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Publisher Routledge

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Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713689663>

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Rita Gonzalez

Online Publication Date: 01 November 2008

To cite this Article Gonzalez, Rita(2008)'Phantom States of America',Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas,41:2,265 — 270

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/08905760802402527

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08905760802402527>

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1. This essay is a reworking of my catalogue essay for *Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2008).

Phantom States of America¹

Rita Gonzalez

Rita Gonzalez is Assistant Curator of Special Exhibitions at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Recent essays appear in Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography (2008) and Recent Pasts: Art in Southern California from the 90s to Now (2005). With Howard Fox and Chon Noriega, Gonzalez curated Phantom Sightings: Art After the Chicano Movement (LACMA, April through September 1, 2008; the show travels to the Museo Tamayo [Mexico City], the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and the Americas Society and El Museo del Barrio [New York]).

2. Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, *Caras Vemos, Corazones No Sabemos (Faces Seen, Hearts Unknown): The Human Landscape of Mexican Migration* (Notre Dame, IN: Snite Museum, University of Notre Dame, 2006), 6.
3. Ybarra-Frausto, *ibid.*
4. Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3.
5. Julio Morales quoted in *LACMA Insider 2:2* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Spring 2008), 14.

In a recent essay, Tomás Ybarra-Frausto links contemporary Latino cultural expression to “an incipient transnational imaginary.”² Whereas immigration has often been allegorized in artworks by diaspora artists with an emphasis on dislocation and disaffection, Ybarra-Frausto asserts that “today’s Latino(a) culture is nurtured within translocal spaces and is vibrant in the formation of new, mobile identities, nascent coalitions and solidarities, and possible social formations of connection, communication, and conciliation within national groups and across borders.”³ It could be argued that these affinities and sympathetic tunings are best illustrated by exchanges between artists who have grown up as hyphenated “Americans” and who have left their native countries to live in the U.S.

Phantom Sightings: Art after the Chicano Movement serves as a “retelling, re-citing and re-siting”⁴ of the legacy of Chicano art. The emerging artists represented in the exhibition retool conceptual art—and post-conceptual art—by defining their practice in relation to a de-centered, transnational, and urban imaginary. The artists question the terms of allegiance (to a coherent staging of *the Chicano*, *the American*) through a dialogue with immigration and nationalism. The terms of this dialogue are drawn directly from “cultural phenomena and strategies of urban Latino centers, such as informal economies, vernacular architecture, and music subcultures.”⁵

6. I borrow this term from the art historian C. Ondine Chavoya.

The “spatially politicized aesthetics”⁶ that once bound artists’ allegiance to the representation a particular place (a particular *barrio*) is now reconfigured to the mapping of a transnational network of cultural signs and phenomena. Many artists live in cities where a shift in demography is skewing power toward Latinos and where cross-ethnic, racial, and class affiliations are brokering new relationships. Artists function in a zone of impressions and collisions rather than with the responsibility of speaking on behalf of a population segment. Informal and illicit economies, mobility, and the de-centering of identity and land-based claims have contributed to reshaping cultural production and the urban imaginary.

In May 2006, pro-immigrant marches swept across the country. Kindled by Spanish-language mass media (whose popularity had, up to that point, largely been ignored by the mainstream press), millions of recent immigrants and several generations of Latino citizens came out en masse to protest encroachments on immigrants’ rights. Los Angeles-based artist Juan Capistran’s proposed mural *What Makes a Man Start Fires* (2007) is part of a series of defacements or effacements of the recognizable yellow-and-blue Corona beer logo. Originally inspired by the song “Corona” (1984) by the Los Angeles punk group Minutemen, Capistran’s mural channels the survival ethos plaintively sung about in the song’s lyrics: “The people will survive/In their environment/The dirt, scarcity, and the emptiness/Of our South/The injustice of our greed/The practice we inherit.” Through his mixed references to underground history and current events, Capistran makes a link across his own political landscape,



Juan Capistran, *What Makes a Man Start Fires* (2007). Altered photograph for proposed mural. Courtesy of the artist

shaped by punk rock and hip-hop lyrics, and the mass movement for immigrant visibility.

Interested in the shifting valences of the term *Minutemen* and how it has been conscripted for an extremely diverse set of purposes, Capistran set out to test the limits of the term's malleability as a signifier. In his large-scale collage *Do You Want New Wave or Do You Want the Truth?* (2007), Capistran overlays the rhetorical and visual techniques of punk rock and nativism to produce an American flag stitched together with conflictive notions of patriotism. Made up of over 120 photocopied do-it-yourself flyers, in the style of punk rock promotional materials, the flag is erected (à la Jasper Johns' or Faith Ringgold's variations) with all its serrated seams on display.

Utilizing a data bank of illustrated apprehensions along the U.S./Mexican border posted by the Border Patrol, Julio Cesar Morales's *Undocumented Interventions* (2005–2008) isolates the source image and paints a flattened, haunting variation. The resulting water colors feature floating forms seemingly frozen within automobiles and domestic appliances. Morales's past work has been a devotional rendering of the ingenuity of Tijuanaenses and their constant repurposing of architectural and industrial second-hand materials. In *Undocumented Interventions*, there is a more poignant take on customization and the more hardened technologies of surveillance on the border.

Addressing the impact of multinational corporate enterprises on the human workforce, El Paso-based artist Margarita Cabrera takes the home electronics and big-ticket items and reinstalls in them the mark of the hand. Cabrera's proximity to Juárez, Mexico—the site of many



Juan Capistran, *Do You Want New Wave or Do You Want The Truth?* From the series *Minutemen Project* (2007). Photocopies of found and altered images on paper, 111 × 186 1/2 in. (281.94 × 473.71 cm). Courtesy of the artist.



Julio Morales, *Undocumented Interventions #6* (2005). Watercolor on paper, 34 × 42 in. (86 × 106.68 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

maquiladoras—has figured directly in her sculptures and installations. She uses the stitch work of the same type of commercial sewing machines that occupy sweatshops around the globe to create sculptures of domestic objects like hand blenders and vacuums, and has even taken on the large-scale luxury automobile in her Hummer sculptures. These products, for some, represent the fullest attainment of the American Dream; when rendered in humble materials like vinyl and canvas and hung from threads or propped up with supports, they become limp and fragile.

Photographer Christina Fernandez's series *Manuela S-t-i-t-c-h-e-d* (1996) and *Lavandería* (2002–3) partake of efforts to depict “intersections (of a multiethnic Los Angeles) where particular social experience and creativity meet with global pressures of capital and geography.”⁷ In *Manuela S-t-i-t-c-h-e-d*, Fernandez turns the camera lens to dull facades of industrial buildings that contain garment sweatshops. Modestly composed, at times hand-scrawled, the signs on these buildings conjure images of high fashion and commerce. The turmoil and sweat within is

7. ADOBE LA, *Ciudad Híbrida/Hybrid City: The Production of Art in “Alien Territory”* (Los Angeles: SciArc Public Access Press, SC2, Southern California Studies Center, and ADOBE LA, 1998).



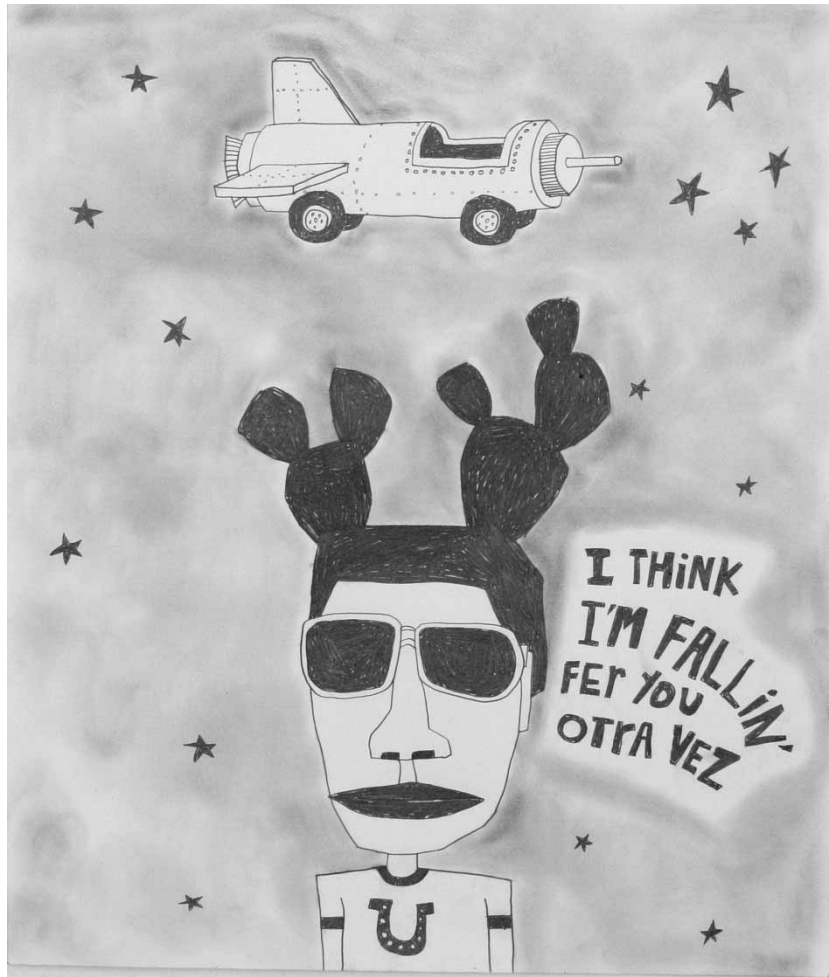
Christina Fernandez, *Lavanderia #2* (2002). Chromogenic development print mounted on Sintra, 30 × 40 in. (76.2 × 101.6 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Luisotti, Santa Monica.

undocumented, but the silent and static exteriors relay this information to the viewer.

San Antonio-based artist Cruz Ortiz populates drawings, posters, and videos with his wily alter ego, Spaztek. He has played with the melancholic lyricism shared by Mexican rancheros and indie rock, and along with a generational cohort represented in *Phantom Sightings* has transformed the agitprop poster—in this case as a confessional and idiosyncratic form. Ortiz—who teaches public high school in addition to working in his studio—has been interested in the political and cultural shift brought on by the sons and daughters of recent immigrants. When his high school students became involved in the immigrant rights marches of 2006, Ortiz started to consider the political and cultural differences between first-, second-, and third-generation immigrants (and beyond).

He grew curious about the ways formations of citizenship were intensifying the Chicano politics of his first-generation students, thus politicizing *Tejanos* like himself. Ortiz began to draw cartoonish yet politically motivated maps and diagrams, utopian concoctions in the manner of Rube Goldberg machines to aid migrants in passing through to *el otro lado*. The project continues with the construction of these crudely engineered machines, such as a trebuchet for catapulting love letters over the border.

What I have described as interventions in a global circuitry of urban formations in *Phantom Sightings* has less to do with the reification of art as global capital than with the development of new topographic



Cruz Ortiz, *fallin'* (2006). Pencil on paper, 14 × 17 in. (35.6 × 43.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

8. A portmanteau of “globalization” and “localization,” *glocal* has become a prevalent term in the social sciences, economics, and humanities since the 1990s. I first became aware of the term through cultural critic Tomás Ybarra-Frausto.

imaginings of migration and cultural fusions. Artist and writer Harry Gamboa’s call for “out-of-bound ethnic visions” was not predicated on an aesthetic rupture but a reframing of “social responsibility.” Artworks like Capistran’s *What Makes a Man Start Fires* and others in *Phantom Sightings* negotiate spatial politics with a heightened sensitivity to the “glocal”: that is, a willingness to situate a localized identity conscientiously and strategically both in the art world and on the streets.⁸