

The Labyrinth of Multitude: *Contemporary Latin American Artists in Los Angeles*

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The Third Center of the World

We have been expelled from the center of the world and are condemned to search for it through jungles and deserts or in the underground mazes of the labyrinth.

— Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, 1961¹

The perennial challenge to (re)discover the center is fundamental to every immigrant² in the United States and elsewhere. What is unclear, however, is the very nature of that center in question. With a deluge of post-modern, post-colonial, and cultural/multi-cultural critics, it is no longer possible to use the simplistic binary model of center and periphery. Paz begins to confound this ineffectual model by proposing that upon arriving to this country, the immigrant left behind not a peripheral culture, but rather the very center of his/her world. The search for a new center, therefore, takes on both a temporal, as well as a spatial, quality. Only by returning to one's past can one find a present and future center. This is also the reason why the struggle is no longer a solitary one, as proposed by Paz thirty-eight years ago. The Mexicans and Mexican-Americans of the 1950s and '60s are now joined by a new wave of immigrants from Central America, South America, and Cuba. By creating a "multitude" of Latin

Americans living in Los Angeles, this new demographic shift has also contributed to the obscure nature of the center.

Los Angeles is the paradigmatic place for an inquiry into the (re)discovery of identity. With a multitude of civic, cultural, and economic centers rather than the main plaza that defines European and Latin American cities, Los Angeles provides an opportunity for people to create their own center(s). Although a Mexican-American may choose to live in East Los Angeles, he/she may frequent the theater in downtown or West Los Angeles. Likewise, a Korean-American may live in Beverly Hills, but own a business in East Los Angeles. The cultural critic Coco Fusco describes this lateral mobility by saying that "many contemporary artists of color" are now free to participate in multiple communities. "No longer bound to a sense of having to restrict one's focus, materials, or genre, [they] move

back and forth between past and present, between history and fiction, between art and ritual, between high art and popular culture, and between western and non-western influence... [They] emerge from the dynamics of moving between worlds, and feeling at home and not at home in more than one."³ This sense of individual volition is paramount to the development of contemporary Latin American artists in Los Angeles today. Because the only existent borders are those which we impose upon ourselves, the road inside the labyrinth has become even wider. Along this very road, the diverse Latin American cultures have come together. At this point where solitude becomes multitude, we begin to witness a gradual transformation of the local culture.

This exhibition presents an opportunity to view seven established artists who have each contributed to, as well as been affected by this transformation in the last ten to twenty years: Guillermo Bert; Enrique Martínez Celaya; Victor Estrada; Cecilia Z. Miguez; David Serrano; Jamex and Einar de la Torre. This is by no means a definitive list of contemporary Latin American artists who have been part of this local transformation. Other distinguished artists include Michael Gonzalez,

Ruben Ortiz-Torres, Jorge Pardo, as well as Daniel Martinez and Gronk, two artists from the 1970s Chicano group ASCO. What all these artists first express is the conjoining of Chicano (Mexican-American) artists with other Latin American artists from Mexico, Cuba, Chile, and Uruguay. This point of congruence represents a return to the first center of the world for the immigrant community in Los Angeles. Secondly, they express a desire to participate in the "mainstream" multitude,⁴ which in this case pertains to the established museum and gallery world, both locally and nationally (and in many cases internationally). While at no time disregarding their personal and ethnic backgrounds, this heightened mobility allows these artists greater access to new worlds, as described by Fusco. Hence, this becomes their second center of the world.

The third center is the very location of time and space that permits us to replace binary models of communication with a more malleable and individualized one. As Homi K. Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*, "It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols

of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew.”⁵ The third center is paramount because it is the only space that we are responsible for actually creating ourselves, and only for ourselves. Borne out of negotiations between past and present, this new space celebrates more than mere cultural diversity within a multicultural city—it celebrates the particular. The individual experience thus emerges in every word, act, and creation.

The seven artists in this exhibition all possess a consciousness of their third center, regardless of whether they yet occupy that space or continue in search of it. The work of Victor Estrada represents not a “strategy of oscillation between cultural values,”⁶ as stated by Michael Cohen in 1994, but rather a new aggregate genre that allows the two values to co-exist. The sculpture *Xochipilli* (1997) exemplifies Estrada’s intent to look to his Mexican heritage in search of identity. Named for the mythological Aztec saint of altered states and multiple reality, it symbolizes the thread of transformation and metamorphosis that permeates all his work. Similarly, the work of Jamex and Einar de la Torre also represents this new genre that can be

characterized as neither an oscillation or assimilation of different cultures. These two artists have been greatly affected by the Chicano culture of Southern California, and have used much of its imagery to make humoristic and often satirical comments on their native Mexico. *Milagritos of the Flesh* (1997) and *El Country* (1997) are two examples of this genre that allows for the artists’ particular expression. Commonly referred to as “border artists,” implying a sense of oscillation and uncertainty, these two artists represent instead the (re)construction of identity in the definitive third center.

Enrique Martínez Celaya is concerned with memory of his past history, and the feelings of nostalgia and melancholy which it produces. His work records his own labyrinthal journey to find the new space that will both surpass and embody the past and present, as well as the “personal and impersonal.” The artist writes in a poem entitled *I am Empty*, “I am planning memories for the future, dismantling events that I know to have been to make new ones.”⁷ The two works in this exhibition, *Quiet Night (ocean)* and *The Circumstances Before Silence*, both from 1999, are highly symbolic and personal narratives of this journey.

With the other three artists in this exhibition, symbols of past, present, and future identity are more subtly merged in their work. Cecilia Z. Miguez brings a strong figurative tradition to her wood and metal sculptures. In the seemingly whimsical figures of an angel, harlequin, ballerina, and mythological pan, Miguez infuses an enigmatic expression of solitude. *Echo* (1997), three figures in white, and *Cinco figuras* (1998), five figures in black, both depict the anonymity of her existentialist forms. Also in the figurative style, David Serrano's latest installation is entitled *The Mad House*. His oneiric juxtaposition of pointed bird beaks and figures with pointed hats (reminiscent of his previous *Circus* series), is intended to elicit various interpretations. *The Mad House*, therefore, takes on a personal and hidden significance for both artist and viewer. Guillermo Bert's work is inspired by the popular street culture in Los Angeles. Using poster material taken from public walls, he creates "fossils" by removing the layers of posters, and then adding layers of paint, thus merging past and present into the creative act itself. In *Fossil-Vessel* (1999), Bert portrays a vessel in the midst of construction on the ocean floor in order to emphasize the paradoxical congruity of creation and decay.

The particular experiences brought forth by each Latin American artist in this exhibition, as well as others, have affected a transformation of the Los Angeles art scene. Chicano (Mexican-American) artists are no longer as "monolithic in thinking about culture," as proposed by Tomás Ybarra-Frausto in a recent essay reflecting on *El Movimiento*.⁸ Describing today's generation, he asks the question, "How can you have so much difference and a common ground?"⁹ Perhaps at first, one could ask the same question about the artists in this exhibition. Are they bound by a common Latino heritage? By the immigrant experience? By the city in which they now live and work? Perhaps all these commonalities are to be found along the road of the labyrinth in search for the third center of their world—an obscure place where the individual experience must constantly negotiate its victory over past, present, and future.

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