

← Back to Original Article

ART : When Worlds Collide : Confused about what's Mexican and what's American? Artist Ruben D. Ortiz-Torres explores that rocky terrain through his photographic works and a new feature-length documentary.

September 03, 1995 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is an occasional contributor to Calendar. and*

In a downtown Los Angeles loft, where homeless people camp out side the door, artist Ruben D. Ortiz-Torres muddles through the meaning of being a Mexican in America.

Within a mile of the tourist-oriented Mexican souvenir shops of Olvera Street and the Chicano barrios of East L.A., this 31-year-old graduate of CalArts is busy printing and organizing his photographs for an exhibition at the Jan Kesner Gallery opening on Friday. He has also just completed a feature-length documentary called "Frontierland/Fronterlandia" with filmmaker Jesse Lerner that will be shown at UCLA's Melnitz Auditorium on Oct. 20.

The recurrent theme of both Ortiz's large color photographs and the film is the blurring of Mexican and American identities. Ortiz records the ways that late-20th-Century popular culture and history have mutated and taken on new meaning. The exhibition will include photographs of a replica of the Statue of Liberty in Palizada, Campeche, Mexico, and the Mexican Beatles, dressed in Sgt. Pepper uniforms, not to mention the Liverpool Bar in Mexico City. In Santa Barbara, Ortiz photographed locals dressed as Aztecs or conquistadors for their annual parade and blond-haired children cavorting on a float shaped like a taco.

Ortiz asks, through his photographs, "What is going on here?" Unconsciously, each culture mimics and warps aspects of the other, thus his title for the show: "The House of Mirrors."

"Coming from Mexico, I became obsessed with the way things that were familiar to me were distorted by being presented in a different way," Ortiz says. "Certain icons and language function differently here. The way Spanish is used, for example--there are always misspellings. The names of streets are often wrong; the way the plurals are singular and the singular, plural. Nothing made sense to me."

After several years in Los Angeles, however, Ortiz began to recognize similar dislocations in his native country. He explains: "In Mexico, I see children dressed up as Donald Duck or the Ninja Turtles. And the Coca-Cola is made with corn syrup so it tastes like the authentic one. Yet, in Chiapas, the Coke is used as an offering in Catholic churches, while Pepsi is used in the Protestant churches. The use of American culture is totally distorted. But I never noticed until I came to the U.S."

Ortiz considers his perspective something of an antidote to other artists' attempts to photograph so-called pure and indigenous cultures.

"I try to use images to create a culture of impurity, a sort of hybridity that eventually, if you have a nationalistic stance, looks threatening," he says. "I'm using the U.S. and Mexico because it is emblematic of North and South, First and Third worlds. But it is a universal problem."

Ortiz has been battling the ideal of cultural purity ever since listening to rock music and riding a skateboard during his teen years in Mexico City.

"My parents were romantics, believing that there could be cultural purity," he recalls. Ortiz's father, an architect, played in a band called Los Folkloristas. "He thought that it was important to fight the cultural alienation from imperialism and capitalism, which was killing local culture and making us consumers of stuff we couldn't even understand because it was in English," Ortiz says.

"At that time, in the '60s, the Cuban Revolution seemed an option for the Third World. I remember songs about condors flying over the Andes and our brothers in revolution. But I was listening to punk music and playing baseball. As a teen-ager, it was a question of identity--not only cultural but also about my parents' ideas."

Attempting to follow in his father's footsteps, he attended a summer program in architecture at Harvard University. But a side trip to New York's Museum of Modern Art and a sighting of artist Andy Warhol in the galleries led him in a different direction. He enrolled in art school when he returned to Mexico City.

At school, he says, "these dilemmas of cultural identity became more relevant. Most of high culture, you couldn't experience it firsthand. The only way to access it was through old art magazines. There was no context for anything you were looking at.

"At some point, I thought, 'This doesn't make any sense.' It wasn't relating to our daily experiences. That happens all the time in the Third World. The more removed you are from the main culture, the more behind you get. I started to do photography to document this."

Inspired by those old art magazines, Ortiz applied to graduate school at CalArts in Valencia and was stunned that he was accepted. He also found out that he would need \$24,000 for two years' tuition plus living expenses that neither he nor his family had.

He deferred his application for a year and wrote to the Fulbright Foundation. Although the Fulbright is generally for graduate studies in the humanities, he was granted tuition and living expenses for the entire two years at CalArts, from 1990 to 1992. "I told the Fulbright people that our countries are bound together through arts and culture. Since then, they've added a section just for the arts," he says.

Acceptance was easy compared to what followed at school. Ortiz, an affable and talkative personality, recalls: "My first year at CalArts was paralyzing, a total cultural clash. People were very critical and aggressive to an extent I'd never seen before.

"It took awhile to realize that these guys didn't like themselves. I had to give up and develop a very thick skin. Even though paralyzed, I kept producing. I couldn't stop just because of my existential crisis. I had this very great need because I thought this is the chance of my life."

The years of confrontation strengthened his inner resolve:

"The role of being insider-outsider was the reason I ended up liking L.A. Even as an outsider, in certain contexts, like the Eastside or with Chicanos, because I'm bilingual, I became the insider. As soon as I realized I was bridging these gaps, I realized photography was very useful as a tool.

"The point for me is to point out that things are not good or bad or Mexican or American. Things just evolve and flux, and ultimately, there is a cultural exchange. It's not as imposing as it seems."

* *Ruben D. Ortiz-Torres, "The House of Mirrors," Jan Kesner Gallery, 164 N. La Brea Ave., Hollywood. Friday through Oct. 14. (213) 938-6834.*