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# The Cardboard Mexicans of "Divested Interest"

## Ramiro Gomez Jr.'s army of Latino-laborer cutouts are now in Orange County

By **GUSTAVO ARELLANO**

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**Ramiro Gomez Jr.***Los Olvidados***Ramiro Gomez Jr.***Salvador Martinez***Ramiro Gomez Jr.**

For the past two years, artist Ramiro Gomez Jr. has conducted a fabulous public art-cum-sociology experiment in LA's Westside with cardboard Mexicans. The San Bernardino native creates cutouts of Latinos engaged in working-class jobs—a housecleaner, a *carwashero*, a man selling star maps—and installs them in the settings where their real-life counterparts toil, to see if anyone will distinguish the real laborers from the fake.

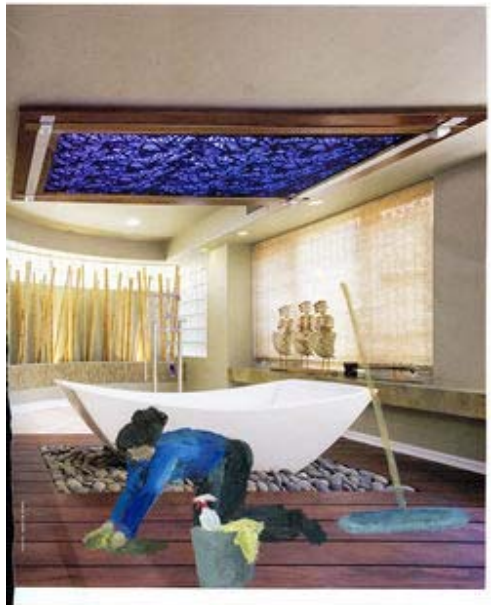
Unsurprisingly, most people don't notice the difference. From a distance, they blend seamlessly into the environment, driving home Gomez's point that Latino labor in Southern California—especially labor in the service of the lords of the land—is so taken for granted, so ultimately invisible, that you can place a forgery there, and no one will care. His faux-Latinos will stay up for hours, if not days, until someone finally figures out the ruse. And this is where the most telling act happens: Gomez writes his contact information on his installations, in the hope someone will return them, but no one does—just as with the workers, the cutouts are ultimately disposable.

Titled *Happy Hills*, Gomez's project is one of the most important efforts in American art right now, and Cal State Fullerton's Grand Central Arts Center (GCAC) has smartly nabbed Gomez for the summer. His cutouts are part of an exhibit devoted to documenting the eternal wound that bleeds called downtown Santa Ana's gentrification wars. It's no longer much of a war, actually: restaurants catering to hipsters (of all ethnic groups, mind you) are bearing fruit akin to the city's many loquat trees, and the area's long-standing working-class Latino shops and clients are being pushed out to points unknown. GCAC's John Spiak commissioned two recent UCLA grads, Misael Diaz and Amy Sanchez, to interview some of the participants in the downtown battles, including yours truly, which play on a loop off a little cart. The acoustics in the GCAC gallery are tinny, but gentrification isn't



*Scrub, Yolanda, Scrub*

**Ramiro Gomez Jr.**



*Fernanda With a Glass of Water*

Details:

"Divested Interest: Exchange Dialogues With Cog-nate Collective and Ramiro Gomez" at 125 N. Broadway, Santa Ana, (714) 567-7233;

[www.grandcentralartcenter.com](http://www.grandcentralartcenter.com). Open Tues.-Thurs. & Sun., 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Through July 14. Free.

easy—it's rather jarring and unpleasant but nevertheless inevitable. Near the cart is an interactive gallery of archival photos of the iconic Fourth Street over the years, from when only *gabachos* ruled to when Mexicans took over to the present day. The point arises again: Change is inevitable, if never easy.

Surrounding that installment are some of Gomez's works. He began his wrench-throwing by cutting out pages from luxury magazines and coloring in his faceless laborers, and that makes up the majority of the exhibit. *Scrub, Yolanda, Scrub* shows a woman slaving away on the wooden floor of a spectacular spa bath; *Remedios Taking a Break* finds another *mujer* slumped on a couch in a living room, the image literally ripped out of the pages of *Dwell*. Gomez's actual drawings are simplistic but fit in with the dimensions and perspective of each shot, further reaffirming his assertion of how easily Mexican labor can come and go from society.

Gomez's best work, of course, is the cutouts, which are largely missing here for a great reason. Really, the only one is *Los Olvidados*, a panorama shot in which Gomez placed a family of cutouts in the Sonoran desert next to a cross, mourning the loss of one of the hundreds of nameless, faceless Mexicans attempting to enter the United States. The family is on display in its own room at GCAC, for once forcing the viewer to take in the sadness. And why isn't there more of this? Because Gomez is planning to cardboard-bomb the ritzy parts of Orange County with his cardboard stand-ins, to bring his important message to us heathens. Coto de Caza, Newport Coast and Shady Canyon: You've been warned.

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THE CAKE & CANDY PEOPLE

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Treats

The flyer features a central image of a woman in a white wedding dress. To her left is a circular inset showing several chocolate cakes with red raspberries. To her right is another circular inset showing a large white cake with pink roses. The background is a light blue and pink gradient.