

Raul Guerrero's "Oaxaca Series"

By Lesley Ma

On the southbound Interstate 5 past Downtown San Diego en route to Raul Guerrero's studio in National City, signs start to count down the mileage in the twenty-mile stretch to the United States-Mexico border. National City, one of the oldest cities in San Diego County and primarily an immigrant community, hosts the largest naval base on the West Coast, along with the Mile of Cars, one of the first auto malls in the world. After being greeted by the row of shiny car dealerships right off the highway exit, one arrives at a plain, adobe-colored industrial and warehouse complex, where the artist's studio is located. A plaque reading "Cine Mono Productions" sets the studio apart from the business-type storefronts next door, as do the oil paintings and the slide-laden light box in the front office, visible from the sidewalk. Inside, one gets the sense of a sanctuary, as neatly organized painting materials, stretchers, racks, and several large-scale paintings resting on the floor complete the contrast to the suburban material culture outside.

The visual landscape in which Guerrero dwells is a hodgepodge of images and influences. "Cine Mono Productions" playfully alludes to the patchwork of narratives and forms that underlie Guerrero's artistic endeavor. Guerrero has been making large, ambitious oil paintings for more than twenty-five years. An important group of early works constitutes his 11-painting *Oaxaca Series* (1984-85), eight of which are on view for the first time in New York in the exhibition at CUE Art Foundation. The canvases, all approximately the same size (around 5 by 3 feet), incorporate a wide range of motifs — Mayan temples, the Venus de Milo, natural creatures, folk objects and lush vegetation. Situated in deep, painterly spaces in which saturated color and intense light interact, they

create dreamlike expressions, woven together by personal interpretations of cultural confrontations and experiences.

As one may wonder how all these images came together, it helps to trace Guerrero's footprints. Born in 1945 in Brawley, California near the border to Mexico, Guerrero grew up in National City in a working class family. His Mexican-American background included Tarahumaran and Yaqui Indian heritage. A short stay at Southwestern College in Chula Vista, near San Diego, introduced him to the experimental minds and teaching styles of John Baldessari and Robert Matheny. Later, at the Chouinard Art School (now Cal Arts) in Los Angeles, he received rigorous formal training and encountered a wide range of international and home-grown avant-garde influences, which led him to experiment with ready-mades and conceptual art. His contemporaries at Cal Arts included Allen Ruppersberg and Jack Goldstein. Post-art school sojourns in Europe included a period when he assisted Ed Kienholz with installations in London, Berlin and elsewhere. Subsequent adventures on his own in Spain and Morocco both nurtured and challenged Guerrero's American, or more precisely Southern Californian, sensibilities, and fueled in him a sense of urgency to merge the diverse strands of stimuli that he had received thus far.

Back in Los Angeles in 1971, he began working with a repertoire of popular symbols and artifacts from his cultural background: a mix of Mexican, American, Native American, Southern Californian and Border. During this period, the mural artists of the Chicano Movement were active in Los Angeles and the Bay Area. Guerrero's approach was stylistically and methodologically distinct from theirs, but his fixation on hybrid identity was a shared theme. His *Rotating Yaqui Mask* (1973) is a piece of motorized

kinetic art that takes an ethnographic artifact and literally makes it spin. He also made sculptural installations, photographs and videos. This phase yielded works that show the artist's exploration of the origins of art-making in various traditions. He playfully but critically positioned himself in the roles of both the indigenous artist and the Mexican-American outsider, employing conceptual tropes used by many of his peers in Los Angeles along with a range of cultural emblems.

In 1980, he moved back to National City. To get closer to the social and cultural issues occupying his mind, he shifted his focus towards the world immediately around him, and abandoned object making in favor of painting. Guerrero went to Oaxaca in 1984 for six months to hone his painting skills, absorbing both technique and cultural material in the Mexican environs. The fruit of this personal journey was *The Oaxaca Series*. The paintings, which were executed after Guerrero's return to California, incorporate in a new guise the raw, mythical energy prominent in his earlier objects and installations, evoking a suspension of time and space. A striking, elegantly poised jaguar in *Vista de Bonampak* (1984) averts its eyes from a faded mural depicting a ritual sacrifice; the animal exhibits indifference and fear at the same time. In representing the ritual scene, Guerrero emulates the style of the frescos found at certain Mayan archaeological sites, emphasizing his affinity to the ancient New World. *The Pool of Palenque* (1985) portrays an eerily hovering Mayan mask, surrounded by butterflies in front of a misty waterfall in a jungle. A mesmerized frog stares blankly into the void, as if frozen by a spell. The same sense of an invisible force lingers in *Undiscovered Chamber* (1984-2009), where three religious figural sculptures appear to be guarding unknown secrets while a watchful reptile observes. *Three Masked Men* (1985) alludes to a case of cattle rustling that ended with

the lynching of three wrongly accused men, two of them white and one Mexican. The image alludes to a film, *The Oxbow Incident* (1943), which was based on a real event. Historical incidents of injustice or violence, which Guerrero tackles with a cool, objective tone, frequently figure in his work. Here, there is a surreal melancholy (along with a touch of the grotesque) in the scene of three hanged men, suspended in a row from thick brown ropes that descend from the painting's top edge, the nooses functioning as prominent pictorial elements. While the men's bodies are indicated by simple schematic diagrams, their heads are seen in startling close-up, faces concealed by garish, grinning Day of the Dead masks. Behind them is a scene of desolation: a blood-red sunset and a deeply shadowed stretch of desert with a black line of mountains on the horizon.

The Oaxaca experience emphasized the fact that Guerrero's consciousness was already firmly structured by his Mexican-American upbringing and his radical art school education. *The Oaxaca Series* can be seen as a meditation of the impact upon the artist of a total Mexican immersion. Since then, Guerrero's penchant for incorporating symbolic objects or situations to expose undercurrents in cultural history has often extended to more topical and explicit subject matter. Like so many of his contemporaries, he reaches far and wide for his sources and images, sometimes including photographs, words and maps, and making reference to the work of other artists. His figures often take on a loose and linear style. He looks across the border and portrays a sexually-charged Baja California club scene in *Aspects of Nightlife in Tijuana, B.C.* (1988-90), a series of paintings in which a sense of desperation for both money and intimacy permeates the crowd. Each of the six paintings in *Problems and Marvelous Secrets of the Indies/Latin America* (1992-2006) features a replica of Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus*, the nude overlaid

by dotted lines mapping various Latin American regions once subjected to colonial greed. Numerous colonial-era scenes, along with texts in Spanish, are scattered across the canvases. Guerrero's fascination with social interactions resurfaces in *The Whaling Bar* series (2003), a group of relatively small paintings that reflect upon a historic hotel bar in La Jolla. The setting and the faceless patrons, whose heads are substituted by clocks, are a clear homage to Kienholz's well-known sculptural tableau recreating the Los Angeles artists' bar, *The Beanery* (1965).

Guerrero has tirelessly articulated his position within the larger cultural and social context through a variety of subjects and approaches. His roots in the border culture provide him a vantage point to document both the local and the international. Executed more than two decades ago, *The Oaxaca Series* represents a decisive moment in the artist's career.

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