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Two new exhibits highlight emerging Latino artists

By Jeanne Claire van Ryzin

AMERICAN-STATESMAN ARTS WRITER

Two new exhibits at Latino-focused art institutions in Austin put the spotlight on emerging artists from the Internet generation who have grown up with a surfeit of information and visual culture at their fingertips. Literally.

Train your smartphone on the pixelated QR, or quick response, code patterns that embellish the exhibit labels and you can link to various websites that have information on the artists.

But high tech info-gathering isn't necessary to realize that the two dozen artists highlighted in this pair of exhibits (which are coincidentally concurrent) wrestle with a range of issues that push beyond expected considerations of race and culture.

Concept reigns over traditional symbolism in both exhibits — "Young Latino Artists 16: Thought Cloud" at Mexic-Arte Museum and "Heir Today, Gone Tomorrow" at the Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center. And each percolates with spirited experiments in nontraditional art material (Gabriel Dawe's thrilling embroidery thread optical installations, for example) and new media (such as Beatriz Cabrera's slyly satirical video blog). Like DJs, these artists sample global culture and events and then mash them up with personal stories and ideas to create new narratives.

The search for fresh, timely artistic narratives ultimately guided the curators for "Thought Cloud" and "Heir Today."

But with both exhibits hosted by Latino art centers, the question persists: How does either wrestle with addressing the cultural specificity that describes both Mexic-Arte Museum and the Mexican American Cultural Center?

Alex Freeman, education curator at San Antonio contemporary art center Artpace , serves as the curator for "Thought Cloud." (Mexic-Arte's annual "Young Latino Artists" exhibit, which features artists younger than 35, likewise asks early-career curators to organize the show.)

And at first, he found his search for artists problematic. How do you find Latino artists or those of Hispanic descent?

"I had to resort to the most basic clue — last names," he says.

Freeman thought that approach was particularly vexing. "If I personally hadn't been previously known to (Mexic-Arte officials), I probably wouldn't have been identified as an emerging Latino curator because of my Anglo surname."

Nonetheless, Freeman drew up a list of more than 100 artists from around the state, from which he chose 10. "I eliminated those that I felt didn't push their concepts beyond the traditional, and I focused more on those that had a strong conceptual bent to their work," he says.

"What remained was a group of artists that I felt told some kind of story that would appeal to Latinos and non-Latinos alike. One of the most harmful things one can do is make statements like this is 'our' art if your intent is to connect with audiences of all backgrounds."

Toward that end, the collection of artists Freeman selected represent a broad range of current art world trends.

There's Austin-based Colombian photographer Alejandro Sánchez, who manipulates news photos in eerie yet trenchant ways and re-enacts crime stories through performance videos to chart violence and crime in his native country, and by extension, around the world. And after acquiring an archive of romance novels on Craigslist, Austin artist Kristina Felix has used the colorful volumes to create whimsical installations, often adding love poems and letters between imaginary characters to the assemblages.

Houston-based Brazilian artist Clarissa Tossin (Freeman extended the definition of Latino past the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America) offers an intriguing video-based installation that offers commentary on the forgotten histories of the laborers who built modern Brazil.

Freeman called his exhibition "Thought Cloud" as a reference to the high-tech method of individual users remotely and randomly accessing computer files and applications. The 10 artists he chose do the same — occupy a similar space for just a brief moment in time. And to understand their connection more deeply, follow where the QR codes take you.

"I feel that many Latino cultural institutions that began in the '70s fought to have a space for their art, and I adamantly respect the work of these cultural pioneers," Freeman says. "However, a lot has changed since then, and I strongly believe that this generational difference has positively affected the type of work artists of Latino descent produce."

With "Heir Today, Gone Tomorrow," curators Michael Anthony Garcia and Hector Hernandez took an even looser approach to cultural identity.

"We tried not to think too much about it being a Latino show or specifically showcasing Latino art," says Garcia.

Instead, Garcia and Hernandez, who along with Salvador Castillo form the Austin-based collective of independent artist-curators known as Los Outsiders, elected to continue an idea they had explored in other exhibits. Namely, they were looking for artistic expressions of personal history and what's passed on through families via genetics, culture, intergenerational relationships and friendships.

But, Garcia adds, "Heir Today" is not necessarily about Latino culture vis-à-vis the idea of personal history.

"With as much diversity as there is within each culture, demographic and even within each family, there are just too many variables to easily label any one style," Garcia says.

"In essence, the only thing that makes any of the work created by the Latino artists in this show Latino art is the fact that it's art made by Latinos."

And for that matter, Garcia points out, there are non-Latinos in "Heir Today" as well. William Hundley's quirky but compelling masks made of leftover building and packing materials suggest a search for a self-created identity. And Amelia Winger-Bearskin's psychedelic music video collages probe her mixed Native American and Jewish heritage.

In the end, both Garcia and Freeman maintain that opportunity trumps pigeon-holing.

"I think the great thing about institutions such as the Mexican American Cultural Center and Mexic-Arte Museum is that as opposed to attempting to define what Latino art should look like or should be about, they offer opportunities to artists and curators of Latino descent that they might not have otherwise," Garcia says.

Adds Freeman: "Even though it's under the arguably constricting umbrella of Latino art, it's still valuable to have work by young artists exhibited in a museum context."

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'Young Latino Artists 16: Thought Cloud'

When: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m. Sundays through Sept. 25

Where: Mexic-Arte Museum, 419 Congress Ave.

Tickets: \$1-\$5 (Sundays free admission)

Information: 480-9373, mexic-arte museum.org

'Heir Today, Gone Tomorrow'

When: 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Fridays, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays through Aug. 27

Where: Emma S. Barrientos Mexican American Cultural Center, 600 River St.

Tickets: Free

Information: 974-3772, heirtoday gonetomorrow.com

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