

Art Notes: Marcos Ramirez/ERRE and Allison Wiese

The San Diego Art Prize is a cash grant 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.

Notes by **Ann Berchtold**
Director of L Street Fine Art
Gallery

Kicking off the second year of the San Diego Art Prize is the exhibition, *STOP. YIELD. MERGE.* Featuring Works by Marcos Ramirez ERRE and Allison Wiese. The exhibition opens September 29, 2007 and runs until January 18, 2008 at the L Street Fine Art Gallery, Downtown San Diego.

Road signs and eye charts dominate this show – both artists use these ready-made architectural fabrications to express truths or observations that communicate ideals of individuality, anachronistic displacement, as well as social and political sentiments that are both present and archaic.

Notes by **Erika Torri**
Joan & Irwin Jacobs Executive Director Athenaeum Music & Arts Library

Marcos Ramírez, also known as ERRE—which is based on the Spanish pronunciation of the first letter of his last name—was born in Tijuana in 1961 and studied law at the Universidad Autonoma de Baja California before he turned his attention to art. Today, residing in the U.S. near the Mexican border, he is considered one of the region's leading artists. Influenced by his previous work in law and in construction, he creates art to emphasize political and social issues of

the border region specifically, and of U.S. involvement abroad, in general. Having no formal art training, he taps a deep-rooted sociopolitical consciousness that runs like an undercurrent through his multi-media work.

ERRE began attracting widespread attention when he participated in inSite '94, installing *Century 21*, a replica of temporary Tijuana dwellings, juxtaposed with their backdrop, the Centro Cultural de Tijuana. He made wave again during in-Site '97 with *Toy an Horse*, a giant model horse placed at the San Ysidro border crossing. The inSite projects have been Ramírez's most critically acclaimed.

In addition he has exhibited regionally, nationally, and internationally. San Diego Art Critic Robert Pincus called Ramírez's 1999 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, *Amor idioma/Love as First Language*, the artist's most memorable exhibition. Ramírez participated in the Whitney Biennial in 2000, constructing a large American flag out of the same material used to build the fence along the U.S./Mexico border. He also exhibited in the 6th Biennial of Havana, as well as in France, Spain, and Argentina.

His most recent local exhibition was his *Postcards from the Edge* at Athenaeum Music & Arts Library in 2007,

in which Ramírez used photographs of Tijuana to create postcards, accompanied by text by people on the street. The Athenaeum is proud to have taken part in the unfolding of this artist's exciting and socially significant career.

Notes by **Larry Poteet, Collector**

Although Marcos Ramirez ERRE lives and works in Tijuana, and was featured prominently in *Strange New World*, the landmark survey of contemporary art from Tijuana recently an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, it would be a mistake to label him as a "border artist", or to consider him part of any one group. Instead, ERRE's work, which has a strong conceptual basis, transcends styles and movements, and brings to the viewer a unique perspective on issues of politics, race, class and prejudice. In addition to reflecting immaculate craftsmanship,

which is a given, ERRE's work has a narrative quality which confronts the viewer on many levels, forcing the viewer to reexamine his or her own beliefs, values and prejudices. Far from focusing solely on U.S. Mexico relations and the so-called border issues so prominently featured in the news, ERRE's work addresses complex human relations on a global level, both socially and politically.

The San Diego Art Prize is to be commended for selecting such an important artist to be featured in this show. His selection proves that San Diego has a wealth of local talent, and that it should hold an important place in the international arts community.



(Image) Marcos Ramirez /ERRE, *Salman Rushdie*

**Notes by Lucía Sanromán
Assistant Curator Museum
of Contemporary Art San
Diego**

Underlying all of Marcos Ramirez ERRE's remarkable artistic production is the give-and-take between ethical paradigms and personal responsibility. Since the early 1990s he has been unmatched in his prescient ability to speak of key global political and social issues by addressing the local—may this be migration and housing issues of his native Tijuana, or American expansionism. He invokes the urban vernacular of street signage, construction and building styles, nationalist symbols, and history to make politically nuanced arguments that not only reveal his own position but also articulate a wider social impasse, subtly asking the audience for resolution through self-identification, personal choice, or empathy.

The form and iconography of highway and optometrist billboards have become particularly important in ERRE's recent work. These types of signs reduce their referents to directional information and instructions, which are consumed rather than considered, and thereby transform its intended audience into passive users.

The actions of a viewer, rather than those of a passive consumer, require engagement with one's personal subjectivity and speak of choice.

ERRE's work in *STOP. YIELD. MERGE.* engages these distinctions and applies them to a

reconsideration of the recent history of social movements in the United States and elsewhere. *In Lost Roads: A View from Center Left Minimalist and Modernist* aesthetics are used to highlight the artificiality of the supposed assimilation of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s to the 1970s into the U.S. mainstream. The piece started from a documentary photograph of the highway billboard on Interstate-5 North announcing the exit to Cesar Chavez Parkway and Martin Luther King Freeway taken precisely from the median—from the road's "center left". By pointing out his own location in the highways' geography ERRE expresses the necessity to exercise one's viewpoint, through choice and action, as the true heritage of the Civil Rights movement.

**Notes on Allison Wiese
by Lucía Sanromán, Assistant Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego**

A particular vein of populist Americana is retooled in Allison Wiese's conceptual art practice. With the eye of a hobbyist, she explores strategies of appropriation and re-use introducing a quiz-zical element into the work that creates the space for critical inquiry.

Wiese's use of language depends on the incongruous application of well-known mottos and slogans that are recontextualized, creating a paradoxical gap that generates meaning through discordance between the social imperative implied in the expressions and their application.



History plays an important role in these oppositions. Wiese selects slogans that are tied to the emergence of Capitalism in the United States and the positioning of industry and work ethic as icons of the American character. *Root Hog or Die*, for example, refers to the mid 19th century agricultural practice of turning out hogs to root for their food in winter. "It loosely parallels Nike's current "Just Do It" slogan, rendered more fatalistic," she explains. Displayed in the form of official signage—for roadways and federal markers—highlights the illogical construction of these expressions while also commemorating their retro appeal.

As common urban markers road signs are empty of discursive meaning yet have a particular color scheme, font type, and shape that changes from country to country and even from state to state

attaching to them a vague sense of nationalist nostalgia. With a light, ironic hand, Wiese makes us aware of personal and cultural affection to largely anachronistic sentiments and links these to a deeper question: to what she describes as "the lingering presence and viability of certain very American myths".

STOP.YIELD.MERGE.
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