

Guerrero's art comes close to B-movie mysticism

But his works rarely plunge over that dubious edge

By Christopher Knight
Herald art critic

Raul Guerrero's recent paintings are double-take pictures. They don't jerk your head around in a sudden shock of recognition as much as surreptitiously slip the rug out from under you, leaving your equilibrium momentarily suspended and floating. At their best, his paintings are visual conundrums in which a tone of conjecture, rather than conclusion, is sounded.

Remarkably enough, the artist accomplishes this feat through a kitschy veneer in which shallowness is all. A languorous jaguar encountering an ancient wall-painting, a pre-Columbian temple glimpsed through a lush and erotic jungle, a ruined door opening onto a monastic courtyard, an apparitional head surrounded by butterflies and hovering over a still pond — these and other Romantic images of a debased, pulp-novel sort dominate the show.

The imagery is orchestrated in a straightforward, iconic frontality, and is rendered in a slick, deadpan, uninflected style, in which no trace of the artist's hand is visible. With their graphic look and often exotic subject matter, these paintings enter into territory that is perilously close to cornball metaphysics: They exude a steamy, B-movie mysticism of Aztec and Mayan hidden truths.

Rarely, however, do they slip over the edge. In almost every case, the paintings are composed from a close and precise foreground that presses hard against a background remote in time or space, like actors on a stage before a painted backdrop. Any suggestion of a middle ground has been excised. An abrupt collision thus takes place between immediate, sensual, close-at-hand experience and the anticipation of a remote, far-off encounter. Perversely, that anticipated encounter is in an arena that is the residue of the past: The background images depict barren desert hills, colonial or pre-Columbian ruins, a waterfall in an ancient forest and the like. The legacy of a communal cultural history is offered as the destiny for future experience.

In this way, a sense of impending revelation marks these canvases — it's as if an obscuring veil is about to be lifted — but they stubbornly hold their tongues. Guerrero plays on the familiar promise that artistic experience will change your life — and then pulls up short. The future tense is drained from these paintings, and in its place one finds an acknowledgment that the present is neither free nor unencumbered; it's always bounded by beliefs tenaciously pushing their way into the foreground from the recesses of the past.

Belief, particularly religious belief, is everywhere suggested in Guerrero's chosen iconography of ritual objects and symbols of birth, regeneration and revelation. Yet the disclosure made by his strangely compelling brand of kitsch-conceptualism has more to do with faith itself than with faith in a particular doctrine. In these idiosyncratic (and occasionally very funny) paintings, he pries open and splits apart the comfortable reliance on unquestioning assumption that is the nature of faith. There's no middle ground depicted in these pictures because that's the space the spectator occupies. Between unthinking habit and unfocused desire, Guerrero seems intent on establishing some room in which to move.

Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery,
9000 Melrose Ave., through June 16.

It's all too sardonic to be called nihilism. Jiri Georg Dokoupil's "IBM," above; Raul Guerrero's "Vista de Bonampak," at right; and Peter Schuyff's untitled acrylic on linen piece, below, are included in three current Los Angeles exhibitions.

