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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Expert to Discuss Public Art Projects

September 27, 2000

ART : Listening to the Militant Muse : The streets are Daniel Martinez's gallery. He loves to make waves about problems that are making waves for other people

February 06, 1994 | MAX BENAVIDEZ | *Max Benavidez is a writer and critic based in Los Angeles.*

"I am an extreme person," asserts Daniel J. Martinez. Not missing a beat, he adds, "If I hadn't been an artist, I would have been a terrorist."

And maybe he would. Certainly the Los Angeles-based artist takes himself and his artwork seriously enough for the role. Like an uncompromising guerrilla bent on justice at any cost, Martinez is mad and wants everybody to know it. Without apology, he manipulates aesthetics and mixes mediums to make a social or political point. He typically opts for colossal scale and inevitably vents his wrath against the inequities of this postmodern, high-tech, paranoid culture.

If nonstop exposure is any measure of talent, then Martinez is very good at what he does. Within the last few years, his art of rage has been seen in venues no less impressive than Seattle's 1991 "In Public" series, last year's prestigious and controversial Whitney Biennial in New York, the 1993 Venice Biennale and last summer's watershed public art exhibition "Culture in Action" in Chicago. Each time he has managed to command both public attention and critical debate.

In fact, Martinez stirs up trouble just about everywhere he goes. His installation at Cornell University last year was vandalized by white supremacists. That attack led, in turn, to an impassioned demonstration by Latino students. His banners in Seattle sparked a rancorous debate on the very nature of art that went all the way to the front page of the city's major newspaper. Even the museum tags he created for the 1993 Whitney Biennial reading "I Can't Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White," were ultimately taken to be mean-spirited symbols of multicultural dogmatism.

Martinez has created a high volume of disquieting work in a relatively short time, and it has earned him dual-edged critical recognition. Newsweek magazine recently named him American art's hot "new face" for 1994, calling his Whitney tags "the sharpest thorn" at the show. Meanwhile, when asked for this article what he thought of the tags, Time magazine art critic Robert Hughes called them a "cute one-liner of zero aesthetic value."

Whatever the critics think, Martinez has managed to gain a foothold in the art world. He is a quintessential hybrid artist who crosses disciplines, mixes technologies, applies theories and appropriates disparate elements from the tangled web of postmodern society. Simultaneously, he is a construct, an angry decolonized individual who has made himself over from the fragments of his original culture and the debris of postindustrial society. In many ways, he embodies a migrant nomadism, an exilic and oppositional sensibility moving subversively through our cool, digitized culture.

Although he now identifies himself as a Chicano, the 36-year-old Martinez is a classic study of the colonized Mexican American. Growing up in the working-class city of Lennox (near Los Angeles International Airport), he never learned to speak Spanish. Although both his parents were fluent, they spoke only English with him and, he says, "Spanish was strictly forbidden by my teachers." By his account, he never learned anything positive about his ethnic background. So, like many of his generation,

he just drifted into an unthinking identification with "whiteness."

Reflecting on that period, he says: "The orientation of my world was toward whiteness. Mexican music was not played in my household. Spanish was never spoken. For me, white meant better. It meant privilege."

By the time he graduated from high school, Martinez knew he wanted to be an artist: "I wanted to learn about the art world and what it meant to actually be part of it. So I applied to every art school in the country, and I was rejected by every art school in the country. Finally, the only place left to try was CalArts," which was where he ended up.

But art school wasn't what he expected. In his mind, it would be a place of creative exchange. Instead, he found it to be a continuation of the prejudiced education he felt he had received all his life. "Even there, I was looked down on by others. On the surface the place seems open, but it's as alienating and racist as anywhere else," he claims.

Perhaps that's where Martinez's irrepressible urge to expose the ugliest truths took root. Even before graduating in 1979, Martinez began a long, intense series of what he calls "aesthetic investigations."

"I worked through several art forms," he explains, "searching for that form that would carry the content. I found myself dissatisfied with the object in the gallery. So I started to combine forms, to collaborate with other artists, with whole communities. This finally led to where I'm at now: large-scale interventions into public landscapes."

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