

ART NOTES:

RAUL GUERRERO AND YVONNE VENEGAS

BY INGRID HOFFMEISTER

**Notes by Teddy Cruz:
Associate Professor, Public Culture and Urbanism, Visual Arts Department, UCSD**

The addition of the San Diego Art Prize to the cultural infrastructure of the city, as a new platform to promote important artistic practices to the public, will hopefully point, once more, to the need to identify our local cultural capital as an instrument to shape civic value and economic development. It is therefore fitting that recipients Raul Guerrero and Yvonne Venegas share the first San Diego Art Prize show. If this cultural capital is to be revealed and exposed, it would not only be by reaffirming that San Diego's artistic spirit is unavoidably intertwined with Tijuana's cultural life, but also by understanding that the work of these two important local artists is a tangible expression of such possibility.

Raul's pictorial visualization of the two-way cultural flows that define the forgotten histories of this region's socio-political and cultural narratives, as well as Yvonne's acute eye for capturing in her photographs the oddity of hidden social relations and urban landscapes become artistic scalpels that pierce at the hermetic wall that divides these two cities in order to reveal the energies of an urban continuum. Their work dives into the cities themselves, engaging their spaces and situations and their diverse cultural demographics, exposing the tension between the low and the high, official and unofficial cultures that inhabit the busiest border in the world.

RAUL GUERRERO

After Raul Guerrero graduated from the Chouinard Art Institute, Los Angeles in 1970 (now the California Institute of the Arts) he became inspired by socially engaged Pop Art and movements emphasizing language and the unconscious such as Dada, Surrealism, and California Funk Art. He explored the boundaries of art and his own identity through a variety of mediums including photography, unconventional sculptural materials, painting, print, drawing, and videotapes.

THE SAN DIEGO ART PRIZE is a cash prize which recognizes excellence in the visual arts. The Prize is dedicated to the idea that the visual arts are a necessary and rewarding ingredient of any world-class city and a building block of the lifestyle of its residents. Conceived to promote and encourage dialogue, reflection and social interaction about San Diego's artistic and cultural life.

Eighteen years after Chouinard, the magazine ArtWeek described him as a disciple of Dadaist Man Ray, a conceptual artist, a California surrealist, an ironist, a constructivist, a Jungian, a comedian and an elitist. For more than thirty years, his worldwide solo and group exhibitions revealed his ever-evolving vision, a style ranging from early conceptually based abstraction to recent narrative realism. Guerrero's self-described "search for the poetry of life" is a constant as is his prominent presence in the San Diego/Tijuana region.

Guerrero's most recent body of work, *Problems and Marvelous Secrets of the Indies* took fifteen years to complete. The three part series, Black Hills of Dakota, Latin America and Southern California, imagines two travelers chronicling their respective journeys through defining moments and events of historical significance. The first traveler arrives from the eastern seaboard and travels west while the second traveler leaves Peru, treks through South America, Central America and Mexico. "Eventually the two travelers converge in Southern California, becoming witnesses to the hybrid culture from which they sprang, an infrastructure made up of Anglo-American, Indigenous and Latino influences," explains Guerrero. "As one, they experience the strange surreal cultural phenomenon that is Southern California with its "dive bars," take-out food culture, its highly industrialized consumer society and of course Hollywood, the ultimate surreal dream machine".

To be paired in an exhibition with someone like Yvonne from a completely different generation is interesting to Raul because of the similarities in artistic approach regarding subject matter. "Yvonne is like an ethnographer, creating field collections of odd subjects with her photographs, which I personally find very appealing. In some respects, she photographs in the tradition of Diane Arbus, who also photographed the exotic, compare Arbus's, *Debutante of the Year, 1938*, to Yvonne's, *Brides of Tijuana* series, although similar in approach differences do exist. While Arbus's photos are gritty and urban, reflecting New York City, Yvonne's are slightly softer, pictorially poetic, a bit crazy yet formally sophisticated. She has great style."

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YVONNE VENEGAS

Yvonne Venegas grew up in Tijuana, Mexico and studied in San Diego, Mexico City and the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York. Presently she is a student of Visual Arts/Media at the University of California San Diego. Published in numerous magazines including The New York Times, her images won her first prize in the Mexico City Photo Biennial in 2002. Two years later the Alberta DuPont Foundation awarded her a personal grant in recognition of excellence. Recent works can be viewed at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art's current exhibition.

Venegas approaches photography as a method of social observation and self-exploration. Inherently about class, her images encapsulate the distinct social structure of Tijuana, in relation to Mexico and the USA. "I believe there is a threshold that is beyond rational thinking and is linked to the subconscious or our instinct. It is somewhere beyond our constructed tastes, needs and conventions. My question is, how do we as image-makers touch upon it?"

Venegas studied the phenomenon of "social representation" in her photographic series entitled *The most Beautiful Brides of Baja California* shown in 2004 at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. "I focused on the lives of upper-middle class women of Tijuana and the people that surrounded them. I became interested in seeking their fragile moments when they were unprepared for the picture and unconscious of their own appearance. My study of an "appearance" intended to find the human side of the subject by pointing to the construction of the shell seen by others.

By re-formulating the question of "appearance", I intended to make a dent in this construction and therefore make a point of its existence and our need for it.

Now I am interested in photography of "true" emotions and what structure of appearance, frames this "truth" effect. I wish to break rules of convention and photograph all the things that we are commonly, not allowed to remember, those things that do not "belong" in our photo albums, therefore, in our memory.

I am interested in photographing feelings that force us to transgress our accepted appearance and therefore immediately link us to another reality apart from what is familiar. I am interested in juxtaposing these images with icons that provoke an unintended response in us as viewers (animals) creating some sort of reality that questions the authenticity of what we consider to be familiar and acceptable.

Notes by Stephanie Hanor: Curator at the Museum Of Contemporary Art, San Diego

Yvonne and Raul are excellent choices for the San Diego Art Prize. Both of them do what they do very well, yet are very different from each other. Raul is an artist/painter who really knows the history of painting and art and reaches back into the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century art movements, pulling imagery, content and style to manipulate them in a new unique way. That is beautiful in the particular content of what he's painting. One might not recognize the depth of his painting by observing one piece but when you see a broad range of his work, you understand that he's not only a painter, but also a conceptual artist. He is thinking very much about not only the formal aspects of painting, color, form and composition, but also about the history of art. His comments about current events are very thought provoking.

Yvonne's images have an amazing way of capturing people in settings. There is a lot of photography out there right now but she really has a way of capturing candidness in her sitters - a little bit uncanny and very interesting. Her background is fascinating, as her father, one of Tijuana's top formal bridal photographers, worked for upper class families. A couple of years ago we first showed Yvonne's work, a body of work entitled "The Most Beautiful Brides of Baja," a phrase written over the door of her father's studio. In contrast to the formal presentations used by her father, Yvonne took a provocative group of behind the scenes images for a much more candid look.

Notes by Julie Fry: Director, Arts and Culture Analysis & Strategy for the San Diego Foundation

As we found in our recent comprehensive research report, Understanding the San Diego Region: The Case for Increased Patronage of Arts and Culture, participation in the arts plays a big part in the daily life of San Diegans. The notion of cultural patronage goes beyond wider cultural distribution, consumption, participation and support. Ultimately, it is the creative act that challenges the heart and mind and differentiates cultural participation from the actions of everyday life. A key indicator of a culturally vibrant community is that it values the creative act and provides an environment where artists and their work are respected, and where the community infrastructure recognizes and supports artists' vital contribution to the soul of community life. Focusing on innovative visual arts can enable the region to achieve even greater national recognition, while reinforcing a positive community self-image and a distinct artistic identity.

The San Diego Art Prize
is sponsored by:

SanDiegoArtist.com

The San Diego Visual Arts Network
L Street Fine Art Gallery

Art Notes are written in conjunction with the Exhibition: *Fata Morgana, New works by Raul Guerrero and Yvonne Venegas*

On Exhibit: Aug. 26 - Nov. 16, 2006 at the L Street Fine Art Gallery/ Omni Hotel /628 L Street in downtown San Diego.

Gallery Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Tuesday through Saturday and
1 to 5 p.m. on Sundays.

www.lstreetfineart.com