title documenting the subject's name, place of origin, and the amount of money sent home to Mexico each week. Minerva Valencia, a nanny tending to her small charges in her employers' well-appointed living room while dressed as Catwoman (she sends home \$400 a week, we're told) is at once heartbreaking, funny, and unforgettable. And I'll probably never look at the Hulk the same way again after seeing a photo of him unloading a produce truck. Incredible.

Caras Vemos stands, or hangs, as an effective curatorial overview, a remarkable assembling of art and art-historical documentation, and a convincing exhibition of art as social protest. But it was upstairs in the Cortez, Lo Bello y Proyectos Galleries that my mind was blown. Or, rather, expanded. *Phantom Sightings*, curated by Rita Gonzalez and the Los Angeles County Musum of Art, balances amazingly diverse media, makes such bold and artful use of scale within the given space, and encompasses such divergent philosophy and imagery that while the mind reels, the eye, fascinated, just keeps dancing.

Phantom Sightings largely features artists who came of age in the '90s, and who exploit myriad forces present in current Chicano art ... and in all contemporary art, period. It's likely that, as a viewer, I'm intuitively drawn to the experimental, multi-media and baldly contemporary. Like me, these artists are informed by queer theory, feminism, and mass media, as well as post-punk and DIY forms of artmaking that make use of materials of no commercial value. This rough-hewn sensibility, of course, is also fundamentally *rasquache*, a term connoting "quick, crude, and cheap," and which originally bore a negative connotation, but was re-invented by artists of the Chicano art movements of the '60s and '70s. One seminal artmaking collective, LA's ASCO (Spanish for "nausea,") was known for satiric performances sometimes called "urban interventions," such as "Instant Mural" (1974), in which ASCO member Patsi Valdez was taped to a wall. ASCO sought to redefine "Chicano art," employing elements of existential philosophy, absurdist art performance à la Joseph Beuys, and graffiti in order to take Chicano artmaking possibilities beyond the received traditions of conventional muralism and religious iconography.

But this bit of history fails to adequately telegraph what *Phantom Sightings* achieves. These artists may be rooted to art-historical and civil- rights traditions, but their work is captured in the process of inventing an all-new language. Margarita Cabrera's "Vocho (yellow)," for example, is a life-size Volkswagen Beetle constructed of "vinyl, batting, thread, and car parts," and manages even with its arresting scale and awe-inspiring attention to detail to be more than the sum of its parts. It's a soft sculpture — comically toylike, and yet with its sunken-in contours it hints at the tragedy behind and beyond the comic, Herbie-friendly consumer icon: Cabrera suggests the ephemeral nature of the hardest of technologies, and the human touch (and concomitant suffering) built into any machine.

Car culture is satirized, also, in "Rigor Motors" by Ruben Ochoa and Marco Rios: Two pimped-out, (post-)life-size coffins sit in attitudes of driver-ready recline, each speaker-fitted, glossy vessel the ultimate "vehicle" (in all its permutations) for eternity. They recall Magritte's painted coffin-portraits as stand-ins for the human body, absurd memento moris whose wit only underscores an elemental pathos. Here's the thing, though: While many of the pieces in *Phantom Sightings* have such art historical underpinnings, the viewer is never bullied with them, only winked at.

You don't need a degree in art history to engage with San Antonian Cruz Ortiz's assortment of mega (and meta-) *rasquachismo* built around his mythic alter ego, Spaztek: A rickety (but functioning) catapult stands ready to vault this lovesick character over any and all borders, while flags pronounce the primal call for Cumbia!, and a video performance captures him howling "I'm so tired of being alone" into an outsized megaphone (the megaphone itself is also on display). Difficult as this installation is to describe, it's easy to enjoy. On opening night, kids stood and giggled at Spaztek's passionate corrido-singing, while arty types puzzled over printed proclamations such as "tu

amor es no good.” For Ortiz, hopeless romantic love is an emblem of a host of communicative problems, an attempt to connect over seemingly impassable borders, a re-invention, even, of chivalric, lyric-poetical notions of the untouchable beloved.

Interestingly, during Saturday’s artist panel discussion, Ortiz characterized the 2008 election of Obama as “Spaztek finally finds his lover!” Baldly and unabashedly political — “I love politics,” he said, on-panel. “I teach high school, that’s a political act, my making art is a political act” — Ortiz nonetheless allows space in his art for the viewer to breathe, to observe, and to construct our own imaginary victories.

The best contemporary art crosses media and genre, cartographic lines, gender identities, and ethnic categories — History and the Future occur simultaneously. Opposing ideas combine and create new realities, and the fronteras between “high” and “low” art are exploded. Witnessing *Phantom Sightings* is a profoundly galvanizing experience, and one potentially transformative to San Antonio’s art scene. San Antonio could speak with a louder voice in the ongoing international conversation of contemporary art. We’re natural postmodernists, long immersed in the process of the *mestizaje* of peoples, and unperturbed by the coexistence of the past, present, and future — to paraphrase Walt Whitman, we contain multitudes.

The argument could, and might, be made that San Anto hasn’t had the economic or artistic advantages of world culture center Los Angeles, the city *Phantom Sightings* sprang from. That we’re hopelessly old-school in some mighty disempowering ways, what with our high teen-pregnancy and poverty rates, our spotty educational record. There has long been a “brain drain” in this town of talented and ambitious artists to both coasts, in order to participate in exactly the kind of cutting-edge scene represented by *Phantom Sightings*. But need it be so? With our growing and strengthening art institutions and an ever-increasing public interest in the arts, couldn’t we glimpse some *Sightings* here? It starts, it seems to me, with groundbreaking art. Artists, Chicano or not, can and should derive stimulation and positive pressure from this show, from its exuberant scale and complex social consciousness. We’ve got the talent, the chops, and a crack at the spotlight; let’s muster up the hard work, the fearlessness, the audacity. •

San Antonio, represent

In addition to **Cruz Ortiz’s** installation, three other San Anto artists had a hand in LACMA’S historic (I’m telling you, it is) *Phantom Sightings* show. **Alejandro Diaz**, a native San Antonian now living in New York City (he founded Sala Diaz in 1995), combines an outsized, Warholian Pop aesthetic with sharp social commentary, as in his now-famous “A Can for All Seasons” installation in the Bronx. In it, Diaz combines the absolutely quotidian — i.e., canned food labels, reproduced faithfully from Herdez corn niblets and La Morena *chiles en escabeche* — are painted on large outdoor planters, containing trees; an investigation both into the decorative tropes of advertising and, yet again, the postmodern/commonsensical value of rasquache. In *Phantom Sightings*, a Diaz installation near the entrance to the museum uses this same outsize-can technique — in this case, the cans are emblazoned with hand-lettered pleas for donations, a tribute to and examination of the donation containers found at cashier stations in family-owned businesses.

Jim Mendiola — yet another San Antonian now living in L.A. — is perhaps most famous for his 1996 film *Pretty Vacant*, about a punk-rock-obsessed young Chicana who lives for the Pistols. According to some reports he’s working on a film adaptation of Sandra Cisneros’s short story “Bien Pretty.” His *Phantom Sightings* piece (sadly, in-catalog only for the San Antonio leg of the tour) is a funny and disturbing meditation on the *Ozzy-at-the-Alamo* bit of legendary history. Seeing it in this exhibition felt bittersweet, this bit of puro San Anto exposed by a native for the world to see, but knowing that he’s left town ... come back to the 5 and Dime, Jimmy Mendiola!

Chuck Ramirez, tireless hi-def chronicler of the gorgeously commercial, the ruthlessly quotidian, and the unexpectedly divine, organized the luscious opening-night tablescape containing many different Crock-Pots filled with SATX comfort foods — Velveeta y RoTel chile con queso, guacamole, *quesadillas de maiz* — while vases of still-life-worthy cilantro and bowls of vivid-green homemade salsa beckoned. Adorning the tablescape were two vintage lamps, and many little brown bags of (ersatz?) *chicharrones*. A delicious, meticulously art-designed feast of childhood memory. Ramirez, thankfully (like Cruz Ortiz), vive en San Anto.

VISUAL ART

Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement

Through Jun 14

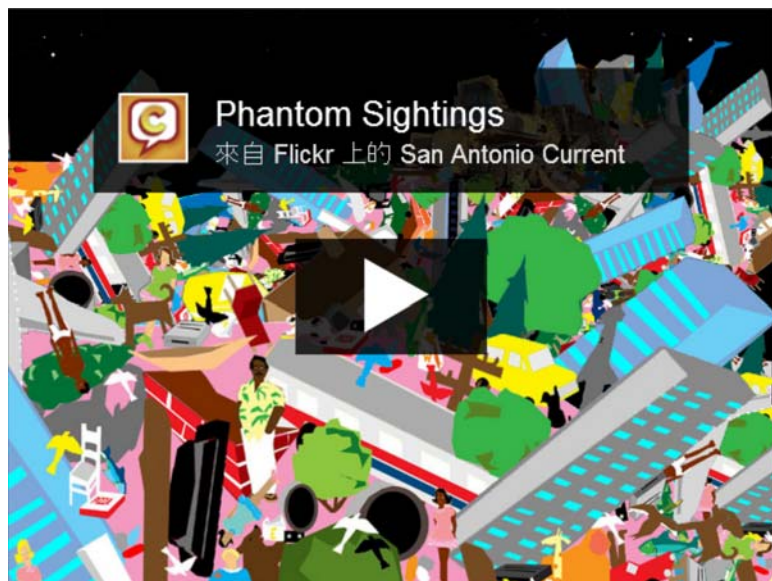
Caras Vemos, Corazones No Sabemos: The Human Landscape of Mexican Migration

Through May 10

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