



Raul Guerrero

CUE Art Foundation

Raul Guerrero

Curated by Allen Ruppertsberg

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CUE Art Foundation is a 501 (c)(3) non-profit forum for contemporary art and cultural exchange that provides opportunities and resources for under-recognized artists. We value the astonishing diversity of creativity that artists provide and the importance of their activity in the social context of the city.

CUE provides artists, students, scholars and art professionals resources at many stages of their careers and creative lives. Our programs include exhibitions, publications, professional development seminars, educational outreach, symposia, readings and performances. Since 2002, we have operated from our 4,500 square foot storefront venue in the heart of New York's Chelsea Arts District.

CUE exhibiting artists are chosen by their peers who are themselves selected by a rotating advisory council from across the country. This pluralistic process ensures that CUE consistently offers diverse viewpoints from multiple disciplines of artistic practice.

Simply put, we give artists their CUE to take center stage in the challenging world of art.

Artist: **Raul Guerrero**

Oaxaca, Mexico

Summer, 1965

I'm 19 years old, a college dropout hitchhiking around Mexico and for some reason have ended up in Oaxaca.

The Zocalo is surrounded by huge trees and has a bandstand serving as the center of gravity for the evening promenade, a mass of people circling people. Some in this throng are well dressed others not, some wear shined shoes, huaraches or simply go barefoot, hats no hats, clipped hair, long hair, on and on. Kids run around chasing each other. Zapotec and Mixtec women wear gold and silver, selling trinkets and copper copies of jewelry discovered in ancient burial chambers. All the while la banda plays, waltzes, danzones or revolutionary period marching tunes.

Summer, 1968

My art school girlfriend and I are hitchhiking Mexico and stop in Oaxaca.

From our pension we can hear someone playing an ancient sound on a flute, a tune echoing the images we encountered that day in the ancient city of Monte Albán. Later in the Zocalo we sit on a bench observing the evening events. A man sitting next to us strikes up a conversation and after awhile asks if we would like to have lunch with him and his family. We accept the invitation. The next day we find ourselves in a remote village and eventually locate the adobe house. It has a corrugated tin roof and the dirt floor interior is recently swept and newly sprinkled with water. We have a simple lunch, and then taking me aside asks if we would please take his eldest daughter to the United States. He says poverty is making life difficult and he would like to give her to us.

Autumn, 1984

The bus from Teococuilco comes by at 8:10 AM, on its way to Oaxaca and the market. I get up and prepare for the trip into town to buy painting supplies. I make coffee, shower, dress, and open the bathroom windows overlooking the waterfall and stream running underneath the building. Formerly a wheat mill, it's now my painting studio and home for the next six months. The studio offers a panoramic view of the valley below, the sun is reflecting off of slow moving clouds, and the distant mountains are obscured by a light rain.

The bus finally arrives. It looks circa 1947, is painted bright yellow with blue trim, worn tires are covered in mud and the name *El Llanero Solitario* (The Lone Ranger) is written in Old English script on the side. The bus door opens to the blare of Mexican music. I step up and make eye contact with as many people as possible, and offer a greeting. A few respond, most are asleep as they have been on the road since early morning. The passengers are mostly children, and shawl wrapped women with bundles of goods, they are strongly indigenous looking, probably Zapotec. I blend in as my genetic heritage includes Tarahumara and Yaqui, native groups from Northern Mexico. We head into Oaxaca.

Biography

Raul Guerrero was born in Brawley, California in 1945 and grew up in National City, located twelve miles north of Tijuana, Mexico. He currently resides in San Diego, California. In the 50's and 60's, weekly family visits to Tijuana introduced him to a variety of Mexican folk arts and crafts imported from the interior of Mexico and all types of kitsch geared towards the tourist market like Da Vinci's *Last Supper* rendered in plaster of paris, or Cervantes Don Quixote and Sancho Panza carved out of pine boards. At the same time an incredible array of pop and sub-cultures were evolving in Southern California, including low riders, pachucos, surfers, beats, folk singers, motorcycle gangs, Hollywood culture and the newly emerging music scene inspired by British bands. This co-mingling of cultures and images was absorbed by Guerrero and would influence his artistic approach and content from this point on. Guerrero attended the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, receiving his BFA in 1970. His first solo exhibition, in 1974, was at the Cirrus Gallery, Los Angeles. The exhibition featured, *Rotating Yaqui Mask*, an Indigenous artifact attached to a wall mounted motor rotating at 15 RPM; *UFOLA*, a photo composite of a UFO over the city of Los Angeles; *Bird Bone Whistles*, bird bones crafted into whistles and attached to a compressor to create sounds and photograms depicting obscene hand gestures with their Spanish translations. Similar works and exhibitions followed this initial show. In the 1980's, Guerrero shifted his focus from the conceptual experimentation of the previous decade to a more emotional, allegorical style using oil painting as the medium of expression. Oil painting allowed for the opportunity to create representations of thoughts and encountered situations using emotion and imagination more directly. In 1984, during a six-month artistic retreat in Mexico, he created the Oaxaca collection, the first body of work using this new approach to his art making. Over the last decade, the question of the reality and myth of the American continent has been the primary interest in his artistic content. The ongoing series, *Problemas y Secretos Maravillosos de La Indias/ Problems and Marvellous Secrets of the Indies*, examines American lands and their historical mythology. The project now includes three distinct areas of investigation: The Black Hills of Dakota, Latin America, and Southern California. Raul Guerrero has exhibited throughout California and his solo shows include the Long Beach Museum of Art (1977); Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego (1989); Thomas/Lewallen (1978), Richard Kuhlenschmidt (1984) and Saxon Lee, Los Angeles (1989); Barbara Braathen Gallery, New York (1984); Quint Contemporary Art, La Jolla (1995); Galeria Ninapi, Ravenna, Italy (2005); and TRANSactions: Contemporary Latin American and Latino Art, MCA, San Diego (2006). He received an NEA Photography Fellowship in 1979 and the San Diego Art Prize in 2006. He is currently a Lecturer in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of California, San Diego. This exhibition at CUE Art Foundation marks Guerrero's first solo show in New York in over twenty years.

Curator: **Allen Ruppertsberg**

When I decided to nominate Raul Guerrero for a slot on CUE Art Foundation's exhibition program, I suggested showing his series of paintings begun in 1984 in Oaxaca, Mexico, because I had never quite forgotten them. They were his first foray into painting and have remained unique — at least to me — throughout his subsequent career, which has mostly focused on painting, and in particular, painting a sense of place. This series had never, to my knowledge been shown together, but had been painted as a group and in a consistent and original style. That style might be defined as primitive but not naïve, with a touch of magic realism from the time and incorporating a narrative feeling of space coming from his sculptural tableaux of the past. The elements that made the sculptural environments stand out had passed into the paintings.

His current work has grown into something more sophisticated or knowledgeable most would say, myself included, but I am also still thoroughly attracted to those first efforts. I selfishly wanted to see them all together at least one time.

I first met Raul at the Chouinard Art Institute where we were both students in the mid 1960's. It was a decade later, however, when we coincidentally found ourselves living in the same apartment building in Santa Monica, that we became close friends and that I began to know more completely his work and ideas.

Raul's art at the time was a formally mixed approach of the interdisciplinary kind characteristic of this period. Centering primarily on sculpture, it included film, video, photography, found and appropriated objects often placed in a kind of tableau, drawing, and prints. There was a specific, conceptualized slant to these combinations that was familiar to me, beginning with a sort of Duchampian Dada and incorporating strains of Surrealism, outré (at the time) painters like Raul Dufy, kitsch illustration, and the general detritus of Spanish and American cultural history that he found growing up in the San Diego area of Southern California. Then in 1984, as he has told me, he tired of trying to infuse these by then mostly straight ahead sculptural projects with the emotional world he was living in. He decided to try to render this world in paint rather than objects and chose as his first subject the Mexican city of Oaxaca. This was to initiate an interest in painting cities and a certain range of subjects that continue to occupy him to this day. I think of this early effort in Oaxaca as the touchstone of what was to come later and what was to embody, for him, some of the best thoughts in a new/old medium.

Biography

Allen Ruppertsberg is a conceptual artist whose work includes paintings, prints, photographs, sculptures, installations, and books. Ruppertsberg graduated with a BFA from the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles. During his early years, he began significant relationships with John Baldessari, Ed Ruscha, William Wegman, Allan McCollum, William Leavitt, Bas Jan Ader and Ger Van Elk. He participated in the groundbreaking 1969 exhibition, *When Attitudes Become Form*, and is recognized as a seminal practitioner of Conceptual art. Since the late 1960s, his work has been the subject of over eighty solo exhibitions and nearly 200 group shows, and can be found in permanent collections of museums internationally, including The Museum of Modern Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Foundation de Appel, Amsterdam; and Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt. He has been included in three Whitney Biennials, Documenta V, Lyon Biennale and Sculpture Project Münster, and has received a Guggenheim Fellowship and two National Endowment for the Arts grants. Ruppertsberg lives and works in New York and Los Angeles.

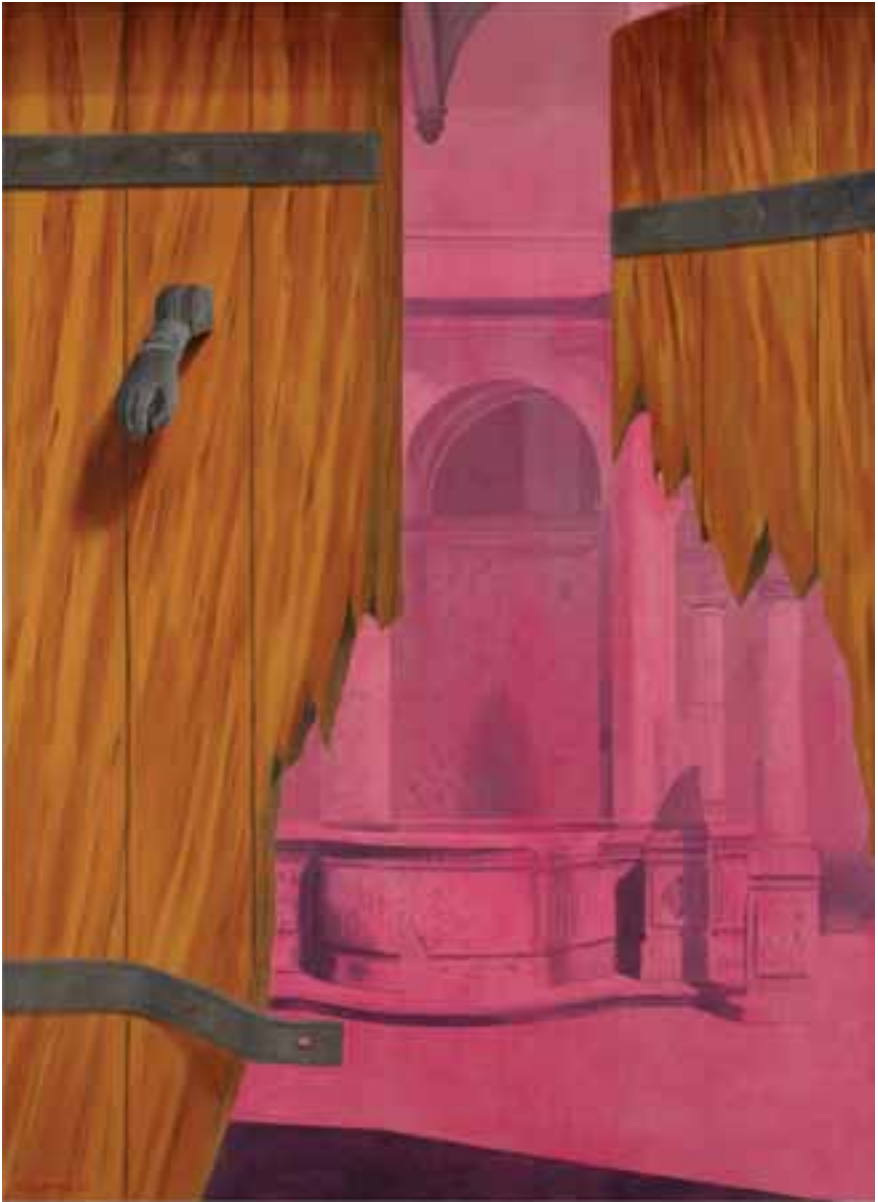
Raul Guerrero



Vista de Bonampak, 1984
Oil on canvas, 54 1/2" x 37 1/4"
Courtesy of Laura Stearns



Pre – Columbian Lovers, 1985
Oil on canvas, 56 1/2" x 35"



Misterio, 1985
Oil on canvas, 58" x 42"
Courtesy of Christine Handley



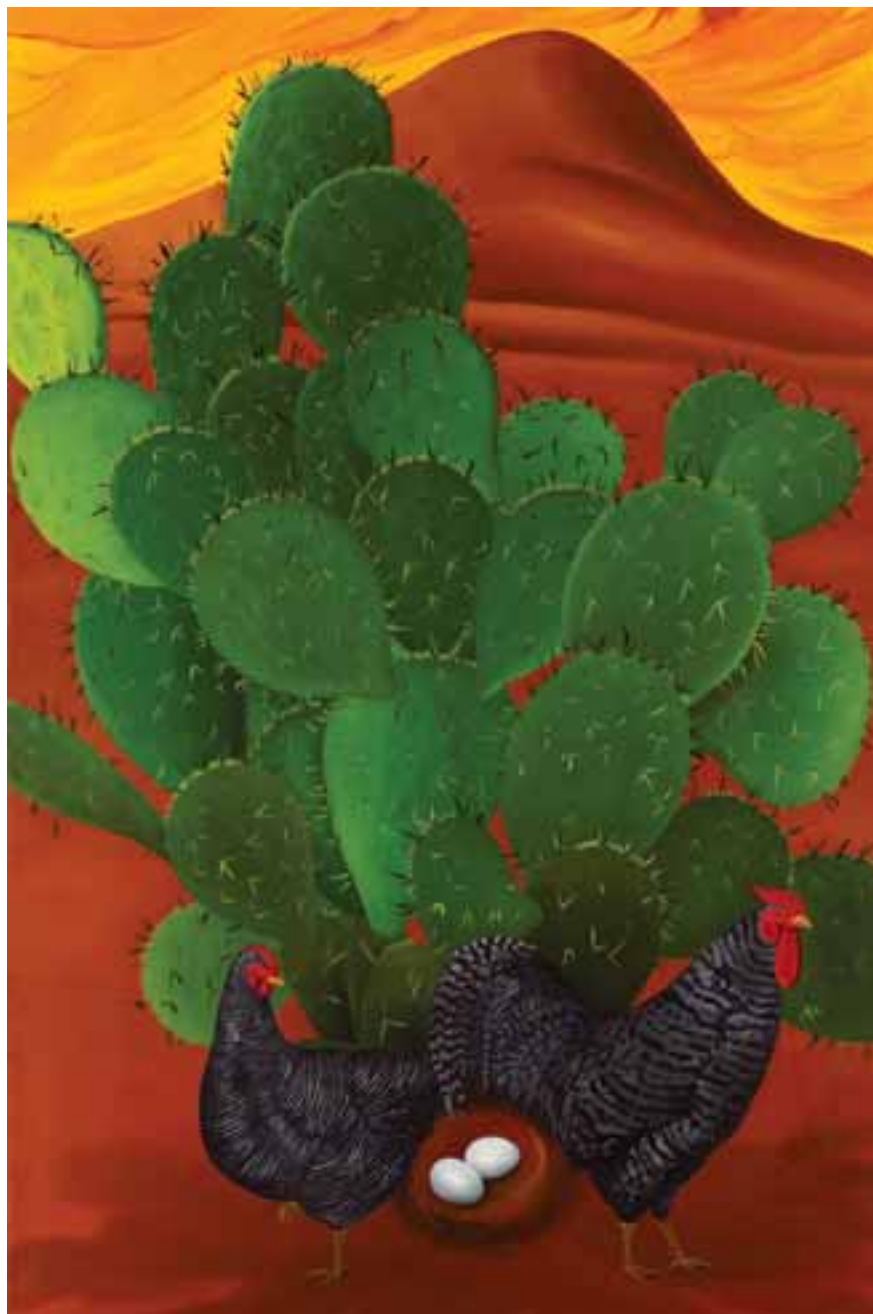
Three Masked Men, 1984
Oil on canvas, 57" x 37 1/2"
Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Steven Drobinsky



Desire, 1985
Oil on canvas, 57" x 42"
Courtesy of Mary Donkersloot



The Pool of Palenque, 1985
Oil on canvas, 60" x 44"
Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ollman



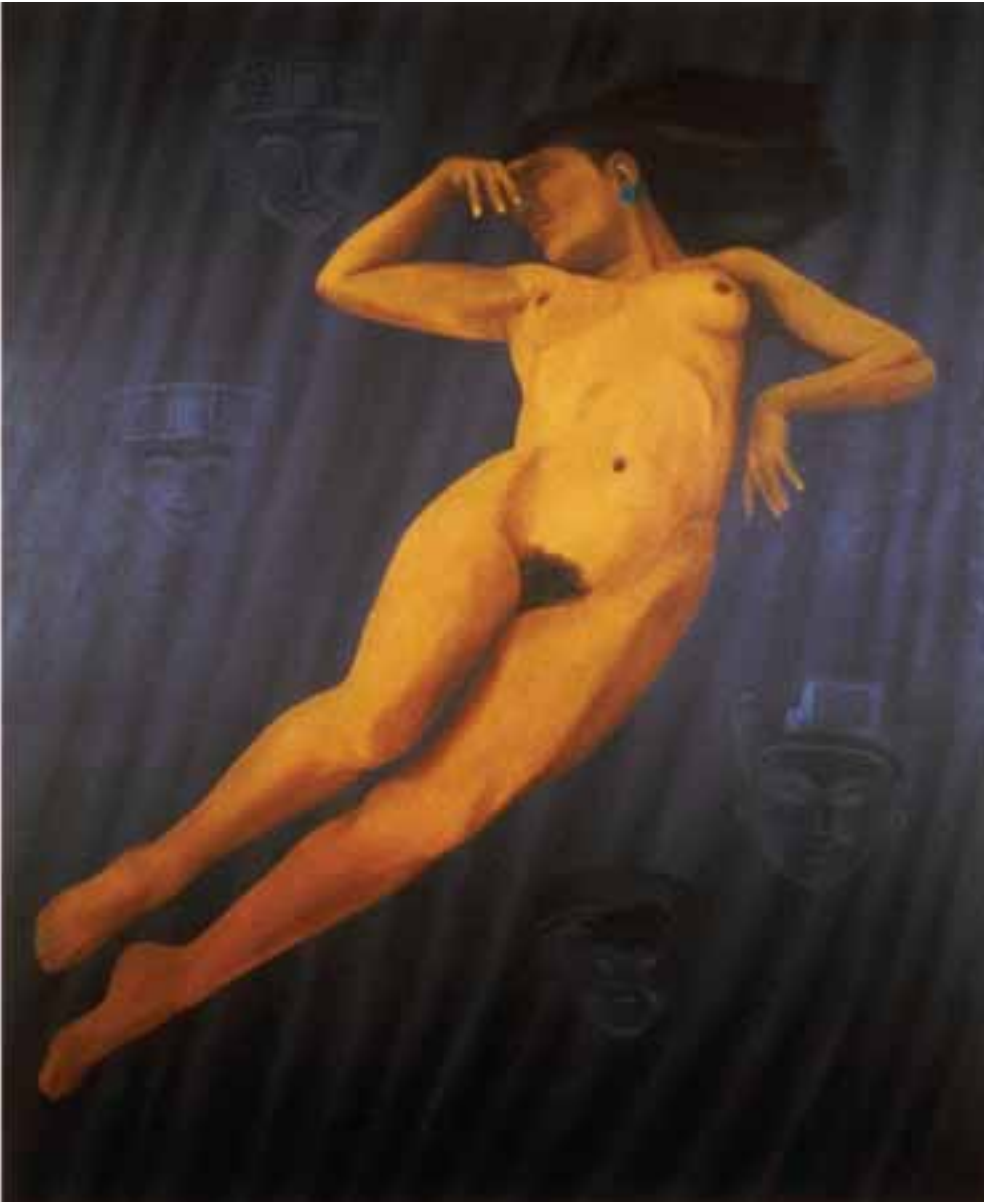
The Point, 1985

Oil on canvas, 57" x 37 1/2"

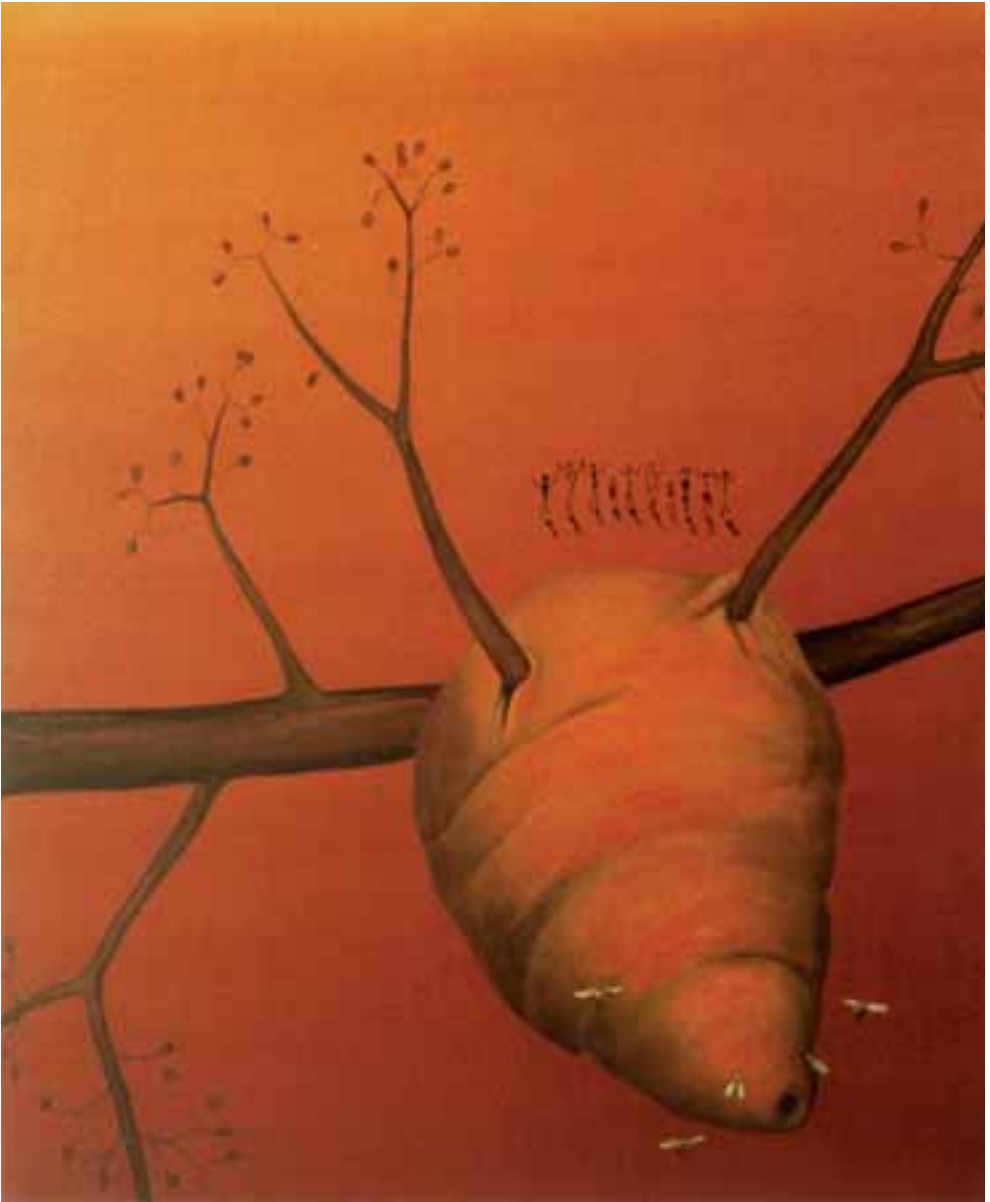
Courtesy of Victoria Baldwin



Undiscovered Chamber, 1984 - 2009
Oil on canvas, 54 1/2" x 37 1/2"



The Last Dream, 1985
Oil on canvas, 66" x 45"
Courtesy of Oliver Stone



Religion: Before, 1985
Oil on canvas, 42" x 35"
Courtesy of Stephen and Gary Phillips



Religion: After, 1985
Oil on canvas, 42" x 35"
Courtesy of Stephen and Gary Phillips



The Pool of Palenque [detail], 1985
Oil on canvas, 60" x 44"
Courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Ollman

Raul Guerrero's "Oaxaca Series"

By Lesley Ma

This essay was written as part of the Young Art Critics Mentoring Program, a partnership between AICA USA (US section of International Association of Art Critics) and CUE Art Foundation, which pairs emerging writers with AICA mentors to produce original essays on a specific exhibiting artist. Please visit www.aicausa.org for further information on AICA USA, or www.cueartfoundation.org to learn how to participate in this program. Any quotes are from interviews with the author unless otherwise specified. No part of this essay may be reproduced without prior consent from the author. Elizabeth Baker is AICA's Coordinator for this program for the second season.

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 25 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* (1984) 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.

The Writer, **LESLEY MA**, graduated from Harvard College in 2003 and subsequently received her MA in Museum Studies from New York University. From 2005 to summer 2009, she was a project director for New York-based Chinese artist, Cai Guo-Qiang. She is an editor of *Lovely Daze*, an artist publication out of Paris, and is currently pursuing her Ph. D. in Art History, Theory and Criticism at the University of California, San Diego.

The mentor, **LEAH OLLMAN**, has been writing criticism and features on the visual arts for the *Los Angeles Times* for over twenty years. She is a Corresponding Editor for *Art in America* and the author of numerous catalogue essays. Her publications include *Strangely Familiar* (Aperture, 2008), *The Photography of John Brill* (Kent, 2002), and *William Kentridge: Weighing... and Wanting* (Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2001). She earned her BA in Art History and Philosophy from Scripps College and her MA in Art History from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. She is currently working on a project exploring the affinities between poetry and photography. She lives in San Diego, California.

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