

THE GRAY CABALLEROS

Hunter Drohojowska

Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.
Pobre México, tan lejos de Dios, tan cercos de los Estados Unidos.

¡Pobre artistas de México! Caught like children between the conflicting demands of the mother and the father, between fealty to *La Raza* with its Europhobic obsession for a pure Mexican sensibility, and a yearning for the international life beyond slogans and simplistic gerrymandering of cultural choices. This artistic schizophrenia was apparent in the avalanche of Mexican art exhibitions that descended upon the cultural institutions of Los Angeles this fall. "Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries" acted as a fulcrum to launch festivals, exhibitions, performances and, inevitably, panel discussions. Amid the smoke and mirrors, there emerged one small show of contemporary art at the gallery of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. "Another Mexican Art: The Perennial Illusion of a Vulnerable Principle" (15 September–26 October) was organized by Guillermo Santamarina and Maria Guerra and included the work of nine artists.

None of these nine felt compelled to produce expressionistic canvases splashed about with the hyperventilating hues of the so-called Latin temperament. There were no pictures of Madonnas, workers united against the capitalist oppressor or scenes from the overheated sensual life of the barrio. In fact, much of the exhibition looked as though Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, head of Art Center's graduate studies program, had been guest lecturer at a series of Mexican art schools. A cerebral, high seriousness had taken the place of the ubiquitous tube of alizarin crimson. These are the Gray Caballeros, outlaws of an intellectual species, out to rob viewers of their many preconceptions about the art of Mexico.

The renegade star of the show was a videotape, *How to Read Macho Mouse*, by Rubén Ortiz, Aaron Anish and their irreverently named Chingadera Productions. This could be the Mexican answer to Nam June Paik's *Global Groove*. This fast-paced, five-minute media collage opens with an assertion from the Nazi camps, "Work Makes You Free," in German, Spanish and English. Mexican laborers are shown blowing leaves off the sidewalks with those infernal machines and cleaning the trash off hillsides. There follow rapid cuts of television and film stereotypes of Mexicans—*campesino* mice who demand to know "where's the cheese?"; revolutionary ducks wearing sombreros; Mickey El Raton giving us the finger; Frida Kahlo as the Virgin of Guadalupe; a *matador* being gored by his bull; and a film clip from the nineteen fifties of a handsome playboy defending himself: "I'm a North American by geography, Mexican by nationality, and very proud of it." His pert blonde date offers a condescending response: "You're cute!"

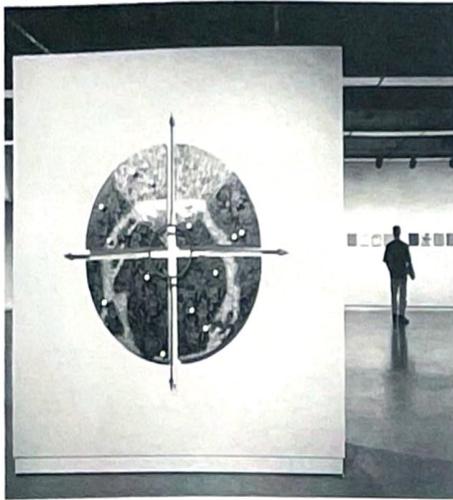
"*Cuidado peligro*" announces a warning sign at the outset of the videotape. The work confronts the history of antagonism that exists between the United States and Mexico with imagery that reinforces the many ways in which this country tends to view its southern neighbor as a source of cheap labor and budget vacations. Yet Ortiz and Anish do not ignore the complicity of Mexico's own attitudes, whereby the mask of revolution has excused decades of corruption, and life as a macho mouse has had a paralyzing effect on the nation's ability to mature. *La Raza*, the political and social philosophy that extols the independence of indigenous Mexican popula-



Rubén Ortiz and Aaron Anish
How to Read Macho Mouse, 1991
Photos: Steven A. Heller

Francisco Castro Leñero
Estructura Escritura, 1991
Photo: Steven A. Heller





Diego Toledo
from the series, *Acquired Awareness*, 1991
Photo: Steven A. Heller



Gabriel Orozco
House of Fire, 1991
Photo: Steven A. Heller

tions as yet uncontaminated by colonial values, has left the country less empowered than enslaved by false pride. (You might consider the parallel problem with the word “democracy” and its loss of legitimacy in this country.) The artists float the question, “Is this for *La Raza*?” over a computer-generated aerial view of the *zocolo* of Mexico City, an area that represents the central government, the center for the arts and the center of pollution, starvation and overcrowding. By using the language and medium of power—videotape—Ortiz and Anish circumvent associations with the official culture of Mexico.

The artists in this exhibition look at modernism as having the same hegemonic agenda as *La Raza*; they have looked beyond modernism, which otherwise seems to hold considerable sway in contemporary Mexican art, to address Mexico’s self-image as a martyred revolutionary. The installations of two- and three-dimensional work in the show, consequently, do not correspond to cultural typecasting. In *Weathers*, Diego Toledo covers thirteen panels with materials such as tapestries, maps, rugs, rusted iron, gold leaf and scarlet paint. He melds the history of modernist painting with the materials of Spanish colonialism and references to the Church. With a similar strategy, Sylvia Gruner’s *Between the Arrow and the Target* links modernism, machismo and Mexico’s devalued identity. It consists of a pair of glass shelves, one bearing a braid of black hair, the other a couple of desiccated pomegranates pierced by an arrow. This is the visual language used by that heroine of Mexican painting, Frida Kahlo—the icon of *La Raza* who turned her back on her European roots to wear the dress of the Tehuantepec Indians, and whose lifelong pain became the subject of her art. The fruit of fertility impaled by a shaft of steel in Gruner’s work stands for the terrifying wound Kahlo received in a bus accident. The braid may also be seen in Kahlo’s many self-portraits. (Is it not too perfect that someone named Madonna should collect these paintings?) Kahlo, the Madonna of Mexico’s twentieth-century art history, might be seen as the symbolic epitome of Mexico’s vulnerability.

Roger Barta writes in the essay accompanying the Art Center show that the exhibit is an attempt to question the official culture of the nation-state at a time when it is abundantly on view in the mother of all such exhibitions: “Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries.” This high-calorie, low-fiber blockbuster extends itself in a way that reeks of official underwriting. From *chacmoos* to altarpieces to paintings of the revolution, a visitor is meant to be overwhelmed by the artistic accomplishments of indigenous populations before, during and after Colonial rule. In the end, it may look like a public relations vehicle for the Salinas presidency, but such exhibitions are generally organized with some political gain in sight. There is a slightly hysterical aspect to the enterprise, and the show winds up looking like an underprivileged waif in an overpriced prom dress. Paraphrasing Peter Plagens in *Newsweek*, the Italian government would scarcely consider squeezing thirty centuries of its culture onto a few floors of the L.A. County Museum of Art.

This is not to say that it isn’t breathtaking to see giant stone heads carved by Olmecs of centuries past. “Those first Mexicans are there to remind us that modernity is born marked by primitivism,” writes Barta quoting Roger Fry. But modernism and *La Raza* have twined themselves together in Mexico, often censoring art that might not have the politically correct hue. In the “Splendors” of official culture, there is no critical point of view, no acknowledgement that such exhibitions are a drama of shadow puppets where the substance disappears when seen in a harsh light. It is only in looking away from the mutually hegemonic principles of *La Raza* and modernism to the possibilities of a less centrist or institutional vantage—as demonstrated by those Caballeros of the Art Center exhibit—that Mexico and its artists may shed this perennial vulnerability.

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